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## Constructing a new sense of (digital) identity:
## The perspective of Chinese migrants on social media
## surveillance beyond regional borders

verfasst von / submitted by

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# Table of Contents

# Abstract

Technology has become an inseparable part of contemporary society. The modern person is so accustomed to the comfort of innovative apps and tools that they rarely question the negative impact these might have. Social media is one example of an ever-growing technological field, becoming not only a key entertainment and communication tool in people's lives but also a main source of information.

China has become an absolute trendsetter when it comes to constructing new social media apps that attract millions of users every year. However, it is no secret that many of those platforms are highly monitored and used to keep a close eye on Chinese citizens. By using mass surveillance and monitoring practices, the Chinese government aims to increase trust in authority and encourage good behavior. The main tools used for governance, surveillance, and monitoring are mobile applications and social media platforms.

This thesis aims to explore the influence of online monitoring and surveillance on the construction of digital identity and the online behavior of Chinese citizens living in Austria. Using the concept of digital identity within the theoretical framework of co-production, this thesis introduces several connections between technology, governmental surveillance, and digital identity. The analysis provides a thorough understanding of how Chinese migrants living in Austria construct and maintain their digital identity with regard to the restrictions of Chinese surveillance practices that expand beyond national borders.

**Keywords**: STS, digital identity, Social Credit System, China, monitoring, surveillance, governance, social media, co-production

# Zusammenfassung

Technologie ist zu einem untrennbaren Bestandteil moderner Gesellschaften geworden. Der moderne Mensch hat sich an den Komfort innovativer Apps und Tools gewöhnt und fragt selten nach deren Nachteilen oder Auswirkungen. Social Media ist ein Beispiel für ein ständig wachsendes technologisches Feld, das sich nicht nur zu einem wichtigen Unterhaltungs- und Kommunikationsinstrument entwickelt hat, sondern auch zu einer Hauptinformationsquelle.

China ist zum absoluten Trendsetter geworden, wenn es darum geht, neue Social-Media-Apps zu entwickeln, die jedes Jahr Millionen von NutzerInnen anziehen. Es ist jedoch kein Geheimnis, dass viele dieser Plattformen streng überwacht sind und verwendet werden, um chinesische BürgerInnen genau im Auge zu behalten. Durch den Einsatz von unterschiedlichen Überwachungsmethoden versucht die chinesische Regierung, das Vertrauen in die Autorität zu stärken und gutes Benehmen zu propagandieren. Die wichtigsten Instrumente für Überwachung sind Handys und soziale Medien.

Diese Masterarbeit zielt darauf ab, den Einfluss von Online-Überwachung auf die Konstruktion digitaler Identität und das Online-Verhalten von in Österreich lebenden chinesischen StaatsbürgerInnen zu untersuchen. Unter Verwendung des Konzepts der digitalen Identität im theoretischen Rahmen der *Co-production* stellt die Masterarbeit die Verbindungen zwischen Technologie, staatlicher Überwachung und der Konstruktion digitaler Identität vor. Die Analyse liefert ein umfassendes Verständnis dafür, wie chinesische MigrantInnen in Österreich ihre „digitale Identität" konstruieren.

**Schlüsselwörter**: STS, Digitale Identität, Sozialkreditsystem, China, Überwachung, Governance, Soziale Medien, Koproduktion

# 1. Introduction

Technology plays a major role in the way we experience our environment. For many years there has been a debate about whether advanced technologies bring more use or harm to society. The field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) indeed focuses on examining this interplay between science, technological innovations, and society.

The everyday technology we use, such as smartphones, social media, and self-tracking gadgets, appears to be harmless. It is a common joke that the biggest lie on the internet is "Yes, I agree with the Terms and Conditions," as the general user often permits access to their contact list, camera, microphone, and location without even questioning how this might affect them. Although massive monitoring was probably not the initial idea of many of the products and services we use, the data we produce surfing the internet quickly becomes a golden treasure as it enables governments to predict patterns in usage and consumer behavior to further develop their governing strategies.

The case of Edward Snowden in June 2013 was a major red flag that gave the public reason to doubt the innocence of digital technologies. Hero for some and traitor for others, Snowden, a former government contractor, disclosed secret files of the National Security Agency (NSA) that exposed how the United States (US) spied on both other nations and its own citizens (Scheuerman, 2014). The first big revelation was that private American telephone companies had been providing the NSA with all of their customers´ phone records. Another important disclosure 'the whistleblower' made was about the existence of PRISM, a program through which the NSA can request user data from tech giants like Google, Facebook, Microsoft, and Apple (MacAskill et al., 2013). Furthermore, according to the documents provided by Snowden, the NSA allows analysts to search with no prior authorization through vast databases containing emails, online chats, and the browsing histories of millions of individuals. XKeyscore is considered to be the widest-reaching system for online monitoring and developing intelligence known today (Greenwald, 2013).

The case of Edward Snowden quickly gained popularity and inspired many to produce movies and write books on the dreadful effects of data collection and human ignorance towards it. The scandal gave society a more critical perspective on technology and digitalization and for a while, people became more thoughtful and conscious about the information they share online and the technology they choose to use. Research by the Pew Research Center conducted shortly after the Snowden saga reveals major shifts in public opinion regarding surveillance and privacy. "A broad majority of the public (70%) believes that the government is using the data it collects through the NSA program for purposes other than to investigate terrorism" (Pew Research Centre, 2013). The poll also reports that for the first time in a decade, the majority of Americans were more concerned about the government infringing on their civil liberties than about a potential terrorist attack.

The Facebook–Cambridge Analytica data scandal in early 2018 was another wake-up call for the citizens around the world concerning digital data privacy, as the analytics firm Cambridge Analytica used people's Facebook data for political campaigning (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018b). By examining the 'likes' of a user, one can gather personal information about the user's digital identity, sexual orientation, gender, race, intelligence, interests and, via an algorithm, can predict with great accuracy which political party this user would vote for (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018a). In this case, the collected data had been used to directly promote the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, which reveals the importance of digital identity and the enormous impact such practices can have (Kirchgaessner, 2017). The Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal exemplifies how personal data generated online can be used to manipulate and intervene in the decision-making of the general user.

Online and internet privacy developed into an important issue as personal data is intrinsically linked to fundamental human rights. Therefore, governments actively pursued strategies to protect their constituents worldwide. The European Union (EU) took measures to protect the digital identities of European citizens when the General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR) was officially implemented in May 2018. The GDPR is a regulation and law on data protection and privacy in the European Union and the European Economic Area (EEA). It aims to give control to individuals over their personal data by establishing principles and norms for data controllers and supervisory authorities (Regulation 2016/679).

A popular belief in the West is that the Chinese word for "crisis" (simplified Chinese: 危机; pinyin: wēijī, wéi jī) signifies both danger and opportunity. The COVID-19 crisis in early 2020 appeared to be a massive opportunity to push digitalization and cause a new digital revolution. With the onset of global mass lockdowns, this has also meant that users have likely produced more digital data than ever before. And if the private information and data produced

online in this period are not handled safely, this might cause significant discomfort in society and endanger the privacy of many users.

A key research topic of this thesis is a project of the Chinese government, which caused a controversial debate concerning digital identity, data security, and mass surveillance. The Social Credit System (SCS) in China is a reputation system developed by the national government. It is a high-tech and big-data enabled toolkit for monitoring, rating, and controlling the behavior of citizens. The system has been in operation since September 2018 and its use has been voluntary until now. It was expected for SCS to reach its full functionality in the next few years and become mandatory for all Chinese citizens from the beginning of 2020 (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2017). Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, the mass implementation of the SCS was postponed, which might cause major changes in the concept and strategy of integration of the credit system.

The goal of SCS is to increase the trust in authority and to encourage good behavior by using mass surveillance and monitoring practices. A social credit score is based on information about one´s hobbies, lifestyle, relationships, political affiliation, spending habits, day-to-day behaviors, and evaluates residents´ trustworthiness. Depending on one's SCS score, they may or may not be provided access to certain public goods and social services such as education, transportation, and employment opportunities. The main tools used for governance, surveillance, and monitoring in SCS are surveillance cameras, mobile applications, and social media platforms (Liu, 2019).

Drawing from a Science and Technology Studies inflected approach, this thesis aims to explore the influence of the Social Credit System and other surveillance practices on the construction of digital identity and the online behavior of Chinese citizens living in Austria. Using the concept of digital identity within the theoretical framework of co-production, the research offers a detailed report on the perception of online self-representation and mass surveillance by looking into how the digital identity of citizens and Chinese migrants is produced and constructed by their experience with governmental surveillance, social media, and information technologies.

The relevance of the topic for the field of Science and Technology Studies lies within its ability to provide valuable insight into the ways technology, society and politics intertwine and shape each other. The implementation of the Social Credit System in China and similar mass surveillance practices is a historical moment that would have an enormous impact globally. Considering that China is an economic superpower with a growing influence over its neighboring countries, it is crucial that STS examine this current issue from the very first step of its massive implementation.

# 2. State of the Art

Our daily lives have become extremely interwoven with technologies. Cars enable us to travel long distances, mobile phones help us communicate easier, the internet makes it possible for us to connect with people from around the world and to stay up to date with important news, events, and issues. STS scholars have been researching the connection between the social and the technological, exploring the multiple ways in which these two entities construct each other and the impact they have on society. But we have gotten so used to the convenience of innovations and tools that we, as everyday consumers of various technologies, rarely ask ourselves about the ethical side of the tech we use. It is inevitable in the highly digitized society we live in that technology plays a major role in shaping the quality of our lives and our moral actions and decisions. And to better understand a particular technology and its significance for society, we should take a look into its 'morality" first.

Verbeek (2011) pays special attention to the moral dimensions of technology and the "mediation" of its implementation in society. He argues that there are many ways to conceptualize the morality of particular technologies. Things themselves are not able to balance the positive and negative aspects of their influence on human actions, this is only possible when human beings use them and justify them in a particular way. Verbeek looks into the "morality of design" of technology, which is quite relevant for topics related to surveillance as the "design" of everyday tools used for monitoring is required to be specifically designed either for a particular social group or a certain purpose. If the design of surveillance technology is aggressive, rude, big, or too obvious, many users will try to avoid engaging with it as much as possible. So, the art of creating user-friendly surveillance technologies is simply keeping them as close as possible to other broadly preferred tools. After all, all technologies will eventually mediate human actions (Verbeek, 2011).

Technologies and ethics have always had a complicated relationship. The active contribution of technologies to our daily lives has an important moral dimension (Verbeek, 2011). Some roles played by technology can be called "good" or "bad," and the case of the Social Credit System in China and other surveillance tools is no different.

## 2.1. The Social Credit System: Are We Just Data?

The Social Credit System is a significantly new topic in the academic world and there are not many publications covering the issue. Literature from both academic and non-academic sources is provided in this work to offer an overview of the multidisciplinary nature of the topic. Due to the high public interest in the emerging technology and new form of digital social order, the topic is gaining popularity in disciplines related to surveillance, security technologies, law, and politics.

With the implementation of the Social Credit System, China has made a big step towards experimentation with metrics and quantification of the value and virtue of citizens. The SCS combines AI, big data, and complex algorithm models to monitor and modify the behavior of the citizens of China (Wong & Dobson, 2019). Integrating such a system in society has the potential to create new forms of social inequality and restrict the freedom of individuals.

One could also say that the SCS is a form of standardization, as the Chinese government aims to systematize human behavior to better regulate financial, social, and moral behavior, and measure and control the people significantly easier. The goal is to "educate" Chinese society on how to live their lives properly, to increase trust among people and authority, to encourage good behavior, and to prevent crime (Arora, 2019). Another topic Wong and Dobson touch upon is the established trust between authorities, society, and technology that could be observed in some regions of China, as honesty is a highly valued moral virtue in the country. This explains the motto of the SCS — "make trustworthy people benefit everywhere and untrusty people restricted everywhere" (Wang, 2017). The Chinese government claims that it aims to ensure the peace of its citizens by "correcting" their behavior. The idea is not to directly punish violent behaviors and crime but to alter the way individuals think so they never even consider committing something bad (China Law Translate, 2015).

Although it was officially introduced to society in 2018, the construction and beta testing of the Chinese Social Credit System started quite a bit earlier in 2009 (Nazalya, 2019). Until now, the SCS has been decentralized which means there was no ultimate credit system. The current system appears in a few regions in China, as each project works independently from the others (Kobie, 2019). In July 2017, Shanghai became the first place in China to establish

a local social credit system regulation (Huang, 2018). How the social credit score is calculated varies among the multiple systems as there are different criteria on what is considered positive or negative behavior and consequently there are different rewards and punishments (Bravo, 2019). Although it is still unclear, the nationwide system might either be a summary of all smaller systems or perhaps only particular things would be taken from each one of them and combined. What is known so far is that SCS will initially only be operationally available in Mainland China while the regions of Hong Kong and Macao would be exempt (Meissner, 2017). This is due to the political conflict between Mainland China and Hong Kong, as Hong Kong is currently a semi-autonomous region (BBC Monitoring, 2018).

Despite differences, the structure is similar in each regional SCS. Every Chinese citizen above 16 years old is measured by a score between 350 and 950, based on, as mentioned earlier, information about hobbies, lifestyle, shopping habits, relationships, political affiliation, etc. (Wong & Dobson, 2019). In their work on the subject, Wong and Dobson (2019) outline the areas of life which are of major interest in the constant monitoring of Chinese citizens, such as workplace performance, health-related self-tracking, purchasing and consumption history, interpersonal relationships, political activities, as well as location history. The authors also elaborate on the rewards and punishment methods used to "motivate" the local population to follow the Chinese government's ideals for behavior.

Good deeds that improve one's social credit are considered "reasonable" purchases such as diapers, donating for charity, donating blood, caring for the elderly, paying bills on time, volunteering, and some more unusual such as praising the Chinese government publicly (Kobie, 2019). On the other hand, not paying bills on time, playing video games excessively, not visiting your parents often enough, drinking or buying alcohol, gossiping, spreading false information and rumors, or even playing loud music on public transport can negatively influence the final score (Kobie, 2019).

A good social score (above 700) signifies a trustworthy citizen which unlocks some benefits, such as discounts on public transport tickets, hotel rooms, car rentals, priority visa application, better terms on bank loans, priority admissions for university, private schools, and work, free gym, priority health care. People with low social scores (under 450), on the other hand, might be banned from using fast trains or purchasing flight tickets, limited to a smaller pool of job offers, be barred from renting accommodation in certain regions, or be forced to use only low-speed internet connections. In 2019, for example, with the Chinese population at 1.4 billion people, over 26 million domestic flights were denied according to government statistics (Lee, 2019).

Another form of punishment for bad behavior is public shaming. People with inappropriate behavior, who committed some kind of violation are shown on TV, portrayed on

big billboards with their personal information — picture, name, address. The Chinese TikTok, Dǒuyīn, partnered with the local courts in the region of Nanning to broadcast pictures of people with a low social credit score between videos (Chan, 2018). In the city of Suzhou, for example, some cases of bad behavior include being caught cheating at online or video games, or not showing up to scheduled appointments, meetings or reservations. In the eastern province of Zhejiang, not sorting your waste properly could also negatively influence your creditworthiness (Huang, 2018).

The introduction of SCS systems also coincides with other initiatives like the neighbor watch program that's being piloted across China where designated watchers are paid to record people's behaviors that factor into their social credit score (Ye & Chor, 2018). As mentioned above, many of these initiatives illustrate that trust is indeed a highly valued virtue in China. Wong and Dobson (2019) mention a very old tradition in Chinese culture — the concept of *Guanxi*, or a trustworthy relationship where "automatic and personal trust exists between people who have personal relationships with one another, whereas strangers are immediately shown with distrust." With the introduction of the SCS, one can only imagine how the relationship between humans may develop once reporting your neighbor to gain social credits becomes more valuable than trust and guanxi.

To precisely measure and monitor citizens' activities, the SCS uses a network of connected websites and platforms where public and private sectors cooperate with each other (Wong & Dobson, 2019). One such system that contributes to monitoring every aspect of one's life is the Sesame Credit (or Zhima Credit) (Wong & Dobson, 2019). The Sesame Credit is a private credit scoring and loyalty program system developed by the Ant Financial Services Group (AFSG) and has been part of Chinese people's lives since the beginning of 2015. This score rates citizens based on their credit history and financial decisions. It uses data from the services of the online shopping site Alibaba and its ownership to compile its score. Customers receive a score based on a variety of factors such as social media interactions and purchases carried out on Alibaba Group websites (Wong & Dobson, 2019). As websites such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, and eBay are not accessible in China, which have their local substitutes — Baidu, Youku, Renen, Weibo, and Taobao. Baidu, the equivalent of Google in China, is the most used search engine in the country and is also part of the eight Chinese companies enlisted to help the Chinese government with online surveillance of citizens (Wong & Dobson, 2019).

As a contribution to the *Journal of Comparative Law*, Chen (2017) reviews the local social credit legislation concerning the three cardinal principles of personal data protection most closely related to data subjects' control over the processing of their data: 1) the data collection principle, 2) the data usage principle, and 3) data subjects' right to access and

correct their own data. Regarding the data collection principle, Chen shares that "in addition to agency-submitted records, the SCS authorities in some regions are allowed to gather records from non-state credit service providers, industry associations or the media" (p. 366). In addition, local legislation does not allow individuals to exert effective control over the collection and use of their personal credit data. Chen further argues that the protection of access and correction rights as a legal force in China is "at a rather primitive stage," stating:

> *From a legal perspective, the existing Chinese legislation at both national and local levels does not effectively prevent the party-state from expanding and intensifying its control over each citizen by generating, aggregating and exploiting personal data on their social behaviors.* (Chen, 2017, p. 377)

For some level of comparison, Germany, for example, has a fairly sophisticated credit system as well. SCHUFA tracks open accounts, unpaid bills, loans, and fines.[1] The SCHUFA score starts at 100 when one opens a bank account or rents their first apartment. The score changes over time as a score of 90 is considered a good credit score (Curley, 2018). The SCHUFA score is kept private and confidential. These types of scores are a somewhat normalized practice in many nations. However, in contrast to Germany, one´s Sesame score, as well as the social credit score in China, is visible to almost everyone, not only to the government or a certain institution but also to family, friends, relatives, neighbors, even complete strangers.

Surveillance practices are not unfamiliar in democratic countries as well, as giants such as Google, YouTube, Facebook, and others collect our data daily. Surveillance practices are not limited to social media either. London, for example, is the city with the most surveillance cameras in Europe — 6th in the world (Statista, 2019). But the way people perceive these procedures in the Western world is quite different. The westernized perspective conditioned in the way we see the world is often the reason why we lack the ability to fully understand unfamiliar concepts such as the establishment of a social credit system.

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[1] Short for "Schutzgemeinschaft für allgemeine Kreditsicherung," or General Credit Protection Agency.

## 2.2. The Background Story: Established Traditions in Chinese Surveillance Practices

*Trust is good, control is better.*

\- Vladimir Lenin, unknown, n.d.

The surveillance and censorship practices in China are broadly researched issues by scientists from a rich variety of fields. These traditionalized Chinese practices unite politics, economy, society, technological development, communication technologies, media, and many other aspects of public and private life. Even though the Social Credit System was considered as the ultimate surveillance technology in China at the beginning of the research and has, therefore, become a key element in this thesis, I want to highlight that in this work, the SCS is used as an umbrella term to refer to different monitoring, surveillance, and censorship practices in China.

One explanation of what might have caused the need for a Social Credit System in China is that the country went very quickly from extreme poverty to being an economic superpower. China is huge, the population is growing rapidly, and so does crime and the amount of people who are in debt with the country. This, some believe, increased the financial discomfort in the country, and therefore the Chinese government decided to take measures and regulate it. The popular outlet *Business Insider* even reported on how one province in northern China even developed an app to tell people whether there is a debtor in their surroundings (Ma, 2019).

*The Chinese government has come to understand the power of anonymity,*
*especially collective anonymity, and has waged a war against it online.*
(Brunner & DeLuca, 2019)

The extreme methods of surveillance are not something new to China, only now the tools used for monitoring citizens are more technically developed. After the Second World War and Japanese occupation, China came out of its own civil war as a communist country in 1949. As Lawrence (1998) contends, the control and the manipulation, as well as the strict observance of the society, began in China with the establishment of their communist regime (Lawrance, 1998). A good example of early communist efforts to surveil its citizens is the

*danwei work unit*[2] system developed in the late 1950s, which collected rich records on citizens regarding their income, work ethics, political behaviors, and more. Those with a bad reputation were blacklisted and prevented access to public goods, work, and educational opportunities, and other social services (Bjorklund, 1986). Another characteristic of the communist regime, of course, is propaganda. The media, newspapers, and radio in China for many years were used to promote mainly messages of the Party. The information that reaches the general public has been strictly censored and limited, so one could assume that massive invasion in citizens' private lives is also not something new.

The Great Firewall, or the internet censorship in China, appeared to be just another step to control the different social processes and knowledge communication in society. The Great Firewall blocks websites, filters results, censors content, and constantly monitors the online activities of Chinese citizens (Economy, 2018). Due to the Great Firewall, China is often characterized as the country with one of the most complex forms of filtering and blocking of sensitive content (Bousfield, 2017).

In more recent research, Yizhou Xu (2018) explores the surveillance and censorship of two Chinese artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots, Xiao Bing and BabyQ, on the popular platform WeChat, owned by tech giant Tencent. In mid-2017, these chatbots were re-programmed to avoid answering politically and socially sensitive questions. For instance, when asked about issues related to political leaders or the Tiananmen Square massacre, Xiao Bing would often respond with "You think I'm stupid? As soon as I answer, you take a screenshot." (Xu, 2018). This example, among others, highlights some of the pressing issues dealing with machine learning (ML) and chatbots in a society increasingly aided by AI-enabled computing and more strongly impacted by the Chinese authoritarian regime. Xu explains this phenomenon through the prism of the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) by examining the human-bot relations and drawing connections between AI, nationalism, and social control. He argues that technologies and authorities are integral actors in shaping social relations but often state and governmental actors are largely hidden from everyday users (Xu, 2018, p. 3). Xu also emphasizes the need for new approaches in understanding human-machine interactions. Both bots are implemented via an application programming interface (API) across multitudes of popular social networks in China. The connection of APIs, surveillance, and digital identity is explained later on in section *2.5*.

Liu (2019) aims to unpack the complexity of the social media and surveillance systems in China in the case of the tech giant Tencent and its collaboration with the state. In contrast to other research publications, he argues that social surveillance in China should not be seen

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[2] Simplified Chinese: 单位; pinyin: dān wèi (translated by Google translate).

as a pure authoritarian style of state dictatorship and that "the establishment of China's surveillance infrastructure is a distinctive historical construct."

## 2.3. Influence Beyond Regional Borders: No Borders for a Digital Territory

As the Internet gained popularity and became a tool we can barely imagine living without, the online space became a new field where governments, institutions, and private actors can grow their power and influence. Despite the censorship that China is so notorious for, the digital world offers a great opportunity to governments to re-define their territorial boundaries in networked societies.

In the past decade, STS scholars have been actively researching how technology is used to produce state power. Norma Möllers (2020) introduces the term "digital territory" and explains how through digital technologies the influence of governments on their own citizens often spreads far beyond the geographical boundaries of a country. In that case, servers, satellites, and the internet, turn into digital territory, where states actively practice monitoring and online surveillance (Möllers, 2020). Möllers (2020) defines digital territory as "nationalized information infrastructure [that] includes building and monopolizing infrastructure as well as normative ideas about the nation—who is a digital citizen, and who isn't" (p. 2). Digital territories establish norms about who is deemed a good and bad (digital) citizen.

The concept of "digital territory" that Möllers presents is strongly connected to technoscience and techno-nationalism and the production of state power in the digital age. She argues that indeed, science and engineering played a key role in modern state formation and territorialization of projects by using statistics, mapping, and engineering to "order" people into categories and create the feeling of a nation — to define the borders of a nation, and to build the infrastructure of a nation. With this, Möllers introduces the notion of *territorialization projects* to address how physical and moral dimensions of power impact the construction of the understanding of (digital) territory, (digital) nation, and (digital) citizenship. Möllers mentions China as an active actor and trend-setter in the global economy, highlighting the reputation of Chinese online practices in cyberspace as "morally questionable" (Möllers, 2020, p. 12).

