

insight



A Social Media Age

Reaching International Students Where They Are

Social Media and Ministry
— Penny Vinden

你扫还是我扫? "You Scan or I Scan?"
— Peter Booth

Staying Connected After Return
— Nicole Liu and Bao Ngoc Ngo

Contents

Editorial — <i>Jack Bentley</i>	Page 2
Social Media and Ministry — <i>Penny Vinden</i>	Page 3
Reaching Across the Social Media Divide — <i>Sarah Dawkins</i>	Page 9
你扫还是我扫? "You scan or I scan?" — <i>Peter Booth</i>	Page 11
Staying Connected After Return — <i>Nicole Liu and Bao Ngoc Ngo</i>	Page 15
The <i>Insight</i> Team	Page 18

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A Word From the Editor



Jack Bentley

Jack has been the Communications and Media Coordinator for Friends International for the last seven years. He is involved in ministry to international students in South Wales.

The great rise of social media, and its astonishing growth over the last 20 years, has changed the very landscape of human interaction, as well as most of our daily tasks. From the ways in which we consume news, shop and review purchases, find out about potential clients, complain to large companies, to how we choose a restaurant, raise money for good causes, sell household items... so much is now shaped by social media.

In addition, the changes are ongoing: not only do we have a 24/7 stream of information and cat videos, but the technology is ever-evolving, expanding, and absorbing more and more aspects of everyday life.

This is far from just a Western phenomenon. We may have heard of Facebook and Twitter in the UK, but for most urban Chinese, using WeChat or QQ is second nature. WeChat has almost 1 billion active users, and QQ almost 800 million. Compare that to just 330 million users on Twitter!¹

The consequences and commentary around social media are neither niche, nor solely for tech lovers. In the last 12 months, all the national news outlets have featured stories regarding social media. It's important, it's now, and it's

here to stay. According to The Telegraph, *"The average person has five social media accounts and spends around 1 hour and 40 minutes browsing these networks every day."*² This is probably even more true of international students.

As Christians, online networks should be a natural place to consider being a 'presence' for Christ, albeit a 'virtual' one. The topic therefore requires serious consideration by those engaged in ministry to international students.

This edition of *Insight* digs into this digital world. Penny Vinden gives a balanced introduction, especially useful for those unfamiliar with social media. Sarah Dawkins provides us with some recommendations of books and authors who can help us understand and use social media in healthy ways. Peter Booth shares from the Mainland Chinese perspective – having himself lived there for several years. Finally, two former international students share practical ways in which social media has helped their spiritual growth since returning home.

If you are a reluctant or nervous social media user, it might all seem a bit daunting, but we hope you will be encouraged to take that first step.

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/11610959/Is-your-daily-social-media-usage-higher-than-average.html>





Social Media and Ministry



Penny Vinden

Penny is a former member of the IFES Global Communications team, and now is the content consultant for their new e-learning programme. She has also taught cross-cultural psychology at Clarke University in Massachusetts.

You only need to Google 'social media and relationships' to find all sort of posts about the terrible damage social media is doing to us:

Facebook is making us lonely.

Social media is wrecking marriages and other relationships by making us suspicious and jealous. It shows us other 'options': people we think are better looking or who are having more fun or whose lives look more attractive in all sorts of ways.

Social media makes us focus on appearances. Therefore, we obsess about having the perfect selfie, being thin or beautiful or muscular and so on.

It makes us present a picture of ourselves which is untrue. We want to be seen as happy people who are doing fun and exciting things while wearing the most fashionable clothes.

But is that the only side of the picture? And does it need to be this way? Should we avoid social media entirely in order to side-step these sorts of problems? Can any good come from social media?

In this article, I'll look at how

international students are using social media when they study abroad. We'll also consider different ways Christians are using social media. We know many people already use social media to advertise events or explain something about their ministry. I won't be focusing on that kind of 'institutional' presence, but instead on our *personal* presence on social media.

I hope we'll see how the constantly changing landscape of social media can be a place where the unchanging gospel can be proclaimed. It may not be in the ways we expect or even ways with which we are comfortable at first. But social media is part of our culture – and therefore part of the culture in which international students immerse themselves. So we can't avoid it.

International Students and Social Media

So, what are international students doing on social media? How are they involved? There aren't a great number of studies that have been conducted, but let's consider a few.

A study published in 2015¹ at a university in Australia looked at over 6,700 international students, about equal numbers of males and females. Although students in the study came from all over the world, just over half

1. Information-seeking behaviour of international students. (2015). Joint study in Australia. http://aiec.idp.com/uploads/pdf/PDFs%20AIEC%202015/1083_Catherine_Gomes.pdf

were from East and Southeast Asia. All were digital natives, accessing social media constantly.

The most popular social media site was Facebook, with 92% of students regularly using it. Second was YouTube at 70%. The most popular activity was lurking. 'Lurking' is a slang term which isn't as bad as it sounds! It refers to being on social media without participating. This doesn't mean the person is not interested. On the contrary, they are reading, looking at posts, scrolling through what others post... but they are not commenting or posting their own messages.

Some research indicates that as many as 90% of all social media users are lurkers. This has important implications for all of us: more people may be reading what we post than we realise!

About a third of the students in this study used social media primarily to keep in touch with friends from their home country. Another third used it to keep in contact with a mix of international and national friends.

