Understanding the Digital Infrastructure of Photo-sharing in China: Notes on Tuchong as an Example

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A photo of my working space, showing my laptop, notebook, IC card for working with images

On 3rd July 2019, I caught up with UCL Anthropology's [ASSA](#) (Anthropology of Smartphones and Smart Aging) team at a local pub behind Euston Station. Most of the researchers just returned from fieldwork and are starting data-sorting and writing. They shared some great stories in the field on how smartphones are playing different socio-cultural roles across various cultures and societies. When I introduced my work of amateur photography on the Chinese Internet to them and mentioned that many of my informants also practice photography on IOS and Android smartphones, they immediately thought of people taking photos with smartphones and sharing them with social media platforms.

Daniel Miller was curious about on which specific photo-sharing website I had conducted my fieldwork, so I opened the Tuchong app on my iPhone and showed them some images prompted automatically on the app's main page. I explained that Tuchong was one of the leading photography-dedicated social media platforms in China, with over six million registered users. He scrolled down the screen and looked at the images. They happened to be some food, still-life and landscape pictures sharing similar thematic and visual elements with those which one can easily find on Instagram. "It looks like Chinese Instagram. But compared with Instagram, it doesn't seem to have as many users," he said.

A view from one of the working places of the company, looking out at Beijing's Zhichun (which means "knowing the Spring") Road

Indeed, as a social media platform with a focus on photography, Tuchong, where I spent four months of my fieldwork from February to June 2017 working as a community operation intern, is comparable with Instagram in many respects. As written in my PhD thesis, essentially, they are both platforms for "image-led socialization" (Yang 2019: 149) in the cyberspace, exploiting photography's social functions and enterprises by offering photo hobbyists a place for image distribution, circulation, and consumption. Moreover, both Tuchong and Instagram underwent a similar development trajectory – from an independent Internet social media product with a strong interest in pictures to acquisition by tech giants in their countries, respectively ByteDance in China and Facebook in the United States. The stories behind the merge and acquisition surely vary dramatically. However, the fate of becoming a part of large companies with infinite ambitions and capitals seems to be inspiring in terms of defining the rules and outlook of the Internet industry across the globe.

As the digital infrastructure for Chinese photo lovers to situate themselves and their images, however, Tuchong is unique in its own way. For those carefully processed photographs of food, still-life and landscape that caught Professor Miller, their high sharpness, clarity, harmonious composition, proper lighting (either manually manipulated or gifted by nature) and vivid (sometimes neutral) colour-matching resonate to a specific Instagram aesthetic, which media scholar Lev Manovich has called "designed photo aesthetic" to distinguish from its casual and professional counterparts (Manovich 2017: 68). It is true that such an aesthetic has strongly influenced Tuchong's visual trend for some reasons[1], even becoming a dominant standard for judging the quality of images and the author's skills in image-making. The pursuit of such aesthetic, on the other side, requires one to investigate time and money to learn photography and retouching skills, locating photography as a "serious leisure" (Stebbins 1992) with a threshold for apparatus and

taste of judgement. It further explains why Tuchong does not possess as many users as Instagram -- a large proportion of its users depend on its affordance for instantaneous uploads of casual snapshots as life records. On the contrary, Tuchong encourages the users to achieve aesthetically satisfactory works through retouching and creative techniques offered by image-processing software, such as Photoshop and Lightroom. Although they also have smartphone app versions, some sophisticated functions are only available on their desktop versions. That is why Tuchong has both the desktop interface and app, while Instagram is predominantly built on IOS and Android frameworks only.

In fact, Tuchong is not even the largest photo-sharing platform in China by user numbers. In spite of this, it is widely considered by Chinese photography amateurs as one of the most influential photo-sharing services on the Chinese Internet. On this platform, uploading, liking and commenting photographic works are only parts of the "culture of connectivity", to use José van Dijck's words (2010: 402). For instance, photo groups based on how you understand and practice photography (landscape, portrait or documentary) and where you live and study (countries, cities and universities) provide the users with easier access to socialise with someone who shares similar ideas and backgrounds. On official accounts like Tuchong's Livingroom (tuchong keting ????) and Tuchong's Secretary (tuchong xiaomishu ?????), you can also find a complete volume of text posts sent by previous editors and Tuchong's founder, in which they kept on reporting interface change (gaiban ??) updates and gathering user experience advice via direct communications with Tuchong's users. Besides, after the acquisition, Tuchong has turned its focus to excavating the commercial value of images produced by its users. The new stock image platform Tuchong Creative (tuchong chuangyi ????) and a growing number of photo competitions, awards, and events sponsored by travelling agencies, smartphone and camera manufacturers, and governmental organisations have further motivated the community to become socially active. Lastly, it is a photography academy where many experienced photographers would share their photographic skills and retouching processes as well. These contents, often incorporating text, figures and video tutorials, have received high popularity among ordinary users.

Unlike Instagram, where people see other's life through photographs, Tuchong wants people to see photography and photographs as life itself. In brief, it centralises photography in one's everyday practice. While my own experience of using Instagram suggests that the recommended feeds on one's Instagram account are constructed on algorithms that learn to predict personal preferences based on the visiting history, in Tuchong, my former colleagues and I were still busily grading individual posts to decide which content we should distribute to a wider audience, after the machine's automatic monitoring on image contents for the first round. In a sense, such endeavour to guarantee the "good taste" of the community demonstrates a "culture of hybridity" (of both human and computational works) behind the "culture of connectivity". The curatorial and editorial practices, as I understand, manifests the "image rules" of the platform, which I define as

the photographic image that rules the platform, even the sociality and technicity must comply with its centrality. On the other hand, it refers to rules and regulations related to the production, circulation and consumption of photographic images that have been continuously evolving in parallel to Tuchong's strategic turns. (Yang 2019: 149)

Beyond "image rules", however, lie "money rules", too. As a subordinating part of one of China's most money-making tech firms, the staff of Tuchong has a strong awareness to explore ways of monetisation for the platform, so that to leverage its value for the mother company. For the Internet industry which considers data traffic as the "meta-capital", user-increase is a core parameter to measure the ability of monetisation of a product. Therefore, the community operators of Tuchong are now considering themselves more like service providers for their users, feeling imperative to cater to their preferences for photographic works as much as possible. A key evidence for such shift is that before the acquisition in 2014, the confrontation between "serious photography" (photography as a pursuit of art) and "salon photography" (photography as a way of entertainment) has stimulated the community to maintain a photographic diversity in terms of genres, while after the acquisition, many "serious photographers" have left Tuchong and the practices of the "salon style", which stresses on the "visual pleasure" conveyed by the photograph (e.g. images of natural splendour and good-looking female figures), have become increasingly ubiquitous on the platform's main and recommendation pages.

To end the discussion, I would conclude that a new digital-visual economy based on social media and the data traffic it creates is being formed in China, shaping the Chinese people's popular aesthetics and conceiving the contemporary social relations between people and their surrounding images. By making comparisons with Instagram and sharing what I have learnt from my participant-observations at Tuchong, I hope this short post has also given the reader an overall impression of the digital infrastructure of photo-sharing on the Chinese Internet.

References

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[1] Instagram is banned by the Great Firewall in China, along with other international social media platforms for economic and political reasons. Still, an "Ins style" (Ins?) has grown increasingly fashionable on Chinese social media not only Tuchong but also other more general platforms like Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter). Before that, however, I doubt whether the "Ins style", or the "design photo aesthetic" is something originated from Instagram, or it is something that has more complex origins in the modernist and postmodernist genealogy of "technoaesthetics" (see Buck-Morss 1992) and the globalised design industry (see Chayka 2016).