Möllers aims to remind the reader that whoever controls the internet in modern society, controls everything. The internet is viewed as both global and local, and simultaneously public and private. She argues that the global and distributed nature of internet infrastructure

challenges purely legal-bureaucratic or political approaches to maintaining state sovereignty, using the "German Internet" as an example (p. 2). Möllers offers an interesting perspective that examines the strong correlation between "digital territories," cybersecurity, and the state, which is using this technological infrastructure to gain control over "physical information and normative ideas." National identity is important for states to the extent that it provides an underlying moral order to legitimize and justify state power and intervention (Möllers, 2020, p. 10).

In addition, I would like to include a statement here from a cybersecurity expert from INTERPOL (The International Criminal Police Organization) I interviewed in May 2020 regarding the topic of digital identity and cybersecurity practices in Europe:

> *The First World War was on ground. Then people built ships in order to become more powerful. Then the Second World War, we could say, was on water. The Third World War would be entirely moved to a non-physical space - the internet. And the tool used would be indeed the digital identities we have created online as nations, citizens, and individuals.*

Miyase Christensen and colleagues (2011) dedicate an entire book to the concept of "online territories" to provide a detailed account of contemporary research into digitally-mediated communication and social interaction (Christensen et al., 2011). With the ever-growing popularity of online communications in diverse forms, the authors draw connections between globalization and the emergence of "*de-territorialization,*" especially among the online milieus. This highlights the importance of bringing "the social logics of boundary-making, maintenance and negotiation clearly into the vision of contemporary (online) media studies" (Christensen et al., 2011, p. 2).

Victoria Bernal (2018) researches the relations between digital media, territory, and the creation of a diaspora. Even though the study looks into the cultural specifics of the East African country, Eritrea, it is still easy to compare the impact of online social media to the Chinese diaspora in Austria and their digital (or shared) identity. Similar to Chinese citizens living in Austria, Eritreans living abroad "used websites to participate in Eritean national politics from outside the country" (Bernal, 2018). The territory in this study is considered the internet, which is viewed as virtual cyberspace. Bernal, however, points out that cyberspace, just like any physical place, is always socially constructed and always political:

> *Online spaces can be constructed not only to serve as virtual, extraterritorial space experienced as untethered from any national territory but alternatively can be used to*

*create an experience of re-territorialization, as if one is located in a particular physical space. Online space can further serve as extra territory (national territory outside the control of the state).* (p. 61)

National territories and the boundaries of sovereignty associated with them do not exist in and of themselves but are made real through social practices and imaginaries. In contemporary society, the easiest way for communities living abroad to stay in touch with their culture and nationality is through the Internet and online social media channels. In that sense, these platforms represent neither "here" nor "there" but serve as a place that is both "here" (in their current location) and "there (in their homeland), allowing the re-envisioning of territorial relations (Bernal, 2018). The digital territories are also unhindered by the national authorities. Digital connectivity can shrink distances, bring physical gaps closer together, and create new cultural spaces for citizens but also challenges the traditional understanding of identity, nationality, citizenship, and belonging.

Peter Adey and Philip Kirby (2016) use the term "digital evacuee" to define the visibility of evacuees of various disasters and the digital footprint that they leave that allows them to be tracked (Adey & Kirby, 2016). In relation to the Chinese diaspora in Austria, this term could be used not in the literal meaning of evacuation but in the sense of migration. Broeders and Dijstelbloem (2016) observe the phenomenon of monitoring and datafying human mobility and migration management that also strongly correlates with the notion of identity, territory, and surveillance.

The concepts of territory, technology and identity are quite inseparable in modern society, especially if looking at migrants, diasporas, and communities that live abroad. In Science and Technology Studies, the importance of technologies and surveillance mechanisms in the formation of personal and national identities is a significant matter of interest. Social norms define identities and identities construct the cultural identity (Laurent et al., 2016). *Techno-nationalism* is a way of understanding how technology affects the society and the culture of a nation even beyond regional borders. An example is how technology is used to demonstrate power and promote nationalist agendas. In that sense, research and development (R&D) and technological innovations are presented as a sign of the overall growth, sustainability, and prosperity of a nation. Slowly, this mindset builds on in the citizens and helps them develop a particular pride in national technology that becomes part of their individual and shared identity.

Shim and Shin (2019) look at the established smart technologies in China as a form of techno-nationalism that sheds light on the future development of telecommunications in the country. The findings of the paper reveal the various actors enrolled in the construction of

techno-nationalism. By analyzing the historical development of the Chinese TV industry, the authors point out that China's smart TV policy has been closely related to techno-nationalism and the desire of the local authorities to reduce reliance on foreign technology and to promote domestic innovation.

Slowly moving from the idea of digital territory to the concept of identity, I would like to present a work by Ulrike Felt where she tangles an approach that relates to neither the type technology nor identity, I explore in this thesis *per se*, but is yet an extremely useful case when relating national technological systems and identity. Felt (2015) elaborates how the (non-)development of specific technoscientific projects could lead to the formation of *technopolitical identity* and the imaginary construction of preferred ways of living, value structures, and social order in the society. The public's vision regarding certain technological innovations is a key aspect when it comes to acceptance or rejection of such. The case described by Felt revolves around the Austrian nuclear power plant, Zwentendorf, in a very democratic society where the citizens have the last word, which led to a national law prohibiting the use of nuclear fusion for energy generation in Austria. As a result, Felt argues, the "national sociotechnical identity" of Austrians has been nuclear-free. This type of understanding can serve as a practical comparison between the formation of technopolitical and digital identities in Austria and China in the case of social media surveillance and the credit system.

## 2.4. Surveillance and Privacy: Constructing and Digitizing Identity

*Digital identities always grow, they never shrink.* (Pfitzmann, 2007)

Cybersecurity, politics, and data surveillance influence a range of aspects in the social life of citizens and nations, including their sense of identity. The term "digital identity" has a multidisciplinary nature and could be used either to describe the concept of digital citizenship in the sense of electronic identity and digital verification (eIDV) or could revolve around the idea of the socio-digital self and how we present our persona online (Laurent & Bouzefrane, 2016). Laurent and colleagues pay particular attention to the socio-technical processes behind online self-presentation and the construction of digital identity.

The notion of identity is closely linked to that of privacy in the sense that people can control the information that they share and receive. Laurent and colleagues (2016) argue that digital identities are an inevitable result of the major technological advancements of the past two decades. The notions of identity and reputation co-exist on the Internet and are closely linked to the notion of privacy. An interesting perspective also offered by Laurent and other colleagues is that "the notion of identity is an objective notion, while reputation is a subjective

notion" (Laurent et al., 2016, p. 13), just like in the case of the social credit score that measures trustworthiness. What is implied here is that "reputation has an economic value"; it is therefore subjective as people attach different meanings to it and judge/rate based on different values. One example cited by the authors to illustrate this is users' reputation on e-commerce platforms where they might use the price/quality ratio to measure the worthiness of a product. Depending on what one considers high or low price and good or bad quality, the ratings of different users will vary as well. A similar methodology is used also when we judge, evaluate, and contribute to the reputation of particular individuals on social media and in real life. Laurent and colleagues conclude that there are different reasons and ways of why and how people manage their digital identities (p. 27). On the subject of identity, according to Sherry Turkle (2006), people use characters different from their true identities. These identities depend on technology, social contexts (arising for example from social norms established in online communities), and cultural contexts.

In that sense, online social platforms give users the opportunity to control the image of their public persona through their pictures, writing, and management of personal information. Mazur and Li (2016) aim to explore and compare social media behavior and the construction of digital identities among Chinese and American students. Their findings indicate that social media is more of a social habit for young users in the United States than their peers living in China. This might be due to "some Chinese users' knowledge of and fear of Chinese censors, who act as watchdogs and have been deployed to guide the online conversation" (Mazur & Li, 2016, p 111). In this sense, it might not be a stretch to imagine that Chinese citizens are perhaps more conscious concerning online monitoring practices than people living in the USA or, in terms of this thesis, Austria, for example.

Michael and Lupton bring up the topic of public understanding and levels of awareness when it comes to big data practices as those related to the Social Credit System (Lupton & Michael, 2017). They also introduce a few sensitizing terms I would like to incorporate into this work for better clarity. For instance, every time a user interacts with some kind of digital or online technology that is incorporated on the internet, a *digital data assemblage* is being generated which feeds archives and big data algorithms (Lupton & Michael, 2017). The authors define these assemblages as "heterogeneous entanglements of humans, technologies and data that are constantly changing as users' new encounters with digital technologies occur and as different data sets come together and interact and are taken up for a range of purposes" (p. 255). *Dataveillance* is another especially relevant term they introduce towards the case of digital identity and surveillance practices. Dataveillance stands for digital surveillance, as each digital device beyond public, private, and geographical spaces, is nowadays a tool for monitoring online behavior.

Furthermore, STS scholars Irma van der Ploeg and Jason Pridmore (2016) have put together an entire edited volume dedicated to the notion of "doing" and "digitizing" identities in a networked world. Van der Ploeg and Pridmore set the ground for their multi-authored overview by describing how we interact and how the way we live causes the need for new identification practices in a digital and automated area (p. 1). The authors pay attention to the construction and management of digital identities (IDM) through a variety of factors such as information and communication technologies (ICTs), metadata, PIN codes, tokens, biometric verification, etc. However, access to and control over personal data is the heart of many contemporary strategic innovations. Social media and its immense popularity present a major concern as these are the main channels where people voluntarily share and present detailed textual and visual information for their lives to mass audiences. People of all ages but especially younger generations share their experiences with various communities online through personal profiles, blogs, stories, photos and videos, reels, etc. Usually, these publications are aimed at friends and relatives but often the consumers of this content are less-defined audiences. The growing number of stolen identities, hacked profiles and other cybersecurity issues have forced many institutions on both national and international levels to try to prevent misuse of personal information and data by enforcing strict regulations.

> *Digital identities are created and maintained for their predictive capabilities. Law enforcement agencies looking for suspects, health organizations and researchers looking for risk indicators, and businesses wanting to "know" their customers are among the most eager to avail themselves of these data* (Van der Ploeg & Pridmore, 2016, p. 2).

The notion of identity and identity management has changed drastically in the past few years with the growth of e-commerce and e-government. E-signature within an e-system has quickly become the most important factor for identities to be verifiable and not anonymous. This is especially applicable in times of global migration and border-crossing, which in turn, raises some questions about the changes in some social processes and the moral issues and dilemmas surrounding technology and society.

In addition to the public, ethical, legal, and political concerns revolving around digital identification, researchers from the humanities and social sciences, psychologists, and philosophers have also developed a significant interest in the topic, triggered by the highly technologized notion of identity that can be observed in recent years and the effects this phenomenon causes — higher levels of surveillance and trackability, for example. Still, any question of digital identity must first reconcile with what exactly constitutes 'identity' in the first

place. For decades, experts from various fields have sought an answer to this complex and hotly debated question.

In 1902, Charles Harton Cooley developed a sociological theory of the "looking-glass self" that describes how we each create our own self-image by looking at a mirror. This shapes how we imagine we are seen and judged by others and based on this perception of comments and vision of the others, we create our self-image. In 1923, Sigmund Freud set the modern base of psychoanalysis and a reinvigorated understanding of conscious and subconscious identity with his theory of "id, ego, and super-ego." Later, Herbert Mead (1932) and Herbert Blumer (1969) began to see identity as a largely reflective process, where social interactions and cultural life have a major impact on the construction of self. Similarly, Anthony Giddens (1991) explains the "late modern" identity as a broad definition of a variety of factors connected to personal stories, beliefs, and experiences.

In the field of Science and Technology Studies, the concept of digital identity is mostly examined through the relation between the social and the technological and the transformative agency of implemented technologies over the society. With a more feminist approach, Donna Haraway (1991) criticizes the traditional norms of identity politics in her "Cyborg Manifesto," where she presents the cyborg as a hybrid identity between human and machine. In other STS research, Akrich and Latour (1992) pay special attention to "scripting users," their behaviors and identities; and in his "configuration of users," Woolgar (1991) identifies the "users" as an essential part of technology and provides a scientific angle of how users and their identities are imagined within the framework of different technologies.

In the sense of modern and digital life from an STS perspective, Irma van der Ploeg and Jason Pridmore (2016) further differentiate *three distinctions of identity.* The first is a distinction between the understanding of identity in a narrow sense: one's tastes and preferences, lifestyle, their life story, and in a broader way: one's name, age, gender, nationality, etc. The authors argue that there is hardly a limit to what can be considered relevant to this first, narrow notion of identity. Usually, in the sense of one's digital identity, it is the narrow conception of identity being taken into account while in socio-political settings, it is the second, broader understanding of identity is used. This second and broader category is less about self-knowledge and is more concerned with the verification of a person who applies for a particular service, account, or needs to be issued a passport or receive a certain benefit (Van der Ploeg & Pridmore, 2016, p. 5).

The *second distinction of "identity"* is related to the one mentioned above but pays attention less to the "content" of identity, and rather to the perspective from which it is conceived. The key concern is the difference between identity as something attributed to someone and identity as a private self-understanding, namely the *third-person* and the *first-*

*person perspective*, as one's public image can contrast with one's sense of true self (Van der Ploeg & Pridmore, 2016, p. 5). Earlier work on digital identities paid more attention to the first-person perspective, focusing on one's online profile and identity management on the Internet. Later on, however, coinciding with the emergence of "surveillance studies" as a scientific field of its own, research on digital identities steadily becomes more concerned with the third-person perspective, interested in the type of identification and personal data gathering of people by others (Van der Ploeg & Pridmore, 2016, p. 6). Constructing, doing, and maintaining identity are central topics of surveillance studies and the field has become very influential in focusing academic research and policymaking on the issues of digital monitoring.

The *third distinction of "identity"* is slightly more abstract and aims to highlight the difference between the conception of identity that sees it as something that is essentially "there," something that is known, expressed, registered, proven, faked, etc., and the conception of identity that sees it as an outcome of a process, practices, social interactions, performances, and so on (Van der Ploeg & Pridmore, 2016, p. 6). For example, one's understanding of identity could be based on objective facts about oneself such as their given name, place of birth, or cultural origin, but it could also be conceived of as the result of a series of actions and historical practices such as naming, birth registration, the definition of kinship, or the issuing ID documents (Van der Ploeg & Pridmore, 2016, p. 6).

## 2.5. Digital Identity and Social Media

It should be well clear then, that digital identity can be understood in a variety of different ways. It has quickly become a broadly applicable term in modern society. For example, digital identity could rightly imply any of these following examples:

1) **eID or electronic identity** — Many countries such as Estonia, Germany, Luxembourg have implemented electronic ID cards.
2) **Digital signature** — Other countries like Austria, for example, broadly use the digital ID verification known as Handysignatur. Bulgaria, Serbia, Latvia, and many others also offer alternatives for digital identity verification.
3) **Biometric identity** — Usually used for governmental purposes, security checks on airports, or even when registering in a mobile app. Biometric data scans the face or fingerprint of the user and becomes a more popular verification method for online services. Online banks such as N26, Revolut, as well as investment tools like Binance, require biometric verification when creating an account.

4) **Digital footprint** — The metadata left by users when searching the internet, purchasing items online, or using mobile apps is part of our digital identities.

5) **Online (self-)presentation** — How people present themselves online and on social media, what they reveal, what they share, what personality they portray.

Media, on the other hand, is often referred to as the "fourth estate" or the "fourth pillar of democracy" due to its capacity of advocacy and implicit ability to frame political issues. Media, including the contemporary social media channels, carries the responsibility of communicating relevant, transparent, and truthful information. Since the press, in all its forms, plays a major role in shaping public opinion regarding important social, political, and economic topics, it also has an enormous impact on the construction of individual, national, and global identities. Isolde Sprenkels and Sally Wyatt (2016) use the term "media wisdom," first introduced by the Dutch Council of Culture or Raad voor Cultuur (RvC), to draw attention to the media competencies and awareness needed by citizens to better understand the ways they use media and the effects that have on them and others. Sprenkels and Wyatt introduce the impact (social) media has on constructing national norms, beliefs, and identities.

Applying the "first-person perspective," Anders and Anne-Mette Albrechtslund (2016) dedicate their work to the practices of performing identity online by investigating online social media networks. The authors explore and analyze online sociality as a "touristic practice" that unfolds in various peer-to-peer social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and similar internet-based communities. The "touristic" approach references the similarity of ways how people perform on social media as if they were tourists — photographing, making videos, sharing experiences, and collecting memories. By tracking down these aspects of social media communication and practices, the authors highlight social dynamics in the online world that are otherwise not recognizable, namely the performance of identities and communication of a particular message online. The Albrechtslunds also emphasize here again that social media behaviors and identity construction could be strongly impacted by cultural norms.

As part of the research, the authors observed tourism practices in Paris, ranked as the most visited tourist destination in the world for many years in a row. They identify the typical traits of tourists: usually large groups of people holding cameras and taking pictures in front of the Eiffel Tower and buying souvenirs and postcards from the nearby shops. Engaging with social media, posting pictures, videos, live streaming, and sharing locations appear to be a major part of the tourist experience, and performing these activities can be interpreted as producing an identity. In that sense, social media profiles are a key element of practicing and shaping online identity (Albrechtslund & Albrechtslund, 2016). The authors further explain that

different social media platforms have different standards (e.g., Twitter has a 140-character limit per post) and therefore require different identity presentations in an attempt to successfully "translate life experiences into something shareable that attracts likes and comments." Posting to social media can also and should also be seen as a co-constructed way of understanding and performing sociality, which would also correctly ensure that "identity performance is not seen as a fabrication or staging of the self" (Albrechtslund & Albrechtslund, 2016).

A great deal of research on this topic in STS continues to focus more on the third-person perspective in the digital identity debate. Jason Pridmore (2016), for example, focuses on the so-called application programming interfaces (APIs), which, simply explained, allows multiple apps and technologies to communicate with each other and exchange information. Pridmore's research reveals the more technical aspects of social media and what lurks behind it. He argues that increased resources and personal information comes packaged together as retrieved social media data and this, in turn, has a significant impact on the construction and development of digital identities in the contemporary world.

> As social media is infusing itself into numerous aspects and domains of everyday life, these social media APIs are arguably becoming default arbitrators and mediators of 'identity. (Pridmore, 2016, p. 37)

Today, there is an app or a digital solution for literally any need or problem. Commonly used tools, usually offered by established tech giants such as Google search, Gmail, YoutTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc., allow their data to be "embedded" into various websites by using their open APIs (Pridmore, 2016). These could serve as archives of locations, images, keywords, and records connected to the identity of a social media "profile" — status updates, relationships, friends, location, tagged photos, shares, reposts, likes, comments. This understanding indicates the entrenched connection between technology and identity. The Cambridge Analytica scandal mentioned in the introduction chapter indeed revolved around these kinds of personal data that are 'hidden' but yet accessible for those who have the right tools. Pridmore argues that "APIs constantly update social media data and serve to connect various different actors," that way they allow external apps to "access significant details about the social media users" and learn more about their social media activities (p. 38). Various groups, including marketers, politicians, businesses, researchers could seek access to such data in order to target particular social groups of interest. For example, social media advertisements are often 'personalized' based on the interests, gender, age, geographical location, behavioral patterns, and search history of the user. Nowadays, there are rarely any

websites, apps, tools, or plug-ins that do not collect personal information about their users. How many times do you need to "accept cookies" and "agree with the terms and conditions" when browsing the internet? This, of course, brings many questions about the privacy and moral boundaries of data gathering, most importantly perhaps: who collects the data and for what it is used?

**Western Social Media Controversies**

One of the most controversial social media platforms in the Western world is Facebook, now Meta. It was the first large network that united people from various points across the globe and helped enable interpersonal communication beyond the geographical borders we know today. Facebook is still the largest and most used social media that has ever existed, reaching 2.85 billion active monthly users (Statista, 2021b). Multiple studies have been conducted exploring different aspects of Facebook, its users, and its impact. Now, with Instagram and WhatsApp under its ownership, Facebook is an absolute trendsetter that dictates how social media develops. Mark Zuckerberg's project, however, is arguably the most criticized social media. In recent years, there have been multiple lawsuits and scandals regarding the privacy, information gathering, and advertising practices of the tech giant. The negative attention towards the social media platform quite possibly led to its recent rebranding and new name: Meta ("Facebook company now Meta," 2021). Ever since its launch, Facebook has actively mediated (online) social life in a manner that some users recognize as neither fully private nor fully public.

Daniel Trottier (2016) tackles exactly this correlation — between Facebook as a social media, the "visibility" of oneself, and digital identity management. The main questions Trottier aims to answer is essentially this: in a context where early users are coping with an increasingly publicized platform, what compelled these users to engage in sharing and collecting personal information on Facebook, how did they perceive these conditions of visibility, and how did they manage their online presence? Trottier looks at surveillance from another angle — it is not the government or the profit-oriented businesses that monitor the people and their actions but it is the users themselves, who 'spy' on one another. He gives this phenomenon the term, "peer-to-peer surveillance" and thus defines surveillance as a broader phenomenon than data collection, which typically relies on "asymmetrical relations of visibility and power" (Trottier, 2016). With the domestication of media technology, there are currently endless amounts of platforms that all allow users and peers to share different aspects of their life in different forms, from blogs, vlogs and stories to more controversial and intimate platforms such as dating platforms — washing away the line between private and public almost

entirely. The majority of the content young people consume is prepared by people close to their age and targeted at a similar audience.

Trottier conducted research with 30 undergraduate students from one Canadian university who are regular Facebook users. The interviewees reported that they use Facebook for socializing with peers their age but have also come to terms with "unwanted watchers" such as teachers, parents, and employers, which undoubtedly impacts the way they present their personas online. Peer surveillance and intervisibility have thus become normalized in much of contemporary society: people share images, videos, and posts because they want to be seen, and keeping track of how our Facebook friends are doing and how their life develops is a modern way of staying in touch. According to Trottier, these practices are tied to both communication and identity and shape how people interact with each other as individuals. After more than 100 years later, it appears as though the concept of peer surveillance and online visibility can still be paralleled to the Cooley's (1902) theory of the "looking-glass self.". Facebook, similar to other social media platforms, serves as a mirror to its users showing them what is liked and approved by their audiences and this plays the role of a guideline that is used to shape a desirable digital identity. 'Creeping,' "stalking,' and other forms of 'background-checking' on Facebook is another aspect of social media surveillance highly related to how, what, and why we choose to present online and how we, as users, shape our digital identities.

**Identity Management and Surveillance**

Valerie Steeves (2016) takes a closer look at identity management practices developed by children due to lateral, peer, and parental surveillance. She researched underaged students in Canada. According to the findings, the younger generations are quite aware of the negative sides of social media and know that their self-presentation online might have an impact on their life later on in terms of occupation opportunities, education, relationships. Many of the female children interviewed in Steeves' research share that their basic strategy of digital identity management is to simply "not take pictures that could ruin their reputation." Another major fear appears to be what others might say regarding a particular post or whose hands the content might end up in. An interesting finding of this research is that the participants rely on friends to help them manage their online identities. The rules are simple: one does not post embarrassing pictures of their friends online and in case of compromising content, friends are expected to go online and restore one's reputation. This is a key element not only in constructing a personality but also in building up trustworthiness in contemporary relationships. However, failure to delete or keep particular content away from "lateral surveillance" causes specific circumstances in which it is "acceptable to break into a person's

phone or social media account without his or her permission" and remove what is necessary (Steeves, 2016):

> *In this sense, lateral surveillance was a form of self-protection. By routinely monitoring what photos of them were held by others, they were able to intervene when necessary to prevent the distribution of unwanted images* (p. 129).

In what circumstances surveillance and unauthorized access to someone else's personal phone, computer or account are acceptable is another interesting topic to look at. Parents, for example, are one social group that tends to justify the monitoring of their children's online behaviors as a necessary protection. Steeves (2016) reveals that, surprisingly, many children at the age of 10 to 12 were much more comfortable with parental monitoring and saw it as a form of care in contrast to older adolescents that consider it interfering in the private sphere. The most popular identity management practices developed by teenagers to avoid parental surveillance include accepting their friends or follow requests, unfriending, or blocking parents and relatives on social media altogether; these, in addition to using stronger passwords, PIN codes, or fingerprints to secure their accounts and devices, or using peer-oriented platforms not well-known among the older generations (Steeves, 2016).

Teachers and educational institutions can also monitor students' behavior to maintain particular norms. A contemporary example is the Dutch Reference Index (RI) for High-Risk Youth that connects various digital systems, youth organizations and centers, and professionals in order to trace risk signals among children and youngsters until the age of 23 in the Netherlands. A complex system of databases and algorithms ascribes what is considered "risk identity" to children. A colorful code is used to differentiate the different levels of risk — from behavioral issues, tendencies to commit a crime, animal abuse, sexual offenses, violence, problematic family members, and so on (La Fors-Owczynik & Valkenburg, 2016). This example is not directly related to surveillance of social media but rather an ascribed identity, as it is managed not by an individual but by authorities and institutions. The RI seems to have a very similar agenda to the social credit system in China - to prevent bad behaviors and reduce crime. In these cases, it is less identifying people and more about identifying problems. Of course, it would be inappropriate to compare the Dutch Reference Index for High Risk Youth with the Social Credit System in China as the politics, methods, and the motivations for implementation behind the two systems differ significantly. This, however, is a reminder that the "morality" of a technological system or innovation is more a question of interpretation than anything else. Even though the RI only evaluates the behavior and environment for youth under the age of 23, these records impact the future development of

these individuals, and their "risk identity" is a label valid throughout their entire life. A 'risky' social score would remain visible for various institutions and will certainly influence how they might treat particular individuals.

# 3. Research Questions and Theoretical Approach

## 3.1. Research Questions

This study aims to research how Chinese citizens living in Austria purposely adapt their online behavior and digital identity when using Chinese social media platforms and communication channels. The thesis seeks to understand what exactly people try to hide from Chinese mobile applications and which methods or tools they use to keep their privacy safe and avoid *dataveillance*. Another matter of interest is how online self-presentation and self-expression on popular social media channels differ among Chinese citizens living in China and Austria, which is examined from the perspective of those living in Austria. Furthermore, this research explores the main online platforms Chinese citizens living in Austria use to communicate with friends and family in China and Austria. The topic of freedom of expression as part of digital behavior is also highlighted in the research.

> *(MQ) How do Chinese citizens living (temporarily) in Austria construct their digital identity and online behavior under the awareness of being monitored?*

The main research question seeks to examine the impact of the digital surveillance practices on online behaviors and digital identity, explored from the prism of native Chinese citizens who live, work and/or study in Austria. Focusing on this topic allows me to learn and better understand the diverse ways in which one could consciously change their online behavior while being aware that their online activity may be monitored and could eventually have an impact on their lifestyle.

To be able to provide a detailed answer to the main research question, a few sub-questions need to be addressed.

*(SQ1) How do Chinese citizens living in Austria adapt to online services, apps, and platforms that are (considerably) monitored by the Chinese government?*

By addressing the issue of how native Chinese citizens adapt to monitored online platforms, I was able to examine in depth the tools that the different people have implemented into their online behavior and digital routine to avoid being monitored. Such tools or mechanisms include using separate devices for private and work-related purposes, virtual private networks (VPNs), secret chats, encrypted messengers, etc. Here, I also give attention to how open the research participants are to integrating such (likely) illegal instruments.

*(SQ2) How do Chinese citizens living in Austria manage their digital identity and the information they share online on Austrian and Chinese social media platforms?*

With this sub-question, I aim to understand whether the same person, with the same personality traits, consciously alters their online behavior while using trending Chinese social media platforms. I intend to further investigate how one's digital identity and their online image visible for internet users differ across Chinese and Austrian social platforms, namely what content, pictures, and information are being presented online. Here, a particular focus includes the main motivations behind the choice of a particular online identity.

*(SQ3) How do Chinese citizens living in Austria communicate with friends, family, relatives, and acquaintances online in a manner safe for both sides?*

Although there is an endless number of platforms, websites, and mobile applications that can be used for communication, some are particularly more established or forbidden in certain regions and countries. It is no secret that the main communication platforms in China, including WeChat, are strongly monitored. Therefore, a growing number of users choose to use alternatives. Integrating this research question into my study allows me to gain a better overview of the platforms Chinese citizens use for corresponding with peers both in Austria and in China and the reasons why these particular channels of communication are preferred.

## 3.2. Theoretical Approach

The concept of digital identity examined within the framework of co-production is the main theoretical approach of this thesis.

*Digital identity* refers to the concept of digital territory that is detailed in section *2.3*. The digital territory is seen as a "nationalized information infrastructure [that] includes building and monopolizing infrastructure as well as normative ideas about the nation — who is a *digital citizen*, and who isn't" (Möllers, 2021, p. 2). Digital territories establish norms about who is deemed a good and bad (digital) citizen. The concept of digital territory and digital citizenship is strongly connected to technoscience and techno-nationalism and the production of state power in the digital age. Möllers (2021) examines the correlation between digital territories, cybersecurity, and the state, which is using this technological infrastructure to gain control over "physical information and normative ideas" (p. 10). In this thesis, the concept of the digital citizen is related to the understanding of digital identity.

*Co-production* is a theoretical approach that uses the dynamic interaction between technology and society to create a fuller perspective on how these two aspects correlate and produce knowledge together. Science and technology shape society in numerous ways and have a great influence on our everyday life and vice versa. *"The term co-production reflects this self-conscious desire to avoid both social and techno-scientific determinism in STS accounts of the world"* (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 20). Jasanoff (2004) argues that "*the realities of human experience emerge as the joint achievements of scientific, technical, and social enterprise,"* where different entities are co-produced, each underwriting the other's existence (p. 17). The idiom of co-production can be seen as the simultaneous processes through which modern societies form their epistemic and normative understandings of the world. The co-productionist perspective draws attention to the ways that knowledge and technological artifacts create and modify social order and it contributes to an understanding of how the production of science and technology themselves are shaped by social, political, and cultural factors, on an increasingly global scale (Witjes, 2017).

The idiom of co-production is a widely applicable concept as various fields, actors, and artifacts constantly intertwine with each other and co-produce new entities. Filipe et al. (2017) provide a few reasons for the diversity and variation within co-production, such as the importance of what is being produced, how, by whom, and to which purpose. The authors address the growing interest in Jasanoff´s work and the expanding use of co-production in governance and policy making. Jasanoff further argues that *"domains of nature, facts, objectivity, reason, and policy [cannot be separated] from those of culture, values, subjectivity, emotion, and politics"* (2004, p. 3).

Looking at citizenship through a co-productionist perspective, Benjamin (2019) draws attention to a new digital valuation program for citizens. The valuation program can be understood as a one-way relationship where a particular technology investigates citizens and makes it easy to spot the *"reliable" citizens* in the country. The new system, however, not only observes the citizens and records their actions to grade but also shapes their behaviors. Benjamin sees cultures of social domination as a central reason to explain why social bias and inequity get coded into technology. The *cultural desire for domination and technologies co-produce one another*. Furthermore, some people have the monopoly needed to create tech imaginations, while others have to live with the consequences of technologies without having a voice in the decision-making.

Another study examines the correlation between renewable energy as a sociotechnical system and how it shapes the *relations between actors and their identities*. A central argument is that "wind energy developments not only alter the landscape and the technical infrastructure but also *co-produce particular representations of communities and identities* of actors and influence the way by which these actors live and understand both themselves and the landscapes that they inhabit" (Gjørtler Elkjær et al., 2021, p. 4)**.**

With the two examples stated above, I would like to point out how the understanding that identity, technology, and the surrounding environment co-produce each other can be researched in various forms — from constructing "reliable" citizens to representing communities and identities. Jasanoff (2004) highlights four of the (most common) instruments of co-production: *identities, institutions, discourses, representation* (pp. 39-43). In that sense, a digital identity is a particular form of identity that could be envisioned through the instruments of co-production. The *identities* as an entity are reflected through the concept of digital identities and their online *representation* as well as the cultural specifics that impact one's identity. The *institutions* in this research case are represented by the Chinese government and authorities. The surveillance practices and online monitoring reflect a controversial *discourse* that serves as a catalyzer between institutions and identity.

Using the idiom of co-production as a main theoretical framework for my research allows me to examine the connections between technology, governmental surveillance, and the construction of digital identity in great depth.

# 4. Research Case and Methodological Approach

Personal data is the gold of the 21st century. Those who own and have access to the digital footprint often know more about Internet users than they do themselves. The question of misuse of this data has therefore existed since the beginning of the internet.

This work seeks to explore the perspective and opinion of Chinese migrants on online monitoring and gain a better overview of the understanding of personal data privacy, and mass surveillance and the influence these factors have on the digital identity of native Chinese citizens living in Austria. The current changes in China and controversial methods for management and control of the population caused a global debate. Many Western media and researchers portray China in a slightly contradictory way, revealing that the monitoring practices expand beyond regional borders through technology and digitalization.

*"The Chinese don't care that much about privacy. You know the government is always watching. There can be no talk of democratic efforts,"* highlights Tseng Yi-Shuo, Head of the Division of Cyber Warfare and Information Security at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research Taiwan (as cited in Pabst, 2021, p. 54). Yi-Shuo examines the extent to which China uses digital technologies to monitor and suppress the population and what consequences this has for freedom of expression.

It is hard for people living in Western Europe to imagine and understand the established tradition in China. Therefore, the social group of relevance, in this case, is people of Chinese origin who have lived both in Mainland China and in Austria. The reason why I choose to research this particular group of people is that its representatives could consciously compare the conditions in both countries and can provide deep insights on real-life experiences with the Social Credit System, as well the specifics underpinning its cultural background.

The comparison and constant competition between East and West often causes disinformation and constructs stereotypes. Exploring viewpoints of Chinese citizens living in Austria also reveals the contradictory news, information, and experiences these individuals witness on a daily basis.

The following sections introduce the methods and materials that have been used during the research process. All methods used during the process align with the ethical requirements of the Department of Science and Technology Studies at the University of Vienna.

## 4.1. Methodological Approach

### 4.1.1. Document Analysis (Exploratory Phase)

Bowen (2007) describes document analysis as a "systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (p. 27). Reviewing and evaluating documents was not initially planned as part of the research. However, during the long period of unsuccessful sampling of research participants, I spoke to several native Chinese citizens living in Austria who refused to participate in an interview. Three of them agreed on a short casual conversation that could serve as guidance for my further research. These individuals are not to be confused with the research participants that were interviewed and therefore could be called *conversation partners* instead of interviewees.

Considering the controversial opinions received by the potential interview partners I talked to regarding digital communication platforms, social media behaviors, and online practices among Chinese citizens, and their refusal to share more about their social media behavior, I was interested in further exploring some of the media channels they use to inform themselves on current issues, such as tabu topics and conflicts, social media monitoring, and the social credit system in China. I decided to collect and analyze relevant publications on the topic of the Social Credit System in China, which can be seen as an umbrella term for various surveillance practices in China.

The conversation partners who agreed to have an informal discussion with me mentioned that the main source they use to read the current news and trending topics is the app WeChat. Due to the inability of the app to provide the articles in English, I asked for other media channels they often use to update themselves on important issues. Below are some of the main media channels used by the informal conversation partners:

**Table 1.**

*The main media channels used by Chinese citizens living in Austria*

| Name of Media | Language | Website | Suggested by |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sohu | Chinese | www.sohu.com | Conversation Partner 1 |
| Sina | English | www.sina.cn | Conversation Partner 1 |
| Tencent | English | www.tencent.com | Conversation Partner 1 |
| TouTiao | Chinese | www.toutiao.com | Conversation Partner 1 |
| CCTV | English | www.english.cctv.com | Conversation Partner 2 |
| People of China | Chinese | www.paper.people.com.cn | Conversation Partner 2 |
| Global Times | English | www.globaltimes.cn | Conversation Partner 3 |
| China Daily | English | www.global.chinadaily.com.cn | Conversation Partner 3 |

> *The first website (Sohu) is hosted by our government, a Chinese official English news website, all the news on it is "positive", you can have a comparison with the news of other countries. I think the value of these two newspapers is that you can compare other foreign language newspapers on the same problem*". (Conversation Partner 3)

The current communist regime is notorious for the harsh censorship enforced on popular media. According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index from *Reporters without Borders*, China scores in 177th place (out of 180), above only Turkmenistan, North Korea, and Eritrea ("2020 World Press," n.d.). Therefore, any analysis must duly consider that Chinese authorities strictly choose what information and content will reach the general public.

The Great Firewall is another popular occasion to criticize China´s governmental decisions. The firewall blocks websites, filters results, censors content, and constantly monitors the online activities of Chinese citizens. The local population rarely has access to media channels and news from foreign sources and the few who dare to break the law and engage with the opinions of independent journalists, often have to use illegal VPNs or other forbidden tools.

The main goal of the document analysis is, first, to gain a better perspective on how the social credit system and mass monitoring practices of the Chinese government are presented in mass media in China and second, to find out more about how media channels in China communicate messages and sensitive topics with the general public. I chose to observe publications related to the SCS because provocative or uncomfortable topics are usually the ones that get silenced or censored the most. By doing this analysis on the topic of SCS, I managed to 1) dive into the type of news that is usually communicated on Chinese media; 2) learn more about the SCS from local sources, and 3) observe if censorship is as strong as the Western media suggests and if particular trigger words are avoided.

The four articles presented are just a brief example of what could be further examined in relation to surveillance practices, online behavior, and digital identity in China in the future. The reasons why I chose to analyze media content and not governmental documents are 1) that the general public in China, including my interviewees, would not use them as the main source of information and 2) gaining access to such sensitive information is hard, especially for foreigners.

**Research Strategies & Keywords**

The research strategy was simply to look for particular keywords and phrases in the search engine of the websites. As some websites are in English, others in Chinese, words in both languages were used. The articles that were originally published in Chinese were translated with Google Translator. The texts were filtered and categorized by a list of important factors such as keywords, date, journal of publishing, the accuracy of facts and data, methods used, and applicability to the research. Some of the keywords used for searching relevant content are:

- Social credit system
- Credit system
- Credit
- 社会信用体系 [social credit system][3]
- shèhuì xìnyòng tǐxì [social credit system][4]

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[3] Simplified Chinese translation, according to Wikipedia.
[4] Pinyin translation, according to Wikipedia.

**Content**

Four articles from three different sources are presented as official document analysis. Each source used was offered by a different informal conversation partner during the exploratory phase.

In the beginning, I wanted to present only content from the past year but I quickly realized that providing articles that in some way define the social credit system or serve as an example of its use are significantly more valuable as sources than current but superficial reflections about it. The articles included in the analysis are chosen among a list of ten publications from the same media channels dedicated to the social credit system I initially considered to include in the analysis due to their detailed overview.

Some of the criteria used to filter the four chosen articles are 1) how relevant the content is, meaning whether the article aims to explain important terminology or introduce particular functions of the SCS; 2) the length of the article — short articles were usually rejected as they did not offer a rich overview on the SCS, and 3) how informative the article is in the sense of how descriptive and detailed the content is. In addition, I aimed to provide different angles on the Social Credit System, one referring to the 'West', one that is more informative, and one that points out the spaces for improvement.

There is no particular methodology used in the analysis of the four articles. The focus is on the main message that each article communicates, the language, and the tone of the expression in terms of the SCS — if it is praised, criticized, or if the information is neutral. As a guideline used for this work is provided by Macnamara (2005), which focuses on media content analysis from the perspective of social sciences.

A list of the articles analyzed in the exploratory phase of the research can be found in the table below. The findings of this document analysis are presented in section *5.1*.

**Table 2.**

*List of articles analyzed in the exploratory phase of the research*

| Title of the Article | Original Language | Media | Date Published |
|---|---|---|---|
| "Southern Weekend": What is the "Social Credit System" | Chinese | TaoTiao | 25.09.2019 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| "There are no absentees in the social credit system" | Chinese | CCTV | 06.06.2014 |
| "West has to understand and appreciate China's system" | English | Global Times | 15.10.2019 |
| "Improving the credit system is an important means to improve the overall civilization of society" | Chinese | TaoTiao | 21.05.2020 |

### 4.1.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

The best way to narrow down the research is to move from the general media to the personal stories and experiences of the users. The topic of digital identity and online self-presentation in the case of the Social Credit System is a sensitive one and is best explored via qualitative methodology as qualitative methods focus more on understanding the phenomenon rather than just collecting data.

The target group for interviewees are native Chinese citizens that live, work and/or study in Austria. Age, gender, education, and occupation are of no relevance for this research. The aim was to present the perspectives of people from different walks of life and show various angles on the topic of digital surveillance and online media behaviors of Chinese citizens living abroad. The sampling process is explained in further detail in section *4.2*.

Since real-life observation of the SCS practices requires much more time, preparation, background knowledge in terms of language, culture, and security measures, I choose to use *semi-structured interviews* as the main research method. This allows me to focus on pre-established questions while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to the conversation if a topic or an issue comes up that has not been considered in the preparation stage (Jensen & Laurie, 2016).

Despite the flexibility that semi-structured interviews offer, the biggest challenge is to find the right interviewees and ask the right questions. The individual experiences each research participant has are each a piece of the puzzle that creates the bigger picture of the digital influence social media has on the sense of identity even beyond regional borders. As pointed out by Bryne (2016), creating a space of trust and openness with the interview partner is crucial for a successful interview. Therefore, during conversations with research participants, I maintained language and decorum and, judging by participants' reactions to

particular questions, I was able to recognize when certain topics might be more sensitive to certain participants, which I would then find another way to approach.

According to Byrne (2016), open-ended interviews are a good method for attaining knowledge about the interviewees' "attitudes and values," which is crucial when it comes to a research topic that involves to a higher level the national and governmental, ethical, and moral values and cultural traditions. At the end of each interview, the participants were given the opportunity to share opinions or talk about topics that were not covered by the interview questionnaire, but still relevant to the research.

From a total sample of six interviews, five were conducted in English while one conversation was in German. The German quotations presented in the findings sections of this thesis were translated by myself alone. The original quotations can also be found in the appendix. During the interviews, interviewees were addressed using a less formal tone of the conversation and they were addressed by the first names they provided to me.

Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, four out of six interviews had to be conducted online using a platform chosen by the interviewee, i.e. Google Meets, Skype, Whatsapp, or Zoom. The other two interviews were conducted face-to-face in a neutral environment, using an office room in the co-working space of Talent Garden Austria. Five of the conversations were audio-recorded and one interviewee declined to be recorded. This wish of the interviewee to remain anonymous was respected and therefore detailed notes were been made by hand during the conversation, which I later used to express the position of the interviewee. In addition, one research participant declined to share their real name during the interview and two of the participants also refused to sign an informed consent sheet (neither digitally nor on paper) in order to maintain their complete anonymity.

Interview protocols were prepared after each interview to complement important context to the interpretation of the audio recordings. All the data collected during the research, including transcripts, audio records, and protocols has been anonymized and confidentially kept in a safe offline source.

### 4.1.3. Interview Questions

Creating questions that specifically address the areas of interest is crucial. Five thematic blocks were prepared to separate the different topics discussed during the interviews and the questions were then integrated into the respective areas. These five thematic blocks are:

1) General Questions / Basic Engagement with Social Media
2) Online Behaviors

3) Digital Identity Management
4) Understanding of Surveillance Practices in China & The Social Credit System
5) Closing Questions

Separating the question into categories or thematic blocks is of major help when conducting interviews as it allows the researcher to switch more quickly between questions and adapt to the flow of the conversation with more ease. Additionally, this categorization allows the researcher to shift focus to a category that they consider most relevant or important when time is limited or other issues emerge. Below are several example questions that were asked during the interviews (the entire questionnaire is included in the appendix).

- *Do you use your real name and authentic personal information on social media channels and other communication platforms?*
- *What are you careful with or conscious about when using social media or surfing the internet? Are there particular topics or behaviors you avoid?*
- *When it comes to personal expression and expressing your opinion online, where do you feel more free and safe to do so - in China or Austria? Explain why.*
- *Do you experience any differences you experience when communicating with friends and family in Austria and China? Which ones?*
- *Do you experience online monitoring and surveillance differently in China and Austria? How?*
- *How do you think governmental surveillance changes the ways you communicate and use social media?*
- *What methods or tools do you use to keep your (digital) privacy safe in China and Austria?*
- *What do you know about the Social Credit System, is it a big topic in China?*

Individual, or follow-up questions, were posed as necessary according to the interviewee's answers and experiences. This ensured a better conversation flow and created an opportunity to learn more about aspects of the research topic not initially considered in the preparation of the questionnaire.

Finally, several interviewees also offered to give or send me additional materials after the interview, often recalling questions or parts of the conversation late on. Among the materials were a few links to articles, apps, and movies, most of which were not of major relevance to the research and are therefore not presented.

## 4.2. Sampling

The research interest of this thesis is to investigate the perspective of Chinese citizens living in Austria on how they construct their digital identity and social media performance under the awareness of potentially being monitored by the Chinese government. In order to provide a valuable perspective on the chosen research topic and to further explore the experiences of Chinese citizens living in Austria, I aimed at interviewing people who are of Chinese origin and have lived in China.

The sampling process took approximately eight months, starting in October 2020 and ending in June 2021. Unfortunately, this overlapped with the "light" and "hard" lockdowns in Vienna that continued from November 2020 until the beginning of February 2021. Initially, ten interviews were planned with an equal number of male and female participants. The final sample consists of six interviews in total. The research participants are between 21 and 34 years of age and have been living in Austria for between one and six years, with five out of the six interviewees living in Vienna. Four interviewees are female, two are male. Five identify as Chinese, one as Taiwanese. The majority have at least a bachelor's degree with one exception, where the interviewee is still enrolled in their studies.

The basic requirements for participating in the study were 1) being a Chinese citizen who grew up in China, 2) having lived, worked, and/or studied in Austria, and 3) being a user of social media platforms in China and Europe. Age, gender, education, and occupation were of no relevance for the research. Lots of people showed interest in the study, the majority of them women. Communication with potential participants was handled via email, messenger platforms, and direct phone calls. Generally, the majority of interviewees wanted to share their knowledge and experience on the topics of surveillance and social media behaviors. However, many stated at the very beginning of the interviews that they would not answer "political questions" or engage with politically-oriented discussions. It was easy to notice that from the sampling process on, most of the potential research participants were quite careful of how they delivered particular information, what kind of comments they made, and what questions they asked back to me.

The majority of the people interested in participating in the research reached out directly through a personal message on Facebook or via email. One of the final interviewees was introduced to me personally from a common acquaintance. A more detailed explanation of the access to the research field is discussed in the section below.

## 4.3. Access to Research Field

Due to the sensitivity of the topic, access to the research field and finding research participants quickly turned into a hard and time-consuming process. The social distancing and strict regulations against COVID-19 were among the main reasons why finding research participants became a major challenge. Growing numbers of infected people, frightening statistics for ill patients, and overfilled hospitals forced most of the people to limit their social contacts. The circumstances were an opportunity to look for potential research participants in alternative ways. Keeping that in mind, interviewees were recruited through a wide variety of online channels, providing access to a diverse pool of people.

Digital visuals with a description of the study were designed and distributed on social media through my personal social media profiles. All materials used during the sampling process have been designed neutrally, avoiding colors, words, and images that might be considered offensive or inappropriate by potential interviewees. The digital and printed visuals included clear information about the goals of the study and the requirements for the interviews and potential participants, e.g. language, duration, topics. Images of the visuals are included in the appendix. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram are the main social media channels that were used for targeting potential interviewees. These particular social media channels were chosen as they are among the most broadly used networking platforms worldwide and are a preferred method for communication, including in Austria. As all posts on social media related to the call for interviewees and the research were published from my personal profiles of the researcher, transparency regarding who the person conducting the research was, including my motivations, was established early on. The people who engaged with the advertisements were able to access my profile and decide they were willing to trust me. For example, LinkedIn users could immediately access details about my professional and educational background. Using a variety of hashtags in the postings, such as #China, #research, #interview, #socialmedia, etc., allowed me to reach more people who are interested in the respective topics.

Recruiting interviewees through social media channels also draws an immediate connection between the research topic and the role of social media platforms. Social media allowed the message to spread quickly and most of the people that had an interest in participating found out about the research online. In an exploratory conversation that was conducted at the very beginning of the research process, the conversation partner was asked about typical education fields and professional occupations chosen by Chinese students that live abroad to make the targeting process easier. I was suggested to look for potential interviewees of Chinese origin in social circles and university departments related to

economics, business, and various technological fields. According to a report by the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) from 2019, focused on Chinese students in the EU, the majority of students choose English-speaking programs as part of their education in Europe (Counsell, 2011, as cited in Fu, 2019). The United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands are ranked among the most preferred destinations in the EU. The most popular undergraduate majors among Asian students appear to be business and finance programs, engineering, and statistics. As a result, a list of 72 relevant groups and communities were prepared, chosen strictly based on their focus and number of members — student groups, Chinese people in Austria, erasmus and exchange communities, Chinese language groups, etc. For a period of eight months from October 2020 to June 2021, the call for participants was shared multiple times in those Facebook groups. Some examples for Facebook groups used for distribution and recruiting of research participants are listed in the table below.

**Table 3.**

*Sample of Facebook groups used for distribution and recruiting of research participants*

| Facebook Group Name | Number of Members* |
|---|---|
| Chinese in Vienna / Austria 奥地利华人 | 1.900 |
| Technische Universität Wien // TU Wien | 1.900 |
| Uni Wien Studentinnen und Studenten Vol. 2 | 2.100 |
| Japanologie Wien | 2.400 |
| Chinese Culture & Character | 4.400 |
| Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie Uni Wien | 4.700 |
| Jobs für Studenten WIEN - Praktikum Studentenjob Nebenjob Vienna | 5.900 |
| Politikwissenschaft an der Universität Wien, POWI | 7.800 |
| Soziologie Uni Wien | 8.000 |
| English Speaking People - Jobs in Vienna ♡ Austria | 9.400 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Vienna International Students | 11.900 |
| FOREIGN IN VIENNA 2 | 17.300 |
| WG-Zimmer und Wohnungen in Wien gesucht! | 25.600 |
| China -10000000 Chinese on Facebook -Join Largest Facebook Group for #China | 51.800 |
| WG-Zimmer in Wien Gesucht! | 62.200 |
| Learn Chinese 学习中文 | 84.700 |
| Erasmus Plus Projects | 144.500 |

*As of 24.09.2021*

Some of these groups might appear irrelevant but are crucial for most students living in Vienna and Austria. Nowadays, many young people seek accommodation opportunities, social contacts, and materials for university within digital communities, such as groups on Facebook. Because Facebook access is so heavily restricted in China, it should at least be considered that the majority of Chinese that use and are accessible on Facebook live abroad.

The Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna was another channel for gathering potential research participants. Students are active users of digital technology and online social media; therefore, they can provide relevant insights on communication channels and online practices among Chinese citizens, relevant for the SCS study. Another way used to expand the reach to people who would be interested to take part in the study was to put printed materials in three co-working spaces and two Chinese shops across Vienna.

In addition, a special email was created for the recruiting process. The created email address, *gespraechseinladung@gmail.com,* was purposely formulated in an anonymous, neutral, and welcoming manner. In German, the literal translation of "Gesprächseinladung" means "invitation for a conversation," which was the main goal: to make interviewees feel welcomed to participate in an (in)formal conversation. The reason why the registered email address is in German and not in English, which would probably be more understandable for foreigners living in Austria, is simply that most of the considered email names were already taken.

## 4.4. Limitations of Research Field

Looking for interviewees online or on social media also has its disadvantages such as a lack of control over the algorithm of who sees the call for interviewees and who does not. Internet-based sampling could also lead to non-representative samples as it is hard to verify the authenticity of the potential interviewees — are they the people who they present themselves as and is the information they share truthful?

Despite the multiple people that were curious to share their opinion on the research topic, only a few agreed to an actual interview or a conversation. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the interviews with research participants were initially planned entirely offline without leaving any digital trace. Digital meetings and online calls during the lockdown, however, turned out to be a no-go for a lot of people, which made the sampling process even more challenging. To protect their privacy, many potential participants refused to engage in an online discussion and did not agree to be recorded. The distrust in various communication platforms and the fear that what they say might end up in the wrong hands was a reason for many potential interviewees to choose not to take part in the research.

Another issue was that many of the potential interviewees I was in contact with moved back to China during a short period of time during which the Chinese government was covering the financial costs for every citizen that decided to fly back to China. This caused most of them to withdraw their participation in the study due to the challenges they experience in China using Western communication services.

## 4.5. Method of Data Analysis: Grounded Theory

The data analysis began with transcribing the audio records of the interviews verbatim. No changes, manipulation, or adjustment of the statements of interviewees or the interviewer have been made. However, non-written words, such as "uh" as well as pauses and intonation have not been marked in the transcripts. No changes were made to words or sentences, even if they were grammatically incorrect minus a few exceptions where the sentences were interrupted multiple times: these irrelevant repetitions have been deleted. Irrelevant parts of the conversation such as small talk about the weather have not been transcribed in detail. Sensitive information that was shared off the record is also not included in the original scripts.

*The aim of the transcription is to convert audio data into a form that enables time-relieved, methodical, systematic and comprehensive evaluation work* (Equit & Hohage, 2016, p. 189).

The transcripts were analyzed using a *focused coding* technique, which comes from the Grounded Theory approach as re-described by Kathy Charmaz. Charmaz and Anthony Bryant (2010) criticize the original Grounded Theory approach from Strauss and Glaser (1967) for their overly positivist approaches and therefore establish a new version of the approach that uses Grounded Theory in a more constructivist way. *"Constructivists have not only re-envisioned grounded theory but also revised it in ways that make the method more flexible and widely adaptable than its earlier versions"* (Charmaz & Bryant, 2010).

This methodological approach is used for developing theoretical analyses. One approaches this method with systematic and inductive collecting, as well as analyzing the data, which also includes checking emerging categories. According to Charmaz (2008), Grounded Theory offers us a systematic and analytical strategy that combines flexibility and clarity. The fundamental teaching of Grounded theory involves simultaneous data acquisition and analysis, the acceptance of preconceived ideas about the research problem, openness to various explanations of the data, and focused analysis of the data to develop middle-range theories rather than just that to investigate the research product (Charmaz 2008, p. 155). Three moveable phases should be followed within a Grounded Theory approach: coding, memo-writing, and theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2001).

Coding is the beginning of the data analysis process which usually goes through at least two of its own phases: open and focused coding. With focused coding, attention is drawn from the research field to data analysis. The theorists deal with collecting and analyzing the material at the same time. The focus is placed on the meaning of the collected data. One can code word for word, line by line, or paragraph by paragraph, using words, verbs, or phrases to describe the fragments. These should serve to find out connections between the codes and to keep the analysis active. After the most common and most important codes are marked, one could move on to focused coding (Charmaz 2008, p. 164).

This form of coding is about merging and sorting larger amounts of data and saving time. Categories are created by comparing the codes with the amount of data and checking them. When deciding whether to categorize the codes, the message and the "weight" of these categories play a central role. The codes that "fit together" are then grouped into main categories on a trial basis and are used for further analytical investigation (Charmaz 2008, p. 164).

The quotations cited from the conducted interviews are marked in the following way: the number of the interview, page, and row of the transcript. For example, 'Int. 1, P. 6, R. 174' stands for interview 1, page 6 of the transcript, in row 174.

## Key Categories

After transcribing, analyzing, and coding, the data collected from the six interviews were finally grouped into five main categories with respective subcategories to present the full picture of the researched topic. For more convenience, I used colors within my coding to mark codes that belong to the same group with a particular color. This helped in my decision-making in how to categorize codes that could fit into two separate groups.

The final topics that emerged from the categories are 1) general social media behaviors and preferences; 2) surveillance and monitoring in everyday life; 3) understanding digital identity; 4) cultural specifics, and 5) a battle of power between the East and the West. These findings are presented in the following chapter with a detailed explanation of why these categories emerged as the most relevant to the research.

# 5. Key Findings

## 5.1. Findings From The Exploratory Phase

As indicated in the previous chapter, my research began with an exploratory phase, where I chose four articles to analyze for their content. Therefore, the next few pages are dedicated to summarizing what was uncovered during this phase and what themes this opened up for the subsequent phases of the research should be stressed here, once again, that all three out of the four articles were originally published in Chinese (articles I, II, and IV), and have been translated with Google Translator; therefore, specificities in the wording of the original text may have been lost or wrongly interpreted by the translation software. Some sections of the translated articles are also presented without changes to communicate clearly the message of the text.

<u>Article I — "'Southern Weekend': What is the "Social Credit System," 25 September 2019</u>
<u>*TaoTiao* (translated from Chinese)</u>

> *If you are a dishonest person being enforced, it will be difficult for you to become a public official, and you cannot engage in many industries. Basically, you can only do small businesses and part-time jobs. Even if you have money, you cannot spend more. The situation of other seriously dishonest people after being jointly disciplined is similar. As a natural person, the most sensible strategy is to stand by yourself, cherish your credit, accumulate your own character, not touch the high-tension lines that are seriously dishonest, and do not become a "distrustful person" or a "seriously dishonest person". "Integrity is gold" It is no longer rhetorical, but strictly literal. [...] The Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in*

*2013 proposed: Establish and improve a social credit investigation system, praise integrity, and punish dishonesty.*

At first sight, it appears that the main legacy of the article is to inform the public and not to enforce or push a particular opinion or agenda. I would not define the language used as neutral as many sensitive phrases such as social management and social governance are also included. However, the tone of the article is quite direct and does not imply any aggression, and does not signify anything inappropriate. The publication offers citations from official governmental statements on the social credit system in chronological order, which makes it easier for the reader to keep track of the development of the idea and concept of the SCS. As a whole, referring original sources and translating the information into a simplistic and understandable language also creates a feeling of authenticity.

The article also describes the four main categories of restrictions and punishments incorporated within the social credit system. The categories are as follows: market-based restraint, industry-based restraint, social restraint, and administrative regulatory restraints. Each of these would limit the access of an untrustworthy citizen to various goods and services. The author also divides the social credit system into two smaller systems: financial credit and information-related credit.

Towards the middle part of the article, the author refers to what one could find as information if they were to look up particular phrases, such as "National Credit Information Sharing Platform." This implies that the unnamed author conducted his/her own research before sharing facts with the readers. This creates a certain level of trustworthiness and legitimacy of the source. Still, however, the directness of this article's language and its opaqueness of fact versus personal opinion is something to take notice of:

*The social credit system under construction covers both deep and broad, covering almost all possible aspects of individual or organizational behavior, and the responsibility for behavior will eventually fall on the individual. Of course, the responsibility for individual behavior will fall on the individual. The responsibility for behavior also falls to the individual.*

### Article II - "There are no absentees in the social credit system," 6 June 2014, *CCTV* (Translated from Chinese)

This article from 2014 offers a very detailed definition and explanation of the social credit system and its goals. It also points out some of the main issues that the government could

solve with the implementation of such a large technological system. The publication informs of the plans of the Chinese government to build credit for collective finance, industrial and commercial registration, tax payment, social insurance, traffic violations, and so on, from the beginning of 2017.

> *Promoting the construction of a social credit system is a necessary move to cope with streamlining administration and delegating power. The decentralization or transfer of economic and social management power means that the market and society will gain more power of self-determination.*

Here one can immediately notice the more complicated language used to discuss the topic of the social credit system, and somehow the author seems to be having a stronger position on the issue than in the previous article. In this publication, the advantages of such a system are brought up many times, such as improving administrative efficiency or supporting new reforms. The social credit system is also called a "necessary move" and a way to solve inappropriate behaviors of citizens that "challenge the public nerves." The author emphasizes the levels of mutual trust between individuals and society that the social credit system could increase and stabilize after the "extremely huge costs" invested already in solving behavioral issues.

However, the publication does not forget to address the other side of the credit system in China. One interesting suggestion by the author is that the government should also be included in such a system and accept external digital supervision just like everybody else. If the government is not included in the credit reporting system, the goal of optimizing management through the establishment of a social credit system will not be achieved. A further question addressed by the article is about the objectivity and transparency of the data of the social credit system. According to the author, regardless of how legitimate it is, the rewards and punishments will ultimately depend on the government.

> *The social credit system implies a reward and punishment mechanism. Those who abide by market principles and public order and good customs can achieve their economic and social goals at a relatively small cost after being screened by the credit system. Otherwise, they will have to pay a greater cost until they cannot gain a foothold in the market and society. This mechanism will greatly increase the cost of violations, and can trigger multiple effects such as stimulating a general sense of social responsibility and avoiding potential risks in the financial system.*

In this article, once again, the expression of the language follows along much simpler wording, with easy-to-understand vocabulary and short sentences. The first four paragraphs address how Western countries have always been misjudging China and its system, and also struggle to recognize China's development and achievements.

Later in the article, the social credit system is also mentioned and positioned as yet another Chinese creation left misunderstood by the West. According to the publication, Western media not only questions the social credit system but accuses the Chinese government of using it to spy on its own citizens.

> *They do not understand China at all. The social credit system helps improve the integrity and credit level of Chinese society. Banning credit defaulters from taking the exam guarantees that Chinese civil servants are not only loyal to the Party, but also observe the law and morality.*

The article draws a connection between the ancient Chinese traditions and the current governance system in the country, highlighting that "*the tradition of selecting the good and the capable for public services*" is one of the things that has not changed. This comparison is another proof that surveillance and monitoring practices are nothing new and are even considered an efficient solution by many. The author rejects the Western perspective that claims the credit system is used to spy on Chinese citizens and supports the argument by quoting a "renowned American political scientist" of Japanese descent, Yoshihiro Francis Fukuyama, who argues that *"Western people should get rid of their stereotype and start to objectively understand the Chinese system, which is based on Oriental traditions and wisdom."*

The social credit system in this text is mentioned in relation to the national civil service exam in China, which is implemented for the recruitment and admission of people to the national civil service. The exam is taken by millions of Chinese citizens every year and aims to achieve an effective and rational public administration through careful sampling. The examination is also part of an ancient Chinese tradition but in modern society, it is strongly related to the social credit system. The 2019 article also reports that for the first time, China took measures to ban those expelled from the Communist Party of China and those with insufficient social credit from taking the exam. This is a practical example of how the social score impacts the lives of Chinese people.

In general, the article does not offer any substantial information but instead, strongly defends a perspective of how biased the Western media is in terms of adequately evaluating the pros and cons of a social credit system. The message of how prejudiced Western countries are against China is repeatedly communicated — almost every paragraph of the article serves to these ends

Article IV — "Improving the credit system is an important means to improve the overall civilization of society," 21 May 2020, *TaoTiao* (translated from Chinese)

According to this article, the "*social credit system is also called national credit management system or national credit system.*" A very interesting thing to mention here is that in contrast to the other articles, where the journalist's language was kept at least somewhat neutral, this publication is written in a first-person perspective. For example: "*Establishing and improving the social credit system is one of the important signs that my country's socialist market economy continues to mature.*"[5] Quickly, one could notice this form is used only when the author refers to China. I assume this is a way for him/her to highlight his belonging and respect or even reverence to the People's Republic of China. This type of example is not at all limited in the article either: :"*There is still a gap between the construction of my country's social credit system and the economic and social development and the demands of the people.*"

The language used here again appears to be more sophisticated, and considering the length of the article, I doubt it targets the mass reader. However, in the introduction, the core values of the communist party (such as integrity) and their development are paid great attention to as the social credit system is strongly related to the cultural and societal norms and puts forward specific requirements.

The author points out six main issues they describe as responsible for the gap between the people and the system. The first one is an inadequate understanding of social credit construction, imperfect organization, and ineffective work measures. Second, comes the lack of credibility in the government. A further gap is caused by business integrity and the required levels of trustworthiness in businesses. The fourth issue is the lack of a unified and standardized national credit platform. The last two issues mentioned are an underdeveloped credit service market, especially in comparison to Western countries, and the limited role of social forces in credit construction. After the issues, some suggestions for solutions follow.

Very often the words "business," "market" and "economy" are used in the text, which signifies that the author probably has experience in the field of economics and the developed

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[5] The underlined words are to emphasize the first-person perspective.

and competitive market is used as the main scale for the success of the credit system. The social and society are aspects are not neglected in the text either. This is also the first publication from a Chinese media I stumbled upon that speaks openly about the perks of growing and developing big data as a key to a successful credit system.

> *The construction of a credit system is a complicated and complicated system project. As an integral part of the social governance system, the construction of the social credit system must also be guided by co-construction, co-governance, and sharing. Building a social credit system involves multiple departments and a wide range of fields, which cannot be achieved by a single subject, and requires the participation of all social forces.*

In general, this publication appears to be more of a commentary from a well-informed person rather than the typical journalist article. The foundation of the social credit system is well analyzed and explained but also the identified gaps and issues are argued for explained in detail.

**Findings**

An interesting finding from the exploratory document analysis is that many of the websites repost articles from *People's Daily*, which could be open for interpretation. On the one hand, this could mean that this is considered the most reliable and most established media channel in China. On the other hand, *People's Daily* is the largest newsletter group in China and is published under the direct supervision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (Fish, 2019). Therefore, this could likewise be seen as a sign that most of the media channels in China do not question or criticize the publications of the Communist Party and instead, only reshare them.

None of the articles presented harsh and direct criticism against the Chinese Communist Party or the government and all texts were respectful towards the authorities. No offensive words, ironic statements, or jokes about the government or the social credit system were detected in any of the publications. None of the articles had comments from readers under them that argue against the authenticity of the texts.

The truth always lies somewhere in the middle. Therefore, it is extremely beneficial to gain a perspective on how the social credit system is presented in some of the main Chinese media channels. Unfortunately, a true media content analysis could be sustainable as I cannot speak, read, or understand Chinese. My conclusions are drawn only based on the translation

provided by the popular, but increasingly accurate, web-based such as Google Translator. Despite the advanced abilities of such technologies, certain messages and specifics of the language can always be lost in translation. Therefore, in future research, I would seek the help and collaboration of people who understand the language and the cultural aspects of media in China to assist me with my research. In addition, it should also be stated that the chosen four articles are far from enough to draw clear and accurate conclusions regarding the type of news about the Social Credit System that are usually communicated through Chinese media. Future research must also be able to track the phrases, words, or topics that usually get censored.

One surprising finding from the media publication analysis that shifts away from the content was the variety of QR codes distributed around the news websites. This is rarely seen in media providers in Austria and Europa and signifies the digital development of media in China as well as the inseparable connection between information media and social media. WeChat itself relies mainly on QR codes for its services such as payments and contact exchange. This observation reveals that today we consume (social) media not only through its content but also through its digital medium. The mindset of the reader/user could be shaped not only through the information provided in an article but also through the way it is consumed.

Generally, the exploratory phase and closer look at some of China's main media channels served as a useful middle ground and 'ice breaker' during the actual interviewees as it 1) helped me better understand and relate to particular references made by the interviewees and 2) provided me stable background knowledge about social media and credit scores in China. The take-aways from the exploratory phase prepared me for what the future research participants might know and expect (or not know) from a big monitoring system like the SCS. Finally, gaining a basic perspective on how the social credit system is presented in the media in China also offered me a better understanding of the beliefs, fears, and motivations of the participating interviewees.

It is important here to highlight again that social media platforms are the key source of information for many modern people across the globe, especially in China. Social media is also the main medium monitored by the Chinese authorities indeed because it is so widely accessible and provides such detailed information about its users. This is why it is so relevant to first investigate how the SCS is presented to the public before further exploring the effects of online surveillance and monitoring on Chinese citizens living abroad. However, engaging in more in-depth research and exploration of how information communication in Chinese popular media developed during the years would have benefited this research even further. This is left as a task for future researchers.

## 5.2. Social Media Behaviors

During the research process of surveillance practices and digital identity, one variable appeared repeatedly: social media. Social media channels and entertainment platforms have become the main tool that connects and informs people worldwide. According to a Digital 2020 Global Overview Report by the English media marketer, We are Social, in 2020 over 60 percent of the world's population was already online as more than 3.8 billion people use social media in one way or another (Kemp, 2020).

Therefore, it is no surprise that social media channels appear to be a valuable asset for the political and economic interests of different governments, organizations, and individuals. Multiple players try hard to get their hands on the social media industry. Our reality with social media and our consumptive use of it truly lives out the musician Jim Morrison's diagnosis that "Whoever controls the media, controls the mind" (Morrison, n.d.).

Social media has transformed into the ultimate tool. It has arguably become the absolute necessity for the modern person, offering far more than just entertainment. Today, businesses rely on social media marketing for advertising, experts recruit future employees through online platforms, social media influencers give shape to entire sections of a generation, and the booming number of social media users, new platforms, and apps clearly signify it. China stands out as one of the most technologically advanced and digitized societies in the world, which is especially applicable for young people, many of whom live in bigger cities.

### 5.2.1. Social Media Preferences and Apps

In 2020, there were around 926.8 million social media users in China. Despite Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter being blocked in the country, local social networking sites such as Tencent's WeChat and Weibo have been attracting millions of users, making China the world's biggest social media market (Statista, 2021b). To understand in-depth the connection the interviewees have with social media, it is important to pay respective attention to their general social media preferences and behaviors.

The research confirms these statistics. Most interviewees stated that they use mainly Chinese apps, regardless of where they are located. European and Western apps and platforms such as Whatsapp, Facebook, and Instagram are usually used only to maintain private and professional connections in Austria, but they are far from the most used channels on the list. The use of these prominent Western platforms by Chinese citizens living abroad

reflects a significantly different use purpose than most Western research has looked into:

> *Facebook I use mostly for news and communication for university.* (Int. 6, P. 1, R. 23-25)

The mobile applications and social media channels that the research participants use the most in their daily life are WeChat, TikTok, Weibo, Alibaba, Taobao, Kuku, and Meituan. Most of them are owned by the three enormous media conglomerates in China: Alibaba, Baidu, and Tencent, which are — as is to be expected — the leading providers of media content in China. These names may sound strange to Western ears, but many Chinese citizens use these websites and channels in the same way as their Western counterparts on a daily basis. Below, I provide a short description of these channels in order to orient this chapter's analysis for readers who are less familiar with these platforms.

**WeChat**

> *"Leaving WeChat means leaving social life."* (Chen, 2017)

WeChat is an all-in-one messaging app that also provides a variety of entertainment options, games, online shopping, and financial services. The app has been classified as the world's first "Super-App" that allows users to get everything they need with just a click. Essentially, WeChat could be seen as an all-in-one combination of the well-known Western apps Facebook, Whatsapp, Google News, Tinder, Pinterest, and YouTube. WeChat provides everything from restaurant bookings and shopping, to getting a taxi, paying bills, making investments, or transferring money (DeGennaro, 2020). Therefore, it has quickly become the most popular social media platform in China. The report, *Digital 2020: Global Overview Report*, reveals that WeChat was the fourth most used social media platform in the world as of January 2020, with over 1.15 million active users monthly (Kemp, 2020).

> *I believe you have heard about WeChat, it is a combination of video calls, WhatsApp calls, text messages, and also a financial aspect that is involved. You can post pictures, like on Instagram. But there is a financial component to it.* (Int. 2, P. 1, R. 12-14)

WeChat users can have different types of accounts. Personal accounts are used by individuals, while businesses can create WeChat official accounts to stay in contact with their customers and post promotional information (DeGennaro, 2020). One user, however, cannot have multiple personal accounts, like on Instagram or Facebook for example. Every personal

profile is connected to the bank account and reflects, at least to some details, the identity of the user.

Some interviewees share that QR codes are essential to WeChat services and users. They provide a link from the online to the physical world and help users to quickly exchange contacts and content. This was already somewhat apparent during the exploratory document analysis, which revealed that news media providers also incorporate plenty of QR codes in their articles. QR code payments are also a widely used service across China.

During the interviews, it was pointed out that WeChat is developed by tech giant Tencent and has become a controversial topic in recent years, and was a key factor in the discussion revolving around mass surveillance practices in China. According to the experience of the interviewees with the platform, the activity of WeChat users is tracked and analyzed by Chinese authorities and the content is highly censored and monitored as well. One of the interviewees recalls that in June 2020, the controversial app was temporarily banned across the US by President Donald Trump, cutting the contact of millions of people in the States with their friends and relatives in Asia (Swanson et al., 2020). This increased the political tension between the East and the West. The app was banned also in other countries such as India (Phartiyal, 2021) and Russia (Kiselyova et al., 2017).

**TikTok**

TikTok, also known as DouYin in China, is the world's fastest-growing social media platform in the past year. The app gained notable popularity globally, especially among younger generations, and became a powerful tool for influencer marketing and entertainment. In order to offer a better overview of the platform for those who are not familiar with it, the first thing to understand is its sheer number of users. As of July 2021, TikTok had over 732 million active users per month, the majority of which are under the age of 24 (DeGennaro, 2020). The predominantly underage audience became a big concern for many people and organizations across the globe who claimed that much of the content shared on the platform is not appropriate for younger children and teenagers (Su, 2020). In addition, the overflow of short videos and content has led to major misinformation and propaganda on a variety of topics such as COVID-19, LGBTQ, and other social issues.

When discussing the viral hype surrounding TikTok and how the new video formats have quickly gotten out of control, interviewees shared their positions regarding the trendy platform. Surprisingly, the interviewees looked at the platform quite critically. One interviewee specifically was very aware of the latest news revolving around the social media channel, especially as this interviewee has worked in social media marketing and therefore kept track

of the legal scandals related to the platform. This interviewee pointed out some important events for the development of TikTok that I would like to introduce below. These events and themes are analytically supported and contextualized with additional fact-checking of the correct dates and numbers.

It is a "public secret" that despite almost the same user interface, the Western TikTok and the Chinese DouYin platforms do not have access to each other's content, at least not entirely. In June 2020, the Indian government banned TikTok due to its promotion of immoral and indecent videos ("India Bans TikTok, WeChat," 2020). Two months later, in August, US President Donald Trump also signed an order to ban TikTok across the country (Allyn, 2020). This led to a lawsuit and the decision was made that no restrictions would be assigned to TikTok services in the USA (Shu, 2020).

Despite the controversial nature of the app, TikTok was the number one social media platform for 2019 and 2020. According to the interviewees, soon TikTok will outgrow other tech giants such as Instagram.

**Weibo**

> *And I also have another app, very similar to TikTok and also owned by the same company. It is like a newspaper but they push different news to you, similar to Twitter, Weibo.* (Int. 1, P. 2, R. 42-43)

Sina Weibo is a micro-blogging platform in China also known as Chinese Twitter. Until recently, Weibo was the second most popular social media in China, reaching a user base of over 550 million people per month. The interviewees share that similar to Twitter, Weibo is widely used for business purposes, allowing various brands to quickly share information and engage with their communities. Users can upload videos and images to their posts which established Weibo as a number one platform for both breaking news and successful marketing campaigns. Unlike WeChat, there are no limits on postings to Weibo, and "companies can create and manage a page for users to interact and discuss to increase the level of communication with their customers" (DeGennaro, 2020). As this particular interviewee said the following about the app:

> *But we can call it a multiple-choice newspaper because they push you news not only from one newsletter but the topics you are interested in, like, they know what you like and how much time you spend on this or that news and they know what you would be interested in.* (Int. 1, P. 2, R. 43-46)

**Alibaba and Taobao**

Alibaba Group is a major driving force behind Chinese social media, entertainment, and e-commerce platforms. One of the interviewees shares that there is no Chinese citizen left that has not at some point used Alibaba's services. The company owns the largest marketplaces in the world: Alibaba, AliExpress, Tmall, and Taobao and holds a significant percentage of TikTok too. Even though these are shopping apps and not social media channels, they are still highly preferred by Chinese people living in Austria for entertainment, following the trends, and getting inspiration for future purchases.

Data from the Statista Global Consumer Survey published in September 2021 shows that Alipay and WeChat Pay are the most popular digital payment platforms among Chinese Mainland respondents, with around 9 in 10 Chinese saying they used them in the last 12 months (Statista, 2021c). According to the survey, Alipay by Alibaba Group takes first place with approximately 95 percent of Chinese citizens using this payment method. The second position is taken by WeChat Pay with around 88 percent of Chinese citizens using it. The reason why online payment services are so relevant for the research topic is that in China, these are inseparable aspects of social media. Online payment and shopping behaviors are also strongly monitored by the local government. Regardless of whether it's the box of chocolates paid for by smartphone in the supermarket, the smartwatch vibrating during training or the remotely controllable smart home. Everything that has "smart" in its name is smart enough to document the behavior of its users.

Aside from the standard communication channels and shopping apps, every interviewee uses mobile applications and social media platforms that better reflect their personal interests, hobbies, and occupation:

*And I have the Chinese Open College, it is an open university I can learn from these sources. Also, a lot of different platforms similar to YouTube.* (Int. 1, P. 2, R. 55-57)

### 5.2.2. Usage and Motivations

How did social media become so important in modern society? People from various age groups and backgrounds can't get enough of the diverse content online. The general user spends up to three hours a day on average scrolling down the feed of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook (Statista, 2021a). Another study reveals that 56 percent of social media users admit to having fear of missing something important online (Murphy, 2013).

For years, researchers have been exploring the role of social media and the main motivations among users to engage with such platforms. Key arguments usually are relationship maintenance, network expansion, entertainment, and inspiration (Schivinski et al., 2020).

> *Only when social media is really good and helps you solve a problem, then people will use it.* (Int. 1, P. 6, R. 174)

But what are the problems that social media solves? Many would argue it causes more issues than it solves with hundreds of pages of research about the negative aspects of special media such as promoting unrealistic life expectations and cyberbullying. When asked how many hours a day they spent on social media, most of the interviewees struggled to answer. None of them knew the accurate time they spent online but most agree they lose track of time when scrolling down the endless newsfeed of social media platforms. Seems like social media has become in a way a tool for relaxation, escaping reality, just "consuming content," as one of the interviewees pointed out.

> *On average, in a normal working-class people work around 10h a day in China and they work Monday to Saturday. So, the only way to meet your community or search for information is social media.* (Int. 5, P. 9, R. 260-262)

One interviewee argued the extensive social media usage with the busy schedules of Chinese people. Many companies and employers in China follow the '996' working hour system. Employees work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week, excluding the two-hour lunch and nap break. This sums up to a total of 72 working hours a week. In the past year, China is working towards standardizing the 44 working hour week, however, so far most of the employees spend the majority of their time at work.

> *To have deeper personal expression is not something people can afford in China. So, I guess that is why social media is a thing in Asia. This is something I still find funny in Austria that people have five to six different hobbies and due to the crazy working hours in Asia people don't have time for hobbies.* (Int. 5, P. 8-9, R. 231-236)

Considering these "crazy working hours," it is no surprise that in China mobile phones, applications, and social media platforms have become the main tool for people to connect with each other. As one of the interviews shared, a growing number of people are looking for love and companionship, as well as entertainment and interaction with peers online. Hobbies and

interests are an important part of one's identity and nowadays, there is a noticeable trend that less of these activities remain offline and instead also lean towards the creation of spaces that are remotely accessible. The digital society that is to be witnessed across Asia reveals how many social interactions and social activities are increasingly shifting towards their online equivalents.

In Europe as well, plenty of platforms emerged in the past years that allow people with similar interests to connect, exchange experiences, or even meet up. Despite that, in Austria offline entertainment activities such as sport, reading, meeting friends, are still preferred. It seems like there are a few aspects in which Chinese apps outdo the Western alternatives when it comes to communication, interaction, and creating a feeling of connectedness. As two of the interviews pointed out:

> *[I]n China, when we do something, it is always with a communication function, not like in Europe, just a code and an app for service.* (Int. 1, P. 2, R. 33-34)

And:

> *In my experience, Chinese social apps are just having a different combination of interaction than in American ones.* (Int. 2, P. 1, R. 13-15)

Chinese apps seem to have found a way to bring the social into the digital and compensate for the lack of social interaction and limited free time of the local population. Tech providers understand the psychology of social media and aim to create a digital space that is fun, interesting, and so engaging that as many people as possible choose to go there in the few hours a day they have available. And the experience has to be so good that people choose it over anything else they could do or it simply has to reflect their needs and offer them a better alternative. The main reason why the interviewees choose to use more Chinese apps than Western is the intuitive and convenient approach they use. The research participants stated multiple times that for Europeans it is hard to understand or even imagine the limitless possibilities that Chinese apps offer. The pool of services and constantly updated solutions makes it impossible for users to leave the digital space.

> *First of all, I'll say that Chinese apps, like WeChat, offer so many options that it can be inconceivable for someone who has never used them.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 56-57)

Or that:

*WeChat just allows you to do stuff without even opening your laptop. Chinese apps provide such a rich variety of services that it is really hard to leave. And it is impossible to survive only with cash money in the big cities.* (Int. 5, P. 10, R. 284-286)

The motto of Chinese social media providers revolves around the concept of "name it, we have it," which is a working formula for attracting more and more users, according to one of the interviewees. On the other hand, centralized apps that are all-in-one have developed a significantly more advanced database of the behaviors of their users. Most of the interviewees expressed their concerns regarding the centralized apps and the fact that everything is trackable within just one app — from communication through interests to shopping behaviors and financial history. Slowly but steadily, Chinese apps turn from a convenient tool to a must-have.

### 5.2.3. Social Media as a (Technological) Necessity

The rich variety of functions Chinese social media and communication platforms offer have positioned social media apps to be viewed as an absolute necessity. From remaining connected with the world and staying up to date with the latest news, to paying your bills and purchasing items online — all of this is done in one app. What else do you need after all?

*The digital life in China is very strongly connected to your real life. In a way you are forced to do it, everything is there.* (Int. 5, P. 6, R. 164-165)

The impression I get from the interviews on this subject is that the borders between digital identity and real-life are almost nonexistent in China. This draws even more attention to the negative impact a potential ban of these apps might have on communities across the world. And it is not only the software itself but also the hardware that is involved. Some of the research participants mentioned that the need to fit in and explore all the virtual and digital experiences one could get reflects on the purely technological necessity of possessing a gadget that can support and keep up with the latest trends in the digital space.

*In Europe, you can still use some kind of a traditional phone like Nokia, but in China, this won't work because many places don't accept cash and you can only pay with your QR code on your phone.* (Int. 1, P. 2, R. 50-62)

As another participant remarked:

*(My sister) told me that she has to buy the latest version of iPhone, otherwise you cannot even download or use many of the apps because she needs very good speed and very good storage space. That's why in China normally the phone is very much demanded than in Europe. (Int. 1, P. 2, R. 57-60)*

An additional interviewee brought up the province of Shenzhen during our conversation, naming it as a key example for the flourishing hardware development of China. Many of big tech companies in China like Huawei are located there, and Shenzhen is now known as the Chinese Silicon Valley with the largest mobile market. In China, the mobile phone has become the key to the entire life of the modern person. It stores pictures and a user's favorite memories, it keeps passwords and private messages, it assists with banking, payments, and orders. As the mobile phone has become such an absolute necessity, it is important to ask who might want to take a peek at what our gadgets and social media channels store and why.

## 5.3. Surveillance and Monitoring in Everyday Life

Data is the gold of the 21st century. One interviewee quoted the popular Zuckerberg and Facebook biopic, *The Social Dilemma*: *"If you're getting something for free, you are the product,"* which highlights the correlation between social media and surveillance. This phrase is often used regarding Facebook and Google who have managed to build a detailed database of user behaviors and preferences through their 'free' products that help them target their audiences better and through personalized ads, for example, sell people things to generate immense profit.

*Chinese apps operate differently and they generate profit differently as well. In the case of Facebook and Apple or Amazon, the government cannot regulate that as much as in Asia. So now we know that they collect our activities to make personalized advertisements. And in that sense, the different markets of social media have different behaviors as well, which triggers the user differently.* (Int. 5, P. 5-6, R. 144-148)

This interviewee specifies that Chinese and Western apps generate their profits differently in the sense that in the Western world, most companies collect the information of their users in order to target better where the latter would spend their money more easily. In China, however, the apps are made so convenient for the user that they would not want to leave them and would be willing to pay whatever is necessary in order to use the particular service, even if

they are paying with their personal data. The research participant points out that the main difference is also that data collection in China is something that people know about while Western companies often try to mask the exact terms and conditions of this collection.

In this sense, it certainly seems as though today's social media has become the ultimate marketing tool with more advertisement than any other type of media. Consequently, social media marketing and paid advertisement on such platforms have become profitable businesses and useful tools for many companies.  This moves the spotlight from the user to the bigger picture where social media providers use the data of their users not to punish them for particular behaviors, but to 'train' them on how to be better consumers.

> *I want to add that what you do on social media (in China) is really seriously taken in*
> *real life.* (Int. 5, P. 9, R. 264)

### 5.3.1. Digital Territory

In the past decade, STS scholars have been actively researching how technology is used to produce state power. Möllers (2020) introduces the term "digital territory" and explains how through digital technologies the influence of governments on its citizens often spreads far beyond the geographical boundaries of a country. In that case servers, satellites, and the Internet, turn into digital territory, practicing state monitoring and online surveillance. As social media behaviors and content is taken quite seriously in China, the local authorities work hard to maintain their control over social media users even beyond the regional borders and regulate content accessible to the users in and outside China.

During the interviews, research participants continually confided that in China the government has control over the private businesses and even big companies obey the rules of the Party. This is how the authorities step into the digital territory and impact the citizens even beyond the geographical boundaries of China.

> *In Chinese apps, I wouldn't be able to see what happens in Europe and then I use the*
> *European but very few apps can apply to the whole world for many reasons, I think.*
> (Int. 1, P. 3, R. 80-82)

And that:

> *If I am in China I cannot use Facebook, I cannot use Instagram or Snapchat and so*
> *on.* (Int. 4, P. 2, R. 36)

Few people are aware that there is a difference between TikTok USA and TikTok China and usually those are the ones who have used both. The interviewees share that the content, laws, and the app's terms and conditions differ significantly in the West and in China, simply because of what is deemed appropriate in the different countries. Most of the interviewees support the opinion that the reasons for establishing digital boundaries and limitations regarding content are usually political. The tension between China and the USA often backfires hardest onto local citizens: the users who have to deal and live with the restrictions and decisions made by the two countries.

> *I cannot download the Chinese version of TikTok in the US. If you buy a Huawei phone here, you have 5G but you can't download Google. They have no Google applications on the new Huawei phones because Google did not sell it to them because of Trump.* (Int. 2, P. 2, R. 54-56)

This interviewee went on to explain:

> *But if I am in China I cannot really interact with people outside China, only if they have the same Chinese apps. Whatsapp also stopped working in China when Facebook bought it, they simply have to run according to their regulations.* (Int. 2, P. 2, R. 68-70)

And further:

> *In China, they didn't block intentionally Whatsapp and other apps to create their own but it was the way the information has been shared on these apps that politically China felt it was inappropriate.* (Int. 2, P. 2, R. 35-37)

The restricted content is an explanation of why the opinions, news, and visions of the same story often differ so radically between China and the Western world. By controlling the information people have access to, it is easy to establish a popular opinion towards a particular issue. Some of the research participants express the viewpoint that the difference and the contrast in the content in the East and the West is more than visible — people in Europe and the USA are exposed to news and content that tackle the privacy problems in China in a negative way. The West, on the other hand, is portrayed as immoral and without values and the Western culture is not one that is highly tolerated in some parts of Asia. As one interviewee shared, when they first came to Austria, they *experienced a big shock about the transparency and the fact that people are actually friendly and no one really "hates" China as it is often discussed by the Chinese government* (Int. 3, notes).

### 5.3.2. Censorship and Freedom of Speech

It certainly seems like one thing that both Chinese and Western (social) media channels have in common is that both can serve as a powerful tool for manipulation when they end up in the wrong hands. It is hard to tell whether Europeans and Austrians fully trust the information sources they use, especially in the face of popular media and social media platforms. However, there is a visible gap between the freedom of speech in Austria and China with Austria scoring 17th place among the most democratic and free speech countries and China taking one of the very last positions, primarily due to China's state and privately-owned media being stuck under the Communist Party's ever-tightening control. One interviewee summed it up quite quickly:

> *We just go in media and read stuff that could be manipulation by politicians.* (Int. 1, P. 11, R. 332-335)

### Fake News

It is an ironic phenomenon to observe worldwide that with the growing number of sources, the easier access to information, disinformation, and misleading content is increasing at the same time. Fake news, manipulated facts, suspicious statistics. These are just a few of the problems we stumble upon while surfing the internet and scrolling through social media.

Many interviewees gave the example of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which quickly turned into a controversial topic and a cheap conspiracy theory for a few reasons: 1) The information in Austria and China regarding the current state of the pandemic differed significantly, according to the research participants. Most problematic, information about the causes of Coronavirus and the methods for its 'cure' differed significantly too; 2) The cognitive dissonance that people get when reading contrasting opinions turned out to be a great opportunity for a variety of conspiracy theories to shake the horizon and cause even more fear and disinformation; and 3) Social media was the main multiplicator and distributor of such content, providing everyone to share their viewpoint on the issue, including health advice from non-experts and medical tips by people who are not verified to give such. An interviewee even asked me if I have noticed that fake news spreads quicker than meaningful information. A study supports their hypothesis and reveals that Facebook posts from misinformation sources get six times as much engagement than reputable news sites (Dwoskin, 2021).

This same interviewee also brings up an important aspect of media, namely the responsibility of the user to filter information and develop critical thinking about what makes sense and what not:

*So let's say social media has two sides, one side is better to avoid and concentrate on stuff that are essential. We should judge stuff on social media on its quality and its performance and not only on a some background fake story.* (Int. 1, P. 11, R. 340-343)

**Credibility**

But, with social media entrenched as the primary information source for so many, just how does one differentiate between fake and real news when they are overloading the social media channels? When they are posted by the same people on the same channels? In Europe and the USA, platforms such as Instagram and Facebook had to incorporate a label under each post, story, or interaction that consists of particular words connected to COVID-19 to prevent or to remind people not to trust everything they hear, read, or see on social media. An interviewee compared these labels with the ones one receives on Chinese platforms when they try to post something that is considered inappropriate by the authorities. Are such measures working and should that become a general reminder to all kinds of content? In that sense, do Chinese citizens living in Austria trust the European media more than they do the Chinese? Or, do they assume that facts could always be twisted and no source is entirely credible? One interviewee described and explained their tendencies as such:

*I use more media from the USA because in terms of content everything is more democratic there in comparison to China, where there is only one party, and everyone listens to it and the population can be manipulated.* (Int. 6, P. 1, R. 18-20)

Meanwhile, another interviewee who refused to be audio-recorded but still agreed to speak on the record pointed out that:

*It is not that the people don't realize that things in China are controlled or altered, or they don't see the manipulation and propaganda, it is just that when they live abroad and notice the mismatch and differences, they can't talk about it with anyone.* According to the research participant, *Austrian and Western media are more trustworthy because they are more democratic. She noticed the different approaches towards news when she started researching and reading "stuff" from different sources via VPN back in the days she lived in China, and this changed her perspective a lot.*

*Media in China and Austria reflects differently on problems and issues and she says usually they have nothing to do with each other. In Austria, media tend to be more critical, in China - more controlled, and in the USA — it is all about the show* (Int. 3, notes).

Another participant shared that they believe that Western media is more liberal and fairly democratic and even though it is hard to tell which one is more truthful — Chinese media or sources from the USA — it is a major advantage for people in Europe to be able to read opposing perspectives on one issue.

The document analysis conducted in the exploratory phase also suggested that some of the content on Chinese media appears to be dictated in order to serve a particular political ideology or interest, likely in order to manipulate the common opinion on complex questions. Therefore, it is understandable that at multiple points the interviewees mentioned how much their perspective on Chinese issues changed when they migrated to Austria, as they then had the opportunity and access to explore new perspectives on the trending news.

**Censorship**

Manipulation does not only mean fake news and disinformation. From the experiences of the research participants, the Chinese government prefers to use censorship to control the news flow and what information reaches the general public.

*Some topics, especially about the US, never make it to the general social media user in China. The government doesn't want people to engage with it and this is also the reason why people are careful with the content they discuss on social media. In this way the government controls the information flow. (Int.2, P.4, R.126-130)*

This participant continues that:

*There are certain words and certain ideas that one would not be able to post or share. So it just doesn't allow it automatically.* (Int.2, P.4, R.148-150)

This, on the one side, could sound scarier than it is. Banning content, words, and hashtags that provoke or promote hate, aggression, or self-harm is nothing new. Having regulations on social media is what makes us feel safer. Instagram also has a long list of hashtags that have been banned at some point, such as #anorexia, #suicide, #bikinibody, etc. When searching for these terms, a message related to the searched term pops up:

> *Posts with words you are searching for often encourage behavior that can cause harm and even lead to death. If you are going through something difficult, we would like to help.*

Or perhaps:

> *When it comes to sensitive topics about body image, we want to support our community. We have gathered some resources that might be helpful — get help.*

However, the posts are still accessible, which is the key difference between the content banned in China. Once something is labeled inappropriate, it becomes very difficult for it to make it to the general public, as it will probably be quickly removed from the public eye. Censorship in China means also means that certain websites are completely banned and therefore inaccessible. Many of the interviewees shared that their experiences with censorship on the internet have existed for so long that it has become a normal part of people's lives. Looking at the legislative pillars of this censorship, this is confirmed as well. In 1997, the Chinese authorities introduced the milestones of censorship. The law provides, among other things, the following conditions for censorship in China:

> *Article 5: No individual may use the Internet to create, replicate, retrieve, or transmit the following kinds of information:*
>
> > *(1) Inciting to resist or breaking the Constitution or laws or the implementation of administrative regulations;*
> >
> > *(2) Inciting to overthrow the government or the socialist system;*
> >
> > *(3) Inciting division of the country, harming national unification;*
> >
> > *(4) Inciting hatred or discrimination among nationalities or harming the unity of the nationalities;*
> >
> > *(5) Making falsehoods or distorting the truth, spreading rumors, destroying the order of society;*
> >
> > *(6) Promoting feudal superstitions, sexually suggestive material, gambling, violence, murder;*
> >
> > *(7) Terrorism or inciting others to criminal activity; openly insulting other people or distorting the truth to slander people;*

*(8) Injuring the reputation of state organs;*

*(9) Other activities against the Constitution, laws, or administrative regulations.*

("Computer information network and internet security, protection, and management regulations," promulgated by the Ministry of Public Security, 30 December 1997)

Of course, this regulation has been changed and updated many times over in the past 20 some years, but at first sight, there is nothing that is really too disturbing about the censorship rules. Therefore, the crux of the major problems arises when no content reflecting important global news or politically sensitive topics from in and outside the land is allowed to be communicated with the public. Interviewees claim that even publications that discuss Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan are often deleted or censored. Most intolerable to the Chinese authorities, however, are references to the 1989 pro-democracy protests. One interviewee also importantly noted that in some cases it is not about banning a particular trigger word but rather, publications get censored based on the context they have been used in. For example, suggesting or saying that China is a dictatorship is forbidden, but the word dictatorship is not banned itself.

As the list of 'bad words' grows, people find alternative ways to communicate their viewpoints. Therefore, there are also some less obvious words and phrases that are banned more locally, like in Beijing for example. Chinese internet users repeatedly used images of Winnie the Pooh to represent President Xi Jinping, which led to a ban of the phrase "Winnie the Pooh." Soviet jokes are also a 'no-go' as these are considered disrespectful towards the Communist Party. These circumstances illustrate that censorship and control do not only apply to important and sensitive news and events but also entertainment. The meme *"ni dong de"* (you understand) is often used on the Chinese internet as a way of acknowledging something that cannot be said, which soon evolved into a generic term to "express their dissatisfaction with the government" (Kuo & Huang, 2014). Interviewees are also acutely aware of this:

*Like memes for example. North Korea filed a lawsuit because they found a particular meme offensive and China had to tell the social platform to stop creating this kind of entertainment. This is how things work.* (Int.2, P.4, R.136-138)

The Chinese government also suggests a lighter approach towards censorship and encourages people to simply exchange particular words with others, such as sight-impaired instead of blind, or special administrative regions of China instead of countries when referring to Hong Kong or Macau. These instructions are given only with the rationale of

"communicating a clear message."

The culmination of my conversations with interviewees left me with the impression that it is very important to differentiate between the censorship enforced by the government by law and the self-censoring caused by the unwritten rules Chinese citizens have become accustomed to using as a way to protect their safety and their privacy. This is also one of the key elements that shape the digital identity and online behaviors of Chinese citizens living both in Austria and in China as censorship and fear often go hand-in-hand.

At the same time, I sometimes also got the feeling that something remains untold and that the interviewees purposely use unidentified, indirect, and opaque wording such as "something," "nothing," "people," "stuff," and so on in order to avoid answering the real question. This leaves plenty of space for interpretation but could also cause misinterpretation. For example, even though they have some idea of who "normal people" are, notice how this participant does not get into any specifics of what this might mean:

> [In Europe and the USA] … *if you show something wrong or inappropriate on social media, you might get fired. It is this cancel-culture. Whereas in China we don't really have a cancel culture because the main person that is going to cancel you is the Party. You are afraid that someone is going to report and it has nothing to do with how the normal people are going to look at you.* (Int. 4, P. 5, R. 125-128)

In another interview, the participant uses "you" to describe their experiences rather than "I":

> *In China, you are more careful because you know the real danger of discussing sensitive topics like politics. But in general, I would say I feel kind of free to express myself online in China.* (Int. 5, P. 3-4, R. 85-88)

The positioning of the interviewees brings up the question of the consequences that come with something or someone being reported for their social media posts. The example the interviewee provides of "cancel culture" in the USA is with someone being racist. Outside of China, in many western societies, for example, if you are doing something deemed inappropriate or offensive like being racist, people might point a finger at you, label you as racist or even cut you off from their social and professional circle. By contrast, in China the accused wrong-doer is not shunned or published by society but rather by the Communist Party. As might be expected, this can have a significantly larger impact on one's life than simple public disapproval.

**Freedom of speech**

When speaking of censorship, it is impossible to look past the topic of freedom of speech or the freedom of expression — i.e., voicing or being able to voice an opinion. The discussion of whether the research participants feel safer and freer to share their personal opinions on social media in China or Austria was a very interesting part of the interviews. This topic, in particular, reveals the complexity of digital identity and its unbreakable connection with cultural norms, upbringing, and the importance of the surrounding environment. Speaking on the record, one participant shared how they:

> *… find it hard to overcome her "setting" and feel free to express her opinion in general, regardless of their location or social media platforms. She adds that even though European apps are not that monitored, she won't voice a disagreement or even comment under a post and this mainly lies in her upbringing, fear, and experiences in China.* (Int. 3, notes)

A similar experience from a different research participant only further illustrates how their mindset is retained from their upbringing to be private and remain silent, stating:

> *Well, for me this is not total freedom here in Austria, as I actually grew up in China. No matter where I live, no matter what I do, my mindset remains that I should not share anything private or sensitive in public.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 56-58)

This argument is common among almost all of the research participants. They all share that they are taught not to share personal information or engage with sensitive topics since they are children. One interviewee alluded that *"keeping it quiet is the formula of survival and a happy life"* in China as the all-seeing Communist party can "*literally ruin your life.*" And the feelings of fear, being watched all the time, and remaining quiet are rooted so deep in the Chinese mentality that no European app or promises for data protection can change. Some further examples of what the participants had to say on the subject are listed below:

> *In China, I can't say everything, I can't discuss everything, there are so many taboos. WeChat as software is controlled and supervised and sharing everything is simply not good.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 34-36)

> *In China, you can't have complete freedom on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. You always have to pay attention, especially with certain keywords, which are taboo.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 33-36)

*I have colleagues who sometimes write to me via WhatsApp "Eh, the Chancellor is so stupid." That can never happen in China. You can't say that.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 41-44)

The fear of saying the 'wrong thing' is a major finding of the research. Every interviewee explains it and reflects on it differently, but all are cognizant of the fact that there are consequences to every action, every comment, every post — this is something all participants feel they must keep in mind when they use social media. This also comes as a massive cultural shock for many who expressed being somewhat 'triggered' by the way Europeans disapprove of particular situations with loud protests, provocative banners, or outrageous comments. Earlier in this work, some of these censored words and phrases were discussed. But what else is considered 'bad words' and what are the consequences of using these? The participants had the following to say about such words:

*We have a lot of censored words and whenever you type it the people working in the database will see that. And if you tend to write these trigger words too much, your account will get blocked and it might get you into some consequences.* (Int. 4, P. 4, R. 95-100)

Another describes how they go about (or rather, do not go about) discussing these topics:

*I will say in Asia I worry about people watching over me or saying something wrong. I feel that in a sense it is still much more restrictive in terms of topics you can communicate openly. You can't discuss any controversial topics or expect people to engage with you.* (Int. 5, P. 8, R. 225-228)

'**Bad words'**

Taboo topics in China are neither myth nor legend. Even travel blogs publish articles with tips and advice to tourists, expats, and digital nomads on the topics they should avoid while in China. Some travelers, like journalists, for example, might even receive a detailed social media check before they enter the country — many advise would-be travelers to keep their profiles free of pro-US or anti-China propaganda. Speaking on the taboo topics, another participant quipped:

*All kind of human rights topic and also the separation of Taiwan is very very sensitive topics. These topics can provoke people. But you have to be very extreme to attract the attention of the authorities.* (Int. 5, P. 4, R. 100-104)

All participants ultimately agree that the most inappropriate topic is the Chinese Communist Party. No critique, comments, or observations are accepted whatsoever — also in terms of the communication of local histories and political situations. This also correlates strongly with the feeling of broken nationalism of Chinese citizens. Another sensitive matter according to the research participants is the territorial borders of China, these most notably include comments about Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Macao. Human rights, environmental issues, and the USA are also not among the more appropriate topics. Of course, these rules do not only apply to individuals, they also apply to businesses: "Anything a brand releases needs to go through stages of local auditing and essentially a cultural proofing process," explains Paul Wong, director of branding agency Kollektiv ("Taboo subjects brands must avoid," 2020). One interviewee who had working experience in China reflected on their experiences:

> *For example, a few companies that I have worked with in China in the past, were worried about having sanctions. So, talking about America, USA in the wrong way will not only attract bad attention but in general not a good idea.* (Int. 5, P. 4, R. 99-100)

The taboo topics, the censorship, and the fear make the communication between people essentially broken, especially when some of them are living abroad. Most of the interviewees share that they are regularly afraid that somehow their actions online could be exposed and might lead to harm for their families in China, as the behavior or action could be linked to them as well. Contact with the people you love is a crucial component of human life. Humans are social creatures, or so some say, but how is the social component twisted in the sense of the Chinese control and surveillance practices? The passages below reflect on some of these fears:

> *When we talk (with my family in China) we have to avoid so many topics that it is almost like we don't talk that much anymore because I don't really know where their mind is, what they are actually thinking… So we only talk about the house, food, and things that we enjoy on WeChat.* (Int. 4, P. 4, R. 95-100)

Another remarks similarly that:

> *Sometimes when we talk via WeChat and I say something that is not entirely okay for the Chinese side, my father says, "Watch your mouth and stop, please". And they can't tell me everything either, of course, for the same reason. When I'm in China and we talk in private at home, like now, everyone can really express their opinion and discuss something negative. But not online.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 45-49)

"Attracting the wrong attention" and "dealing with the consequences" are the first associations participants appeared to have when thinking of honestly expressing their opinion and feelings. A constant, never-ending restriction of words, thoughts, and actions. Imagine how much this impacts one's real-life personality and digital identity. The silence is a form of suppression but also a hope for safety for many of the interviewees. Until here, the interviews had seemed somehow superficial but once we touched on the subject of the Communist Party and its strict eye for wrong-doers, the conversations took a totally different tone, revealing the complexity of the topic, especially in the sense of the modern digital world. Fears are so great that at times, the participants even expressed that they avoided digital communication altogether:

> *I, personally, don't say anything on WeChat, I'm completely silent. And one reason for this is that I don't want to attract negative attention to myself or somehow meet the wrong people.* (Int. 6, P. 4, R. 103-105)

### 5.3.3. Social Credit or National Surveillance System

As has been elaborated and corroborated by this research already the easiest way to find, track, and monitor those that use the "bad words' or have the wrong thoughts is through digital devices. The all-in-one super-apps like WeChat make it even more convenient for authorities to observe what content one engages with, what political or religious beliefs they have, how and what they communicate with their family, friends, or acquaintances — even beyond the physical borders of China. In that sense, social media plays a double role in both shaping public opinion and "hunting' those who might think otherwise.

**Digital surveillance**

All interviewees described WeChat as the "ultimate app" and the majority shared that they suspect that it has been monitored. On the one hand, an ordinary user wouldn't be able to objectively measure to what extent Chinese apps or authorities could intervene in their life. No normal citizen knows for sure how digital surveillance happens. There are no scientific papers about it, there are no clear laws. But on the other hand, the lack of regulations does not mean that it is not happening and people who have spent the majority of their life in China should have by now developed an overview of what is happening — if they feel they are being observed, they probably are. Using they/them in place of the Chinese authorities — even while continents away — one participant admitted that:

*Any app that comes from China can potentially track you. And I know that once my phone has WeChat, they are tracking me already.* (Int. 4, P. 4, R. 106-108)

This participant had already early admitted, with some sense of acceptance, that:

*For me, it is like, I kind of expect them to know already, so there is no hiding or anything. They have so much technology so they can definitely find me, they can definitely read what I am writing.* (Int. 4, P. 3, R. 64-66)

But who is "them"? Since the beginning of this research, it has been clear that "they" are the Chinese authorities, the Communist Party, the people behind the Social Credit System, those in power who, in one way or another, control the lives of the ordinary people. Although it is no secret who the notorious "them" is, I still find it astonishing that the research participants avoid by all means to reveal who stands behind the undefined word "them." In each interview, most often the Chinese authorities are referred to as "them" or "they" not as a gender-neutral pronoun, but as a symbol of the elephant in the room, the secret that everyone knows but no one talks about. This "they" also reveals just how accustomed the participants are to censoring themselves, knowing — at least expecting — that the other person on the other side will understand what this code word means because they are, simply, in the same boat. It requires a particular strength to call "them" by their real names, be it personal or of the institutions they represent. "They" stay hidden in the shadows, controlling the game and pulling the strings from backstage. "They" could be anything or anyone.

**"They" are everywhere**

***Are you a Chinese spy?*** (Int. 4, P. 3, R. 87)

One might suppose that a researcher knows they have overstepped a particular boundary when they get asked if they are a Chinese spy in the middle of an interview. This is also the moment a researcher understands that "they" are dangerous and even though Chinese spies are like unicorns for Europeans — mythical creatures we have heard of but have never seen, the same unicorns are the scariest and plentiest of all monsters for Chinese citizens.

This reaction of the interviewee was not triggered by an inappropriate or insensitive question, at least it did not seem so at the moment. Rather, this was the response to the question of whether the interviewee feels free to communicate with friends and family in China. The previous three questions had revolved around the digital footprint left on mobile devices, using different mobile phones for Chinese and Western apps, and using real names on social media. I have to admit I was absolutely shocked by this question but I also understood the

fears of the person on the other side. At that point, it was of no importance for me if we would finish the interview or not or if we had together produced good research material. I only wanted to make sure that the interviewee felt comfortable and safe. We took a short break from the interview and I explained again how I got involved with the topic, why I found it interesting, and why I chose to research it further as part of my master's thesis. Of course, I also suggested to the interviewee to stop the interview. The participant explained that the question was "just to make sure" that I am not one of "them." The participant then declared that there was no problem continuing the interview. The rest of the conversation continued in a good mood and we managed to tackle plenty of sensitive topics. However, all the personal information shared off-the-record or such that I, as the researcher, consider delicate was not transcribed and will not be disclosed despite its contribution to the research.

It is hard to imagine how vulnerable one might feel when they seriously suspect they might have just shared something 'wrong' in front of a Chinese spy. This was a turning point in the research project — a secure sign that "they" are much bigger than the Social Credit System used as the main case in this research, which had attracted my attention as an advanced technology for data monitoring.

"They" are like a modern-day surveillance octopus spreading its tentacles everywhere. The educational system within and outside China is another minor part of Chinese life that gets monitored by the Chinese authorities — both online and offline:

> … *every Chinese citizen gets the so-called "yellow file" from primary school and it should be always carried around since it is some form of dossier. It is a packet with ticso or something similar and you can't open it or read what is in it. It includes all your scores and data, all your "mistakes," history, etc. If one has studied abroad, it will be written down that you have foreign experience in education.* (Int. 3, notes)

Meanwhile, another interviewee remembered that:

> … *[i]n 2014 I think I received this information that they keep a record on your spending and basically they have a run-down analytics on you. And there is a Chinese Student Organization in almost every educational institution abroad that keeps track on the numbers and calculates how many students migrated there and so on.* (Int. 4, P. 6, R. 145-149)

During these conversations, I was also made aware by one participant *that people in the big cities and people in the countryside experience monitoring and restrictions in very different ways. Those studying abroad, for example, usually come from the big cities and have been*

*exposed to more technology, communities, and in a way, monitoring.* The participant also adds that *regardless of their location, everyone is afraid and everyone knows about the surveillance*. She points out that *one of the more 'old-school' aspects of surveillance is a commission, which is like a team of people who might visit you at home in case you committed an offense or a crime or simply attract negative attention with your behavior* (either online and offline). *"They" visit you simply to remind you of your situatedness in society* (Int. 3, notes).

## Social Credit System

The nature of the social credit system in China has been presented and explained both in the introduction of the thesis and in the state of the art. It is interesting to observe how much the interviewed Chinese citizens know about it. The topic only became popular in Europe in the past years but besides the fuss and shock about it, most Western sources do not provide very detailed information. How is it in China, is it a topic people discuss? At times, it did not seem as so:

> *A lot of people have asked me about the social credit system and I have no idea what it is about. I believe it is for certain state-owned companies or officials in China. But what are the consequences for normal citizens, I don't know.* (Int. 6, P. 6, R. 165-167)

Another interviewee seemed to have at least a few more details parsed out:

> *I think they are definitely doing something that comes with social credits and things like this but I think the most direct example that I can give is if you want to purchase an apartment or send your kids to a good school, your social credit would affect that. But there are no immediate actions taken yet but I think it is there, moving towards something bigger.* (Int. 2, P. 6, R. 167-171)

When this subject was brought up, interviewees were rarely convinced of the information they provided me about the Social Credit System. Most gained their knowledge on the topic from Chinese and Western media. And the majority admit that they cannot recall a particular time or event when the social credits have been introduced to the public in China, but they also have not looked for original documents or publications from the Chinese government where the function of the credit score and general structure of the system are explained. There are many different onions and different suggestions of what the credit could be:

*The way this social scoring is trying to correct certain behavior patterns is like similar to Singapore, where you go to jail for spitting your chewing gum on the street. So this is how and why they try to monitor the public. So maybe if people know that their social credit depends on their behavior and it impacts their life, they simply won't do the bad and illegal stuff.* (Int. 2, P. 6, R. 182-190)

Another could not tell if the system existed yet or not, was "bad" or "good," but was certain it curtailed freedom:

*You can't necessarily say that these credit points are bad or good. But if such a social credit system really exists, then it restricts people's freedom. It may be that these social points have existed for a long time and I just didn't know about them. Maybe there is such a system for those who speak against the party.* (Int. 6, P. 6-7, R. 169-172)

The non-recorded interviewee also shares that the Social Credit System is nothing new, and it even gives off a feeling as if it *"has always been there."* It is nothing that people talk about and nothing that has been officially presented to the public. This participant, for example, does not recall active campaigns or information initiatives that told the citizens how the system works. The research partner describes it as *"a tool that slowly adapted to the lives of people,"* first, by being used in shopping websites such as Alibaba, and now, you can't escape from it, you always need to register somewhere. (Int. 3, notes). Similar to other interviews she believes that the system intends to keep people quiet, suppressed, and under control (Int. 3, notes).

*In China, if you say something against the party, they will ban you because of your social score. And then you can't take a plane, you can't take a train, you can't do anything. Your kids also wouldn't be able to go to school or leave the country. You can't get a job, you can't earn money and provide for your family. That's why you keep your mouth shut and you are careful with what you post on social media.* (Int. 4, P. 6, R. 141-145)

Some see the credit system as a more advanced police force that is tech-based and more digitized. A digital system will be more efficient in terms of preventing crime or particular behaviors. The negative side of the standard police force is that policemen do not see everything and are often quite vulnerable. An all-seeing system could solve that but will also cause new questions about the moral values of such a technological system.

*In China, if you have a fight in the subway, that would affect your credit score. In Austria, the police will document that you had a fight in public. They are just changing how the data has been documented now. In general, here in Austria, it is like a police state or something but now China is more like digital. The police can access it and the banks can access it and the schools can access it. All these big institutions can access the data.* (Int. 2, P. 6, R. 201-208)

Considering the technological transformation through which we are going right now as a society, one could guess that some type of "digital police" or digital surveillance has a much brighter future in comparison to police on horseback, for example. Each interviewee opined in some way that monitoring and online surveillance will without a doubt increase in the next few years. And almost all admit that they are not planning on returning to China — that they will do everything possible to settle and stay abroad. They associate going back as a "*restriction in every way possible,*" as one interview described it. Still, one interviewee is an exception, sharing that she would probably return to China so she could take care of her parents when they are old. If she moves back, she "will make sure to be invisible and unnoticed".

A few interviewees share that "they already have the information they need" and there is no point in even trying to hide anything. For example, one believes that the government already knows and operates with the understanding that people use Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), a broadly preferred tool for accessing foreign websites in China. The Party, however, chooses to neglect such irrelevant offenses and focus on the more serious issues. After all, China is a very big country, with over one billion citizens and this requires more advanced solutions.

### 5.3.4. Positive Aspects of Surveillance

In this regard, many recognize that there may be positive sides to such an advanced monitoring project like the Social Credit System and share that people do not complain about it because they see that it works. Personal data is a small price to pay for a better life.

*Well, I think there is certainly an element of control from the government in that matter. But at the same time it is actually beneficial for the whole country.* (Int. 2, P. 3, R. 74-75)

Or that:

> *Some data or some data collection might make people a little uncomfortable, but it is supported in China from the whole community and society because people see the profit of it.* (Int. 1, P. 8, R. 234-236)

The security management of China — internal and external — will improve and the crime rate will fall drastically after the implementation of a social credit system, according to some of the participants. Two of the interviewees give as an example the terror attack that happened in Vienna on November 2, 2020, where four civilians were killed and 23 were injured after a series of shootings:

> *A terrorist attack will never happen in China because if you do something bad, from the social media we already can notice that you want to do something bad.* (Int. 1, P. 8, R. 220-221)

When asked if particular features of the social credit score or digital surveillance should be implemented in Europe, most of the interviewees disagreed and said that it should serve as an example of what not to implement. One interviewee, however, saw an opportunity of positive impact if the system gets implemented in other countries that are less developed and struggle with lack of control and high crime rates.

> *This social credit system would probably do wonders for the rape rates in India probably.* (Int. 2, P. 6, R. 201)

This comment will be considered inappropriate in the context of a Chinese social media post and most probably would be found very inappropriate and get banned as a result. In the context of the research, this quotation reveals the need for different systems, different social media, and different control methods in different countries and cultures.

## 5.4. Embracing Cultural Specifics

We have been exposed to cultural stereotypes based on nationality, race, or ethnicity our entire lives: all Austrians dance the waltz and all Chinese are excellent in math. The cultural and social norms in society dictate how it develops, what issues it has, and what solutions are created. Speaking not on stereotypes, but on the cultural underpinnings of taboos, one participant remarked:

*Well, the Chinese people are kind of traditional and closed compared to those in Austria and the USA. There are many taboo subjects like sex, politics, relationships. That's our way of thinking, we can't say anything negative.* (Int. 6, P. 7, R. 178-180)

It is interesting to observe how communities and diasporas live and maintain their native culture and part of their identity when living abroad. The interviewees share that most Chinese exchange or international students very rarely have other friends who are not Chinese or Asian. Many don't even have WhatsApp or Facebook and use only Chinese apps to communicate with the closed community of other Asians in the particular town or country they are located. One interviewee shares that the Chinese embassy in Vienna organizes regular events for Chinese people. In her opinion, the only goal is that these people stay part of the Chinese community and do not integrate and engage that much with other cultures (Int. 3, notes).

### 5.4.1. Mutual Trust, Unity, Common Responsibility

This signifies the importance of community for Chinese culture and indeed many Chinese citizens. Along with unity, trust also appears to be an important value. One interviewee shares that "mutual trust is the most important thing in China." They cite the example of Alibaba's collection of personal data and how Chinese people accept that because of the mutual trust and belief that everything that has been done is for the common good. A dangerous personal interest shall never be allowed to harm society and it is important that as a group, people have common interests to protect:

*This is a mutual understanding between China and society. Chinese motto is: I do something for everybody, and everybody does something for me.* (Int. 1, P. 8, R. 241-242)

They want on to comparatively reflect:

*Angela Merkel said that freedom is not that you make everything you want but freedom is taking the responsibility for the society and for yourself and all the people living in the community.* (Int. 1, P. 8, R. 237-239)

There is also another aspect of "we are stronger together." This is where, usually, the hierarchy is not horizontal, however, there is an authority responsible to nurture this togetherness. But is unity possible without control?

> *We're stronger together, but the Chinese people can't really stick together. Everyone has their own opinion, although everyone remains silent. We need a superpower to control that, otherwise there will be no more China.* (Int. 6, P. 7, R. 185-189)

### 5.4.2. The Importance of Reputation and Authority

Another cultural aspect is that a different approach is required to control particular cultures — fear, religion, propaganda. One should know what triggers "good behavior" and what values are important. Among the mentioned methods, reputation seems to be a key element of Chinese culture and traditions. Reputation is not only important between individuals but also when a brand or a company develops its relationship with customers. All interviewees, in one way or another, shared that it is no coincidence that the social credit system can impact one's reputation to such a considerable degree. As one interviewee mentioned, it is a "cancel culture" where people with lower scores have a bad reputation that can impact their entire life. Another research partner drew a comparison with an episode of the American series, *Black Mirror*. "Nosedive," the first episode in the third season of *Black Mirror*, tells the story of a tech society where everyday activities impact one's socioeconomic status. The reputation system presented in the TV show has been widely compared to China's Social Credit System and the Sesame Credit in China.

> *Reputation is really important in China. If you do something bad once, okay, but you do it a second and a third time — no one will work with you. Even your family will look down upon you because you are not an honored man. Chinese people, we think, rules have a lot of mistakes and have to be updated but honorable manners are very important for the community and the society, mutual trust is better than guanxi.* (Int. 1, P. 7, R. 189-194)

*Guanxi* is a very old tradition in Chinese culture, meaning a trustworthy relationship or "automatic and personal trust exists between people who have personal relationships with one another, whereas strangers are immediately shown with distrust" (Wong & Dobson, 2019). Reputation is the modern version of this custom. An interviewee shares that *people who go and study abroad get briefed before they go to Austria or another country. They are told what topics to avoid in their communication with others and they are warned not to speak against*

*the government* (Int. 3, Notes). This is a great example of the importance of maintaining a good reputation and praising authority at the same time.

**Authority and Hierarchy**

Authority is legitimate power, contingent on a mutually recognized or socially constituted set of rights and obligations. Hierarchy exists when one person or organization exercises authority over some or all other people or organizations (Lake, 2017). The Communist Party in China is put on a pedestal and is seen as the ultimate power and decision-maker in the country.

> *In the beginning, I couldn't really understand all this concept of freedom* [in Austria]. *So, the Chancellor is the Chancellor, he's a superpower, why are we swearing at him?* (Int. 6, P. 5, R. 116-118)

Meanwhile, another interviewee compares the relationship between students and professors in China and in Austria, which in her opinion reflects the way authority and hierarchy are perceived in both countries. She admits she was a bit surprised and slightly shocked by the open communication between students and "authoritative figures" at the university in Austria as it was exactly the opposite of what she has experienced in China. In Europe, the students can start a debate or discussion with their teacher or professor, ask questions, and disagree with their position or opinion on a particular topic. Everyone is free and even urged to share their viewpoint, their experience, and everyone is allowed to defend their own angle. This, however, is not the common example in China, where students are in school or at university to learn from the greater mind, from the higher standing individuals and they have no right to doubt or disagree with what they are being told.

Research from 2002 examined further the "silent strategy" of Chinese students living abroad. Besides the language barrier that sometimes causes discomfort, the research found that rather than passive engagement in class, they were reconstructing their identities in a new cultural environment (Liu, 2002). What is meant by that is that often people who live abroad change their behavior and reconstruct the beliefs and norms they were brought up with in order to adapt to the new environment and fit into it. But they could also "practice" their culturally constructed identity in the new environment even if their new norms are applicable. For example, to show respect to the professors, students hold the classroom culture of their home country by acting silently in class because this is a norm they grew up with even though it is not an established tradition in the West.

A further example shared during the interviews is the work environment and how teamwork functions in China and Austria. In China, when the leader or the boss says

something, everyone should support this decision without even questioning it. You cannot rebel against the "Superpower" that is on top of the corporate ladder. In Austria, teamwork is a symbol of a more horizontal hierarchy where employees and colleagues can openly exchange ideas, express opinions, and offer new strategies. In that case, people work towards what is best for the company, gaining new perspectives and including most of the staff in the discussion. In China, you do what is best for the reputation of the leader:

> *In Asia, the authorities are beyond the internet or social media providers. So, if the government requests something from the tech companies, there would be no discussion, they would have to hand it in to the government.* (Int. 5, P. 5, R. 140-143)

It is no surprise that the authorities located on top of the hierarchy are intangible, being over everyone and everything in both the online and offline world. This speaks for itself of the democratic state of the People's Republic of China. However, it is interesting to explore this attitude and setting towards democracy — in the digital and in the public space, among Chinese people living in Austria, as they have seemingly seen two quite different experiences: one democratic and one dictatorial.

> *You might think that communication has to always be transparent in a modern democratic society but it simply is not how it works, especially in a democratic society which China is certainly not claiming to be.* (Int. 2, P. 4, R. 137-140)

### 5.4.3. Demanding Democracy

The Western world often wonders why Chinese people do not do anything, why they do not demand democracy. According to one of the interviewees, the answer is simple — it is forbidden and it is extremely hard to unite almost 1.4 billion people to fight for a more democratic future. The interviewee also shares that China has never been a democracy and actually, people have tried to change that. There are multiple examples of protests and demonstrations that ended in millions of deaths. Some of the mentioned examples during these sensitive conversations (here, contextualized with added numbers for a more precise understanding) were the demonstrations between 1943 and 1976, when Chinese dictator Mao Zedong killed approximately 78 million Chinese "dangerous thinkers," (there is not unamous agreement over any set of estimates) which would be four times many victims than created by Adolf Hitler and the Nazi-era Holocaust (Pineiro Escoriaza, 2010).

*There are no civil demonstrations in China, they are forbidden.* (Int. 6, P. 7, R. 173)

Talking, posting, or demanding democracy is always some sort of a no-go in China. Among the other words and phrases banned in the communist country, the list includes a few more phrases that indicate past events in the history of China where people tried to fight for a more democratic regime. "Go, Hong Kong," standing for support for the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong is a banned phrase along with mentions of "Tiananmen," "June 4," "Tank man" or any other references to the 1989 pro-democracy protests:

*In 1989 when we had the Tiananmen Square protests, people demanded democracy and they were all shot by a tank.* (Int. 4, P. 6, R. 159-160)

Discussing the sheer amount of death, one interviewee reflected that:

*During the cultural revolution half of my family were killed by the communist party. In a sense you know something is wrong, you just don't think about it.* (Int. 4, P. 6, R. 168-169)

There are many geopolitical and socio-economic reasons which cause the complicated situation in China. China's aim to remain independent and become an economic superpower requires it to keep its territory as it is. However, the country is much more diverse culturally than many Europeans would assume. One of the interviewees is originally from Taiwan and shares that with over 55 different ethnic minorities in China, keeping the community together is almost impossible due to the radically different cultural traditions, spiritual and religious beliefs. Another interviewee points out that democracy increases the chances for small regions to demand independence which would make China lose important territories.

*If there was such freedom in China where people could say anything and demonstrate against the government, China would definitely be torn apart. Tibet, Hong Kong, South China everything will be separated.* (Int. 6, P. 7, R. 185-187)

An interviewee brings up a topic that I otherwise would not dare to ask about. She says that *some regions of China where non-Han ethnicities live are also strongly monitored in comparison to others.* (Int. 3, notes) The Muslim minority of China that she implies is located in the Xinjiang province is a controversial example and an absolute taboo to discuss. This area and the millions of Uyghurs living there attracted the attention of the Western world due to the

growing number of disappearing people and newly built "re-educational camps" in the area (Schechter, 2021). The Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group and present approximately 12 million of the Chinese population ("Who are the Uyghurs," 2021). The Xinjiang province is closer to the capitals of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan than to Beijing and therefore the culture there is strongly influenced by the closer neighboring countries. With their own religion, culture, and language, a big part of the ethnic minority does not identify as Chinese, and the idea of demanding independence started to arise (Regencia, 2021). The Communist Party had to take action and protect what 'belongs to China.' To be clear, it was not the Uyghur people living there that the authorities wanted to keep but the geographical territory. Part of why this region is so vitally important to China is that it has a lot of energy resources (Overton, 2016), as it is home to almost 40 percent of Chinese coal reserves and over 20 percent of the country's oil and gas (Wong, 2014).

The region where the Uyghurs live is among the most surveillanced areas in the entire country with cameras positioned almost everywhere (Bhuiyan, 2021). No journalists are allowed in this area and there are rarely any authentic materials, which tell the stories of the people living there to outsiders (Schiavenza, 2019). China's government, of course, published propaganda videos describing what "they" claimed was happening in these educational camps. In turn, these videos received major criticism in the West because they appeared manipulated and unrealistic (BBC News, 2019). This brought even more questions regarding the unusual practices of Chinese authorities for gaining control over the minorities. This is a clue as to why digital control is so important for China. When losing control over physical territories, the government creates digital ones:

> *In history, there were a lot of wars in China, and it was split into 8 nations and then the Japanese war, and then with America. And in the past 50-60 years it is probably the most stable time, without any open fire conflict. So I guess in that sense they are trying to protect what they have achieved so far.* (Int. 2, P. 4, R. 99-103)

## 5.5. A Battle for Power: East vs. West

One of the main competitors of China when it comes to geographical and economical power is the United States. Some of the interviewees think that the tension between both countries dates way back but increased significantly in the past years due to the massive economic growth of China and its positioning as a global superpower. The end justifies the means and all tools are in play for both parties to achieve their goals and remove the competition.

It is interesting to observe the opinions of Chinese people who are living abroad

regarding the relationship between China and the USA. During the conversations, most of them were quite supportive of the liberal and democratic media in the USA. However, when we talk about technological advancement, I could sense a slight national pride in the fact that China is getting ahead of the US in terms of innovation.

> *China and the US have been opponents for a very long time. And they try to destroy each other's reputations. That's not good for the population, people don't know what is right and what is wrong.* (Int. 6, P. 5, R. 136-138)

As another describes:

> *It is also historical, I think, that they always try to get information from each other, China and the USA. There is a lot of data that they are trying to not share.* (Int. 2, P. 3, R. 85-87)

Some of the interviewees quite surely point out technological innovation as an important factor in the competitive relationship between the two countries. Recently, in 2020, a book by Winston Wenyan Ma was published that takes a closer look indeed at the digital battle between China and the USA. Ma discusses these topics through a wide spectrum of technological innovations and tools, which shape real and digital identities. Social media, AI, blockchain, mobile phones and digital infrastructure, e-commerce, fintech, and mobile payments — these are a few of the main fields where the battle between East and the West happens (Ma, 2020).

### 5.5.1. Enforcing Technological Innovation

China has committed to supporting and nurturing the world's greatest tech minds in fields like deep learning, artificial intelligence, and big data. Ma shares that Chinese mobile apps and social media platforms are currently more advanced than the American ones, which marks the end of the era where China was always seen as the copycat stealing intellectual property from the West (Ma, 2020). China's total research and development (R&D) expenditures are growing faster than those of the United States, but China is at a lower absolute level (Deutch, 2018). China and the US are forming two leading innovation centers but with different strengths. Therefore, the tools and methods they use also differ, often based on the needs and expectations of the users. The interviewees had some general thoughts over these developments:

*From my perspective, the fact that Chinese apps boomed was the result of political relations between China and the USA, but it was not a strategy. When a lot of apps got banned, China had to deliver the same quality to its users, if that makes sense.* (Int. 2, P. 2, R. 32-37)

Or, speaking on the interrelated nature of culture and digital behavior:

*I think the main difference about the development of social media is the people's tastes. For example, Austrian and German people like to use cash instead of cards, so the social media adapts to it. In China, the mentality is paying online and similar paying systems.* (Int. 1, P. 3, R. 86-88)

And, finally, another approaches to the issue in terms of economic development:

*The US faces serious competition as social media providers. They want to create a space where people exchange ideas. And in Asia, they want to grow as diverse activities and features as possible — entertainment, finances.* (Int. 5, P. 7, R. 195-200)

A big part of technological innovation is rooted in the habits and cultural specifics of the users. The complex algorithms and know-how required to track and adopt these in a particular product is one side of the story. Every technological innovation, every product, every new feature, re-shapes, upgrades, or changes the needs and expectations of the user. User behavior and technological innovation seem to be in constant correlation with each other and it is hard to say which impacts the other more. STS scholars have debated this tension — between technological determinism and social constructionism for years — the only difference lies in whether society plays a primary or secondary role in its own progress. However, much contemporary STS recognizes this relationship as fluid and therefore, not always constant. The social and the technological intertwine: they co-produce each other.

When it comes to the digital competition between the East and the West, a major thing to look at is how the decisions regarding the implementation of new technologies are made. Some of the interviewees share that social (media) technology develops so quickly in China because if both the government and a company want to try a new thing, the majority of people will also agree and say it is okay. As one interviewee put it:

*Usually there isn't much of a discussion (about the implementation of something) at the beginning and we think it is a good idea and we do it. If during the operation we think it is wrong — we stop it, if not — we continue it. I think it is a different mentality.* (Int. 1, P. 4, R. 94-98)

And continuing:

> *In the future, the big tech giants will be only the USA and China, Europe is quite far behind because they are quite conservative and old thinking in terms of technology.* (Int. 1, P. 10, R. 308-310)

So, what is the position of Europe in the digital war between China and the USA? Is this the middle ground or the battlefield? One interviewee states that Europe completely relies on foreign technologies and did not develop that much on its own, and I guess they are right. No doubt there are many quality manufacturers in Europe but when it comes to more contemporary technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), or even local social media, Europe is left behind. Despite the growing investments in AI and big data startups and projects, Europe still is not a major part of the innovation landscape. Two interviewees reflected that:

> *For a developed continent, Europe is the most advanced industrially but technologically they are so behind.* (Int. 2, P. 3, R. 78-84)

And further, that:

> *From a mechanic, electronic side, Europeans are fantastic but the government is involved in business and innovations and that's why you can rarely see and innovation coming from European countries in the recent years.* (Int. 1, P. 10, R. 308-313)

Maybe Europe simply has a different approach and instead of developing more technology, it works harder on the regulations and restrictions that may need to come along with it. With one of the research participants, we dive deeper into the topic and discuss the recent laws that were enforced in Europe and the growing industry in the tech sector that cost billions of dollars. The interviewee has some notable knowledge in the field and I would like to emphasize the topics we discussed by bookshelfing them with more precise sources.

The European Union (EU) places significant importance on data and privacy protection. In April 2021, the European Union announced that it intended to ban the use of AI for mass surveillance or social ranking behavior (Drozdiak, 2021). According to the draft proposal of the European Commission, all AI systems that manipulate human behavior or exploit information about individuals will be banned. "High-risk AI" within the territory of the EU would have to undergo inspections before going public. In June 2021, the European Data Protection Board (EDPB) and the European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) called for a ban on the use of AI for automated recognition of human features in publicly accessible

spaces, and some other uses of AI that can allegedly also lead to unfair discrimination (European Data Protection Board, 2021). These types of laws do not exist in China, the extraction of data has been heavily normalized:

> *China is very technologically advanced and one thing that is a topic lately is of course AI. They are now able to collect so much data on the social scale and manage to feed the data into deep learning AI to make it more realistic.* (Int. 5, P. 10, R. 268-270)

Huw Roberts (2019) and his colleagues take a closer look at the strategy outlined by the Chinese government to monetize AI into a 150-billion-dollar industry by 2030, namely the "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan." The article aims to provide a more detailed understanding of the complex AI strategy and its future trajectory. The authors point out that China's major development strategies rely on solutions driven by big data and as part of their research identify three areas of particular relevance of AI for China: international competitiveness, economic growth, and social governance (Roberts et al., 2019).

### 5.5.2. Maintaining Independence

Independence is an interesting phenomenon to look at, especially when comparing China, the USA, and Europe. An interviewee distinguished the different strategies for growth and development in a very unique way: China seeks absolute independence in terms of not relying on anyone else to "function properly." The USA has proclaimed independence because it has the biggest economy in the world and this makes it easy to impact smaller economies but in terms of goods, it is still dependent. The European Union, in contrast, aims at uniting many small countries in order to create some kind of stability that should not be mistaken for independence.

China's AI technology development may lead to the emergence of new power structures also on a global scale. Some of the interviewees argue that the extreme focus on technological innovation was an opportunity for China to maintain its independence — culturally, politically, and economically. One of the participants points out directly that big part of the manufacturing and waste management of the USA and Europe are moved to China due to the significantly cheaper production. Even big companies like Tesla rely on Chinese manufacturers even though the brand is officially American. This caused intense discussion not only regarding the political situation between the countries but also pointed out the environmental harm caused by such actions. Nevertheless, taking over as many industries is seen as a way for China to eliminate the USA from the global market of goods.

*China will always be an independent country. It is not only about making business with other countries but we want to protect ourselves. We don't want to be manipulated and we don't want to become a tool for the bigger countries.*

(Int. 1, P.10, R. 290-293)

## 5.6. Understanding Digital Identity

Now comes the most important question: How do all these aspects — social media, censorship and freedom of speech, cultural norms and expectations, technological advancement and independence impact the real and the digital identity of Chinese citizens living in Austria? China is an interesting example because unlike Austria, where all these aspects of digital identity are separated, Chinese digital identity often combines all of these components into one social media channel — WeChat.

*(In China) all the social media platforms are asking you to upload your official personal documentation and identification so sometimes they even ask for ID cards or a passport, otherwise you can't share videos or can't use all features, or share anything to the general public.* (Int. 2, P. 6, R. 171-173)

### 5.6.1. Personal Expression — Is the Digital Identity Authentic?

For the majority of the interviewees, the answer to this question is "kind of." Just like in real life, many of them practice the 'silent strategy' also offline in order to keep their privacy safe. Most of the research participants share that they don't have a fake digital identity in the usual sense when people lie about who they are, where they are, what they like, where they work, and so on. As one of the interviewees said, "*it is not about creating a brand new personality online but smartly managing your own*" (Int. 3, notes). Most of the interviewees do not use their full or real names on social media in Austria or China except for WeChat and other mobile apps or services that require biometric verification or identification with ID card (e.g., banking and financial services, renting a car, etc.). Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube do not request these. As another interviewee confided:

*So what I post on this social media depends on what identity I have there. So if one group gets agitated when I speak about a particular topic I will simply not post anything that will agitate them. But for another identity, I might be true to myself because*

*WeChat, Snapchat you post something, and it disappears. But if the wrong person takes a screenshot...* (Int. 4, P. 3, R. 76-81)

They all know they are being monitored, they all assume that someone is watching and waiting for them to make the wrong more or post the wrong thing. They all feel they need to fit into a particular behavioral norm online and are always conscious about their online activities. The interviewees share that besides a new name they often use a profile picture that does not attract much attention. Some use a cartoon, a landscape, or a visual, others choose images where their faces are not that recognizable, a faraway image, or even a very old one to maintain their privacy on social media. The research participants only accept friend requests and followers from people they personally know and find it safer when only their close circle of friends and relatives know who is behind their profiles. One of the interviewees shared that they use Facebook to exchange information with other fellow students about upcoming exams and useful materials. In Facebook groups for students, no one is really interested in which profile belongs to whom as long as the users help each other. Another research participant reports that they use a semi-realistic name on LinkedIn, for example. The nature of the platform there requires more authentic information as it is mainly for maintaining business connections. However, according to the interviewee, people in Austria and Europe could not tell if the name on the LinkedIn profile is their real Chinese name or not, as Europeans are not familiar with Chinese names in general. Chinese names need to be translated into Latin symbols for Europeans to be able to read them. There are different versions of a translated name so this is also a niche that allows Chinese people to distinguish themselves slightly from their real identity when using social media online.

Personal expression is not that important in China because it is more important to fit in rather than stand out. Therefore, profile pictures, provocative statuses, or numerous stories are not the standard way to use social media. In Austria, for example, most people aim to personalize their profiles as much as they can and be different from the others. To prove that they are unique, that they are individuals, that they have a one in a million style or personality is not the goal for Chinese social media users. As the interviewees describe:

*There is a very high social pressure to be and to act similar to the content you see on social media. So, you are in a way forced to display certain behaviors on social media much more than here in Austria.* (Int. 5, P. 7, R.1 89-191)

Or:

> *I will say that the personal expression is quite valued in Europe and how you express your personal identity — what clothes you wear, different colors, different hobbies.* (Int. 5, P. 8-9, R. 231-233)

**Knock-knock, who's there?**

All interviewees drew attention to a topic that was initially not included in the questionnaire and was not predicted as a crucial element of digital identity among Chinese citizens living in Austria, namely the background check. When users are so conscious about their personal information and digital identity and rarely use their real names or current pictures online, they are also careful with other users and people as they never know what is true and what is not. A major challenge is to find out who stands behind this digital profile.

In previous sections, I discussed how the majority of the interviewees live with the thought that the Chinese government and respective institutions are constantly watching, and to avoid troubles, they act almost as if they are invisible. All users share they have developed a particular level of anxiety through the years, especially when meeting or communicating with other Asians abroad. The examples below further illustrate this reality.

> *If I meet a Chinese person, I immediately assume they are a Chinese spy. I have this stereotype for anyone with Asian heritage that they might in some way be connected to the party.* (Int. 4, P. 6, R. 153-155)

> *I will say you simply don't discuss information with people you don't know, and you try to speak the same language as they do, so they try to explore you If you are much different than them.* (Int. 5, P. 3, R. 74-76)

> *For example, when I meet Chinese people here in Austria, I am always very careful because I don't know who the other person is. Perhaps he or she is an official for the Chinese Party. That's why I always have to be conscious.* (Int. 6, P. 4, R. 107-109)

The interviewees' backgrounds and upbringings have left a significant impact on the way they communicate and have made them much distanced. The findings reveal that their fears of the powerful hand of the Chinese Party dictate their real and digital identities almost entirely. Both identities are purposely unostentatious and careful with what they share and to whom. As one of the interviewees asserted changing your name in China serves as basic protection. It is especially hard for people who are from an ethnicity different than Han or those who are from Hong Kong and Taiwan, as one of the interviewees was. In such cases, the real name carries a "negative vibe" and simply increases the chances of people being suspicious towards you:

*Yes, I change my names and it is mainly because I am not with Han Chinese ethnicity so in my case and the case of many people like me is that we keep a second identity and change our names. Ahm, and we don't disclose almost any personal details when we are in China.* (Int. 5, P. 2, R. 52-54)

Early, they had concluded that:

*I would say when I live on the Chinese Pacific, I will use a second identity in China. Because I work in different continents, and they have different rules so I have to adapt. So, if I put it, let's say in China, I separate my identity with another one in China.* (Int. 5, P. 2, R. 47-49)

### 5.6.2. Tools and Methods for "Maintaining" Safe Digital Identity

The interviewees use different methods to maintain a safe digital identity — from using different names online to VPNs and encrypted browsers. But VPNs, which are also commonly used in the West too, are certainly the most used "illegal" tool interviewees admitted to using — all revealed that they had at least one such service installed on one of their devices. The VPN enables virtual point-to-point connection and with simple words, allows users to trick the system where they are located, providing remote access to websites that are blocked by the Chinese Firewall. Interviewees also share that a VPN is essential for people who live, study, or work abroad as they are not even able to access their university website when they are in China. VPNs are also used for communication and maintaining contact with people living abroad. Reading foreign media is also among the top reasons to use VPN. Usually, the key to freedom is quickly tracked by the Chinese authorities and removed. Therefore, VPNs are usually exchanged among friends and trusted people or bought from abroad:

*VPN is technically illegal in China but you can get it if you work for the Communist party or some other company that is related. Often people who live abroad bring a stable VPN with them on the way back that they purchased abroad.* (Int. 4, P. 4, R. 109-111)

And that:

*With VPN you can visit websites that are normally banned in China, including Facebook. The Chinese government knows that Facebook means freedom and that's why they ban it. I also need VPN to keep my contacts in Austria.* (Int. 6, P. 3, R. 64-67)

Another strategy for keeping some privacy and avoiding surveillance is having separate phones for Chinese and Western apps. Half the interviews keep their 'identities' separate but also admit that it is almost impossible to never mix or merge them.

It is hard to tell if having multiple or different identities is a way to stay safe in the digital world or a solution to avoiding surveillance. Perhaps it is both. This research, however, has illustrated that in the eyes of the interviewees "not attracting negative attention online" translates into safety, protection, and no problems with the Chinese government.

> *They track everything. There is no point in trying to be another person or hide anything.* (Int. 4, P. 4, R. 110-111)

# 6. Connecting the Dots: Data and Theory

The thesis at hand had two main goals: the first one was to research and introduce the concept of mass surveillance in China and its importance and major role in contemporary Chinese society. While there has already been earlier research of the structure and performance of the Social Credit System, this project differs from previous studies as it looked at the surveillance practices in China from the perspective of native Chinese citizens living in Austria. Unlike their fellow citizens in China, those living abroad have significant freedom when it comes to their online behavior and activities. Therefore, their experience with and awareness towards governmental monitoring and privacy differs from both the traditional western and traditional Chinese perspectives.

The second main aim of this study was to find out how Chinese citizens living in Austria construct their digital identity and online presence under the awareness of being monitored. The main framework in which these identities were examined is through social media platforms — both Western and Chinese. The understanding of identity is a topic actively researched in a variety of fields and has multi-faceted layers of meaning that could be ascribed to the term. From philosophical, spiritual, and social concepts of identity to more technological and governmental understandings, the question of who we are in an endless and constantly evolving digital space will continue to be a matter of research in the future. Several studies tackle the specifics around identity and its construction as a phenomenon caused by the intertwining of the social and the technological. The impact of social media, how it shapes user behavior and the need for fitting in, is also broadly examined in a variety of scientific research. However, there is hardly any research that looks into the correlations between surveillance, social media, and identity, especially in the context of communities living abroad. This thesis

provides a new viewpoint on how we could look at these aspects as co-producing entities and therefore can be understood as an attempt to fill this gap.

The following will recapitulate and discuss the main outcomes of this thesis and show how they provide answers to the main research question of the project. Furthermore, I will outline what these findings mean for the analyzed case and how they relate to the concept of digital identity used within the theoretical framework of co-production.

## Discussion

The Chinese citizens living in Austria construct their digital identity and online behavior based on a variety of factors that include cultural upbringing, personal values, individual preferences, and experience with surveillance practices in China. A key finding in this research is that the cultural aspect plays a major role in the construction of both digital and offline identities. The rooted fear from the Chinese government and rich traditions with surveillance across China has shaped the way Chinese citizens use digital platforms and social media channels to a great extent. This can be examined in the basic protection measures taken by all research participants such as changing their online names, sharing minimal amounts of personal information, using profile pictures that are hard to identify, and staying quiet when it comes to expressing their political views online. The digital identity is an identity shaped and formed by the fear of being your true self. This is a reality in which every individual seems to be connected with an endless amount of similar-minded people, yet is always conscious about the opinions they express and the comments they make in front of the stranger on the other side. This digital identity that all interviewees share is a reflection of the authentic fears and behaviors they face in the offline world.

There is no drastic difference when it comes to using Chinese or Western mobile apps. Indeed, the findings of this research reveal that Chinese citizens living in Vienna do feel more free and secure when using Western social media channels and apps in comparison to the Chinese. However, regardless of the more democratic and liberal communication channels in Europe, the research participants highlight that they are always conscious of their online behavior, posts, and online self-representation on both Western and Asian social media channels. The current location of the interviewees also does not determine how they look at digital tools and social media as they have all already established their own strategy to maintain their personal information online. The findings of the research reveal that despite the growing interest in new social media apps and pressure to be present online, the interviewees choose to limit their social media activity and rarely register for new mobile apps or digital services. The main reasons they use social media channels and digital platforms are to stay

in contact with family and maintain professional connections, and for entertainment and online shopping.

The topic of surveillance and monitoring in China and the authorities that stand behind it was a very sensitive matter to discuss and the interviewees briefly touched upon their experiences and positions on the topic. The Social Credit System in China seems to be a very unclear subject for many of the research participants, yet the majority of them share that this system is nothing new, it is rather an improved and digitized version of control.

Much of the information shared in the interviews, especially revolving around personal information and political beliefs, was not included in the analysis in order to protect the interviewees. All personal information related to the interviewees and their families will not be disclosed. Sensitive parts of the conversations that might jeopardize the identity of the interviewees and their relatives have not been transcribed and are not considered as part of this research.

## Relation to The State of The Art

This thesis and the findings from the research touch upon many of the topics that were introduced in *chapter 2*, the State of the Art. There, the presented studies aimed not only to introduce the state of the current research from the scientific field that could assist in the process of answering the research questions but also to better contextualize the research case. Surveying at the research revolving around digital identities was crucial for this thesis as it revealed the multilayered meaning of identity and the various perspectives this concept could be examined from. Some of these differentiating ways to look at and construct an identity were also apparent in interviewee stories, including the three distinctions of identity which reveal the contrast of how one is seen by others, the attributed aspects of their personality, and the desired digital identity they aim to create. The publications on surveillance, social media, and digital identity presented in the State of the Art uncover the correlation between these three entities and helped me to better understand the ways they relate to each other in the experiences shared by the research participants.

It was an interesting finding that many of the interviewees shared how they do a 'background check' on the people they meet in order to gain a better perspective of who they are and if they are somehow involved with the Chinese authorities. This could be associated with the concept of peer-to-peer surveillance introduced in the second chapter of the thesis. Another key discovery of this research concerns the concept of reputation. The importance of reputation appears to be central in the construction of digital identity in China. This reaffirms

the conclusions of prior studies, which were presented as part of the research introduced in section *2.5* in relation to research about the social media behaviors of students in Canada.

One topic, in particular, received significant attention in the state of the art: the social credit system. The reason for that is not only because I wanted to offer a better understanding of the newly implemented system but also because I expected to discuss the topic in much more detail with the research participants. To my surprise, this emerged as one of the least covered topics in the interviews, namely because many of the interviewees did not want to talk about it directly or had no significant knowledge on the matter. Nevertheless, the information regarding established traditions in Chinese surveillance practices that were presented in the State of the Art indirectly contributed to my ability to find connections between monitoring and Chinese migrants' construction of (digital) identity by building a web of basic background knowledge regarding the cultural norms and expectations of the Chinese society. During the interviews, many of the participants drew connections between their upbringing and their online behaviors, and these cultural specifics entrenched themselves as a key finding in my research regarding the construction of digital identities.

The findings of this research strongly relate to some of the work and research presented in the State of the Art. For example, this research confirms the major role that social media plays in the lives of Chinese people, including those that live abroad. The research results reveal that Chinese migrants living in Austria use social media not only for entertainment but also to participate in national politics from outside the country, similar to the study of the Eritrean diaspora presented earlier in the thesis.

Another corroborating finding also briefly touched upon in the State of the Art is the propaganda and lack of independence in the media. Section *2.2* discusses the history of surveillance in China, especially how, in the past, Chinese radio, newspapers, and television programs shared and promoted messages almost exclusively in support of the Chinese Communist Party, with little room for independent comments or opinions. This was not part of the research I initially planned to focus on, however, the document analysis that was conducted as part of the exploratory phase confirms these claims.

## Co-producing (Digital) Identities

In the contemporary world the discussion of whether technology shapes society or vice versa has become the modern-day dilemma of the chicken and the egg: it is impossible to track down which has a bigger impact on the other. Therefore, in this thesis, I argue that we could look at technology and society as co-producing entities rather than such that emerge or originate from each other.

The concept of digital identity highlights the connections between state power and citizenship and explores how the technological infrastructure could be used to control and impact the sense of identity. The findings of the research confirm that there is an enormous correlation between the (lack of) democracy in a country, surveillance and data protection practices, and the way users and citizens choose to construct and present their digital identities.

Jasanoff (2004) highlights the four most common instruments of co-production: identities, institutions, discourses, and representation. The research presented in this thesis introduces connections between almost all of these entities. Digital identity can be seen as an entity that reflects upon multiple overlapping aspects presented in the research, such as mobile applications, surveillance practices, governmental control, and cultural norms. These discourses are in constant relation with each other, intertwining, underwriting, and co-producing each other. In the next short passages, I provide a breakdown of the co-producing entities in the case of digital identity construction from the perspective of Chinese migrants living in Austria.

The *identities* as an entity are reflected on through the concept of digital identities and their online *representation* as well as through the cultural specifics that impact one's identity. As stated multiple times in this thesis, the concept of identity is a complex mix of different factors. This research reveals that the digital identity of the participants presented in online social media is inseparable from their 'real' personality. More or less, the digital identity serves as a tool for self-expression and self-representation. It also has the function to connect personal and national identities with higher authorities. Within the framework of this thesis, this function can be seen as a "layer of (in)security" between people and authoritative institutions.

The *institutions* in this research case are represented by the Chinese government and authorities. During the research, these institutions, particularly the Chinese Communist Party, were often referred to by the interviewees with the neutral pronouns "they" and "them" as it was self-explanatory who they were indicating. This signifies the major importance authoritative institutions and governments play in the role of citizens. The national institutions impact the society through their decisions, enforced cultural norms, systems, and technologies. The people, on the other hand, impact the institutions on their own by (not) demanding and (not) tolerating particular norms and decisions. The position of the interviewees regarding public demonstrations and demanding more democratic governance in China is a great example of how institutions and identities depend on each other.

The laws, incorporated systems, and technologies adopted by the people in a country affect the beliefs and identities of people on a border level. Surveillance practices and the

Social Credit System, for instance, take the role of a controversial *discourse* that serves as a catalyzer between institutions and identity. The competition and digital battle between the East and the West was one of the key findings of the research and is another interesting discourse to look at, which plays a major role in the construction of digital identity among Chinese migrants living in Austria. I argue that these controversial discourses co-produce each other with digital identities mainly through the knowledge and involvement of the citizens in such debates. The interviewees shared that their perspective on the political regime in China and the relations between China and the USA changed when they moved abroad and increasingly engaged with information from non-Chinese sources. This made them more conscious about their personal online information but it also gave them an opportunity to learn more about the nature of government surveillance and to criticize particular practices.

A last entity not originally included in the definition of co-production is *technology*. It could be looked at in the sense of an independent institution or a discourse but within the framework of the research, I believe that technologies deserve to be presented separately. Technologies could be all tools, gadgets, and services that connect institutions and discourses with people and their identities. Some examples of technology as an entity relevant to this research include mobile phones, media, online communication platforms, the internet, and tracking algorithms. Various technological inventions and innovations impact the way people live their lives and indirectly shape the way they think and behave. At the same time, users also play a major role in constructing contemporary and future technologies as they are usually created to fulfill a particular social need. The internet, mobile phones, social media, and even surveillance mechanisms are all technological solutions to social problems. Though technology can slow down or speed up particular processes in society, at the end of the day, it is the people who have the power to choose how and whether they will use these technologies.

Digital identity, both individual and national, is the result of how we perceive and experience governmental surveillance through (social) media channels and information technologies. Of course, monitoring and technology are far from the only variables that play a role in shaping digital identities. Many other factors contribute to the construction of 'self' among which are also family, cultural and moral values, education, peers, and environment. However, these are also in a constant correlation with the tools, technologies, knowledge, and entertainment channels we build as a society. To co-produce better societies in the future, with or without the help of technology, we should be more aware of the tools and worlds we build and the impact they have on our surroundings. Otherwise, we might well end up in the devil's circle of "surveillance capitalism," that Shoshana Zuboff so fiercely criticizes.

*"Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data."* (Zuboff, 2019, p. 8)

# Conclusion

The topic of digital identity is relevant to the field of Science and Technology Studies as it emphasizes the relation between technoscience and socio-political processes. The Social Credit System and related surveillance practices in China is a very controversial project with the potential to cause an enormous impact on the ways we experience society, politics, and digital innovations. Furthermore, our society has already made the first step towards digitizing our tools, our world, and our identity, and it is crucial to examine the development of these practices.

This research had several limitations and could not provide a clear answer to the research question. Even so, it certainly lays out some of the key elements when it comes to the construction of digital identity not only among Chinese citizens living abroad but overall. These findings can be used in future research and might be of help when looking for correlations between social media usage, digital identity, surveillance, and cultural specifics.

Despite the gaps in the research process, conducting this study was an eye-opening experience and a turning point in how I look at research and the ethical considerations that come with it. The fact that I was asked if I am a spy partly passed on the feeling to me that most of the interviews talked about: to always look behind your shoulder and doubt the intentions of everyone you meet. The conversations I have had with the interviewees and the stories they told me were a brutal reality check that reveals how fragile we are as humans and as a society. I quickly understood why so few people agreed on openly engaging in a conversation. Any topic becomes political when it involves China and it is impossible to avoid the sensitive discussions surrounding the Communist Party and the local authorities. Everything that one might share can be twisted and considered an offense towards the regime. One cannot escape the Chinese citizenship that forever labels you a variable to be constantly under the control of the party.

I am forever thankful to all the people who participated in this research, who trusted me with their story and agreed to share it with the world. I deeply respect and appreciate the enormous effort and strength it took to overcome the restrictions, fear, and discomfort to speak openly about the current issues surrounding digital identity, social media monitoring, and mass surveillance.

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## List of Abbreviations

AI …………. Artificial Intelligence

ANFSG ….. ANT Financial Services

API ……….. Application Programming Interfaces

EEA ………. European Economic Area

eIDV ……… Electronic Identity and Digital Verification

EU ………... European Union

GDPR ……. General Data Protection Regulation

ICTs ………. Information and Communication Technologies

IDM ……….. Identity Management

IoT ………… Internet of things

ML ………… Machine Learning

NSA ………. National Security Agency

R&D ………. Research and Development

RI / VIR ……Reference Index (for High-Risk Youth) / Verwijsindex Risicojongeren (Dutch)

SCHUFA …. General Credit Protection Agency / Schutzgemeinschaft für allgemeine

Kreditsicherung (German)

SCS ………. Social Credit System

STS ………. Science and Technology Studies

UK ………… United Kingdom

US ………… United States

VPNs ……… Virtual Private Networks

## List of Tables

# Appendix

## Articles used for Document Analysis

完善信用体系是提升社会整体文明的重要手段 [Improving the credit system is an important means to improve the overall civilization of society]. (2020, May 21). 头条 [*TaoTiao*]. https://www.toutiao.com/a6829126795556553229/

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## Facebook groups used for Participant Recruiting

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Chinese Culture & Character [ca. 2020-21]. In Facebook [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/alicechinese/

Chinese in Vienna / Austria 奥地利华人[ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/1592544097632274/

Erasmus Plus Projects [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/211479949023086/permalink/1926487127522351/

FOREIGN IN VIENNA 2 [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/foreign.in.vienna2/permalink/4011520292218798/

Japanologie Wien [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/95042972905/permalink/10159087287032906/

Jobs für Studenten WIEN - Praktikum Studentenjob Nebenjob Vienna [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/Studentenjobs.wien.oesterreich/

Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie Uni Wien [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/7733591063/permalink/10159453497341064/

Learn Chinese 学习中文 [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/1563933053626324/

Politikwissenschaft an der Universität Wien, POWI [ca. 2020-21]. In Facebook [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/6533436073/permalink/10158080441381_074/

Soziologie Uni Wien [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/506586519693549/

Technische Universität Wien // TU Wien [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/TechnischeUniversitaetWien/

Uni Wien Studentinnen und Studenten Vol. 2 [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/208557737124816/about

Vienna International Students [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/599505833501360/about

WG-Zimmer und Wohnungen in Wien gesucht! [ca. 2020-21]. In *Facebook* [Group page]. https://www.facebook.com/groups/982918248475313/about

# Sample of Interview Questions

## I. General Questions / Basic Engagement with Social Media

1. Can you tell me a bit more about yourself, your background — work, education, interests? (How long have you been living in Austria, why did you move here?)
2. Do you consider yourself a person who is a heavy social media user?
3. How much time on average do you spend on social media daily?
4. Can you tell me a bit about the social media platforms you use? Which ones do you use the most and for what purposes?

## II. Online Behaviours

5. How are the Chinese social media channels different from the Western equivalents — Facebook, YouTube, etc.?
6. What did you find surprising about the European culture of communication at the beginning when you moved abroad?
7. Do you experience any differences you experience when communicating with friends and family in Austria and China? Which ones?

## III. Digital Identity Management

8. Do you use your real name and authentic personal information on social media channels and other communication platforms?
9. Do you use "fake" or a second account to comment, participate in groups, chats, forums, etc? Explain why.
10. What are you careful with or conscious about when using social media or surfing the internet? Are there particular topics or behaviors you avoid?
11. Are you more conscious about your online activity, social media posts, search history, in China in comparison to Austria?
12. When it comes to personal expression and expressing your opinion online, where do you feel more free and safe to do so — in China or Austria? Explain why.
13. What methods or tools do you use to keep your (digital) privacy safe in China and Austria?

**IV. Understanding of Surveillance Practices in China & The Social Credit System**

14. What do you know about the Social Credit System, is it a big topic in China?
15. How do you feel about such a mass-monitoring system?
16. Do you experience online monitoring and surveillance differently in China and in Austria? How?
17. How do you think governmental surveillance changes the ways you communicate and use social media?
18. How do you adapt to online services, apps, and platforms that are (considerably) monitored by the Chinese government?
19. Do you think that some of the Chinese practices should be incorporated in Europe or vice versa?

**V. Closing Questions**

20. Are you planning on moving back to China?
21. How would your social media behavior change in this case?
22. Is there anything we did not cover that you would like to add or find it important to mention?

## Original Interview Quotations

Q1    *Facebook nutze ich am meistens für Nachrichten für Uni.* (Int. 6, P. 1, R. 23-25)

Q2    *Also, erstens, werde ich sagen, dass die chinesischen Apps wie WeChat, so viele Möglichkeiten bieten, dass es kann unvorstellbar sein für jemand, der das niemals benutzt hat.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 56-57)

Q3    *Ich nutze mehr Medien aus der USA, da ganz inhaltlich ist alles dort mehr demokratisch im Vergleich zu China, wo es nur eine Partei gibt, und alle hören zu und die Bevölkerung kann manipuliert sein.* (Int. 6, P. 1, R. 18-20)

Q4    *Also, für mich das ist nicht eine totale Freiheit hier in Österreich, da ich eigentlich in China aufgewachsen bin. Egal wo ich lebe, egal was ich mache, meine Denkweise bleibt so, dass ich nichts Privates oder sensibles öffentlich teilen muss.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 56-58)

Q5    *In China ich kann nicht alles sagen, ich kann nicht alles diskutieren, es gibt so viele Tabus. WeChat als Software ist kontrolliert und supervised und "alles sagen" ist einfach nicht gut.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 34-36)

Q6    *In China kann man in solchen Plattformen wie Facebook und Instagram nicht komplette Freiheit haben. Man muss immer beachten, besonders bestimmte Stichwörter, die sind auch irgendwie tabu.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 33-36)

Q7    *Ich habe Koleg\*innen, die mir manchmal per WhatsApp schreiben „Eh, der Kanzler ist so blöd" und das kann in China niemals passieren. Sowas kann man nicht sagen.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 41-42)

Q8    *Manchmal, wenn wir per WeChat reden, und ich sage etwas, dass nicht ganz okay ist für die chinesische Seite, mein Vater sagt: „Beachte dich und stopp, bitte". Und sie können mir auch nicht alles erzählen, natürlich, aus dem gleichen Grund. Wenn ich in China bin und wir ganz ganz privat reden alleine zu Hause, wie jetzt, dann kann jeder seine Meinung wirklich mitteilen und etwas Negatives besprechen. Aber online nicht.* (Int. 6, P. 2, R. 45-49)

Q9    *Ich, persönlich, sage gar nichts auf WeChat, ich bin ganz schweig. Und ein Grund ist, dass ich will nicht eine negative Aufmerksamkeit auf mich oder irgendwie die falsche Leute zu treffen.* (Int. 6, P. 4, R. 103-105)

Q10   *Viele Leute haben mich über die Soziale Kreditsystem gefragt und ich habe keine Ahnung, worum es geht. Ich glaube es ist für bestimmte staatliche Unternehmen oder Beamte in China. Aber was sind die Folge für die normale Bürger, weiß ich nicht.* (Int. 6, P. 6, R. 165-167)

Q11   *Man kann nicht unbedingt sagen, dass diese Kreditpunkte schlecht oder gut sind. Aber wenn so eine SCS wirklich existiert, dann beschränkt das die Freiheit der Menschen. Es kann sein, dass diese Soziale Punkte seit langem existieren und ich wusste einfach nicht darüber. Vielleicht gibt es so ein System für diese, die gegen die Partei reden.* (Int. 6, P. 6-7, R. 169-172)

Q12   *Also, die chinesischen Leute sind irgendwie traditionell und geschlossen im Vergleich zu Österreich und der USA. Es gibt viele Tabu Themen wie Sex, Politik, Beziehungen. So ist unsere Denkweise, wir können nichts Negatives sagen.* (Int. 6, P. 7, R. 178-180)

Q13   *Wir sind stärker zusammen, aber die chinesischen Leute können nicht wirklich zusammenhalten. Jeder hat seine eigene Meinung, obwohl alle schweig bleiben. Wir brauchen eine Supermacht das zu kontrollieren, sonst gibt es kein China mehr.* (Int. 6, P .7, R. 185-189)

Q14   *Am Anfang konnte ich diese ganze Freiheit (in Österreich) nicht wirklich verstehen. Also der Kanzler ist der Kanzler, er ist eine Supermacht, wieso schimpfen wir ihn?* (Int. 6, P. 5, R. 116-118)

Q15   *Bürgerliche Demonstrationen gibt es in China nicht, die sind verboten.* (Int. 6, P. 7, R. 173)

Q16   *Wenn in China solche Freiheit gab, dass die Leute alles sagen können und gegen die Regierung Demonstrationen machen, China wird unbedingt zerrissen. Tibet, Hongkong, Südchina alles wird separat.* (Int. 6, P. 7, R. 185-187)

Q17   *China und USA sind seit langem Gegner. Und sie versuchen die Reputation voneinander zu zerstören. Und das ist nicht gut für die Bevölkerung, die Leute wissen nicht was richtig ist und was falsch.* (Int. 6, P. 5, R. 136-138)

Q18   *Auf Soziale Medien wie Instagram nutze ich niemals mein echter Name.* (Int. 6, P. 3, R. 80-81)

Q19   *Zum Beispiel, wenn ich hier in Österreich chinesische Leute treffe, ich bin immer ganz ganz aufmerksam, da ich nicht weiß wer ist die andere. Vielleicht ist er oder sie eine Beamte für die Chinesische Partei. Deswegen muss ich immer aufmerksam sein.* (Int. 6, P. 4, R. 107-109)

Q20   *Mit VPN kannst du Webseiten besuchen, die normalerweise in China verboten sind, also inklusiv Facebook und sowas. Die chinesische Regierung weißt, dass Facebook Freiheit bedeutet und deswegen gibt es in China ein Ban (lacht). Ich brauche VPN, um meine Kontakte in Österreich zu behalten.* (Int. 6, P. 3, R. 64-67)

# Visuals used for Recruiting Research Participants

**Digital Visual #1**

## INTERVIEWEES WANTED!

## DIGITAL INFLUENCE BEYOND REGIONAL BORDERS

**China** is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world, and **social media** and other online media are very important for its **contemporary culture**.

For my Master´s Thesis at the Department of **Science and Technology Studies** at the **University of Vienna**, I am looking to **interview** / have a casual conversation with **native Chinese citizens** currently living in Vienna as I aim to learn more about the trending digital innovations and understand better the **social media behaviors** and **online practices** among Chinese citizens living abroad.

**THE PARTICIPANTS:**

- must identify as **native Chinese citizens**,
- must **live in Austria** (preferably consider moving back to China at any time in the future),
- are familiar with and **use social media channels and communication platforms that are popular in China**.
- Age, gender, education are **not relevant** to the research.

**THE INTERVIEWS:**

- are conducted in **English**;
- will last up to **1h**;
- could take place **online** or **face-to-face**;
- are **free** and **voluntary**!
- All data collected is used **anonymously**.
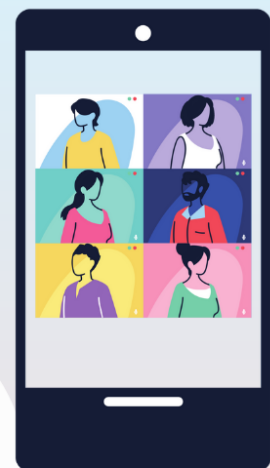
FOR MORE INFORMATION, WRITE AT **gespraechseinladung@gmail.com**

The first digital visual has been used for recruiting and scouting for research participants on social media channels such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter in the period October 16, 2020 - April 21, 2021. This visual has been shared on social media platforms with an additional message that reflects better on the goals of the research and the aims of the interviews. Each post, the style of writing, and the form of address have been carefully adapted to the particular group or community it is shared with. In the following, I would like to introduce an example of one of the descriptions complementing the visual, posted in a Facebook group for students.

*"Research Participants wanted!* 📕

*Dear all, nowadays nothing impacts our society more than social media and communication technologies. Facebook is a great example of that.* 🗔

*If you are of Chinese origin CN and you are interested in taking part in a survey dedicated to developing and changing online practices and behaviors, make sure to drop me a line at* 📧 *gespraechseinladung@gmail.com :)*

*If not, please spread the word with your network! That would be an enormous help!"*

**Digital Visual #2**



# INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT

**China** is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world.
For my Master´s Thesis, I am looking to **interview native Chinese citizens** currently living in abroad. I aim to learn more about the trending digital innovations and understand better the **social media behaviors** and **online practices** among Chinese citizens living abroad.

### THE PARTICIPANTS:

- shall identify as **Chinese**
- are familiar with and **use social media** channels and communication platforms that are **popular in China**.
- Age, gender, education are **not relevant** to the research.

### THE INTERVIEWS:

- are conducted in **English**;
- will last up to **1h**;
- could take place **online** or **face-to-face**;
- are **free** and **voluntary**!
- All data collected is used **anonymously**.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, WRITE AT  **gespraechseinladung@gmail.com**

This second digital visual has been used for recruiting and scouting for research participants on social media channels such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter in the period May 10, 2021 - June 10, 2021. This visual has been shared on social media platforms with an additional message that reflects better on the goals of the research and the aims of the interviews. Each post, the style of writing, and the form of address have been carefully adapted to the particular group or community it is shared with. In the following lines, I would like to introduce an example of one of the descriptions complementing the visual, posted in a Facebook group where one of the interviewees was recruited.

*"Dear all,*

*As part of my MA thesis at the University of Vienna, I am looking for native Chinese citizens living in Austria that would be interested in having a chit-chat with me. 👫 The topic of my research revolves around digital connectives and how we construct our digital identity through social media. 🗂️*

*As China is the leading trendsetter in terms of social media, I was curious to explore further the topic. 🚀*

*📨 If you would like to have a conversation with me, DM me or drop me a line at gespraechseinladung@gmail.com.*

*I would be extremely thankful to anyone who agrees to a short interview. 🙏*

*PS. If the admins find this post inappropriate, feel free to delete it. :)"*

**Printed Visual**

The printed visual has been used through the entire recruiting period from October 2020 until June 2021. Colorful copies of the tear-off flyer were positioned at the information boards in three co-working spaces in Vienna, namely Talent Garden in the 9th district, WeXelerate in the 2nd district, and Impact Hub in the 7th district in October 2020 and in May 2021. Two Asian shops in Vienna were also approached and handed a copy of the tear-off flyer: Nakwon in the 7th district and Yip Hint Import-Export in the 16th district.