Similar findings come from research published in 2016² in the USA. In this study of 2,145 students, there was control for age, gender and number of years in university. The main reason for international students to use social media was found to be keeping in touch with friends, both those from their home country studying in the USA but also new American friends and other students from similar cultures. As with the Australian study, Facebook was the most widely used form of social media.

As they expected, the researchers found a positive association between social media use and social adjustment to their new life as an international student in the USA. Social adjustment in their study included things like adapting to the lifestyle, making new friends in the USA, being involved in university social activities, and overall feelings of attachment to the university.

However, the study did not find any relationship between social media use and perceived support in difficult circumstances. In focus groups, students explained that privacy was very important to them and that sharing negative emotions or stressful

situations on social media was something they were unlikely to do for fear of alarming those close to them back home.

This desire to maintain privacy was also found in a study by two German scholars in 2016³. They surveyed 1,800 international students across five countries: USA, UK, Germany, Netherlands, and China and established that participants in all countries were very aware of the risks that could arise from privacy-related behaviour, such as having an open profile or uploading pictures.

While there are some differences among international students from diverse countries and regions around the world, what seems to be emerging is that there are some important commonalities. Social media can be good. It can help students to adjust to university life and a new culture. It can help maintain old friendships and also promote new friendships. However, it is not a cure for loneliness or stress or homesickness. These kinds of negative emotions are more often than not kept out of social media.

In short, what seems to be happening is that a globalised online culture is forming. How then should we respond to this culture? How does it affect our interactions with students? What kind of a presence should we have on social media?

Christians and Social Media

As a Christian, I want to reflect Christ in all that I think, say and do. I want people to look at me and see Jesus. Is this possible on social media?

As I have contemplated this question, I've been helped by the work of Stephen Cottrell, an Anglican bishop who has written a number of the evangelism and discipleship resources for the Church of England. While I don't agree with everything he says, I think he has noted a helpful trend in evangelism. In his blog post from 1998⁴, he ponders what has been the most common model of evangelism, based on Saul's experience on the way to Damascus. He summarises the Damascus Road approach as focusing on a **dramatic moment**: 'People need to be brought to a moment of decision and response.'

2. Seo, H, Harn, R-W, Ebrahim, H and Aldana, J. (2016). International students' social media use and social adjustment. First Monday, peer-reviewed online journal. <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6880/5646>

3. Trepte, S and Masur, P K. (2016). Cultural Differences in Social Media Use, Privacy, and Self-Disclosure. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303749254_Cultural_Differences_in_Social_Media_Use_Privacy_and_Self-Disclosure

4. Cottrell, S. (1998). Damascus or Emmaus? In Ministry Today. <https://www.ministrytoday.org.uk/magazine/issues/13/63/>



A more appropriate model for today, he believes, is the *journey*, which he bases on the risen Jesus meeting the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. A lot is about to happen in Jerusalem, but these two are heading in the wrong direction. They are confused and don't yet understand who Jesus really is. Jesus meets them where they are: he goes along with them, lets their questions set the agenda, explores Scripture with them, and waits for their invitation to go home with them.

Of course these two models aren't mutually exclusive. There is overlap. As Cottrell points out, the Damascus Road experience contains elements of the journey, while the Emmaus Road has some dramatic moments. Who knows how being present at the stoning of Stephen might have influenced Saul? And even after his dramatic vision, Saul still needs the ministry of Ananias and the other disciples in Damascus. The vision on the road is part of a journey. Likewise, when Jesus meets the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, there are several dramatic moments: when Jesus scolds them for not understanding, for example, and when they suddenly see Jesus for who he really is.

How does this relate to our social media presence? If we see our goal on social media as bringing international students to a dramatic conversion experience, then how we present ourselves will be quite different from if we see ourselves as meeting them on a journey.

Bryony Taylor, a rector in Derby with a strong interest in social media and popular culture, has written a booklet on how Christians share their faith on social media. In 2013 she surveyed 300 Christians⁵ and found that people fell roughly into categories that could well be described in the terms Cottrell used to portray evangelism.

The Damascus Road group share their faith in a clear, explicit and direct way. They post specifically Christian or overtly evangelistic content.

For the Emmaus group, however, sharing their faith online is more complex. It is part of their personal journey and they share in a way that is integrated with everything done online, with no specific aim to communicate Christian things.

Taylor also found a third group. She named them the Athens group, because, like Paul in Acts 17, they want to respond to the culture around them. This was a much smaller group who conveyed

their faith through engagement with issues such as social justice, current affairs, and politics.

I resonate with Taylor's findings, as I recognise that I have friends on Facebook who fall into each of these three categories. The Damascus 'explicit' sharers post pictures with Bible verses or Christian quotes. They ask for prayer, share mini-sermons on a variety of topics and cite short passages from Christian books. When they do comment on politics or current affairs, it is usually to indicate how they deem a person or a situation to be contrary to Scripture.

My Emmaus 'lifestyle' Facebook friends share about all of their life. God is sometimes mentioned, sometimes not. They don't hide the fact that they are Christians, but don't feel compelled to mention it either. I feel as if I know them better than my Damascus friends, including the things that interest them such as fishing or gardening or photography.

I don't know many people from the Athens 'issues-focused' group. However, I appreciate that they keep me aware of what is happening in the world, whether it be a cholera outbreak in Yemen, conflict in Africa, or something closer to home.

Which way of sharing should you choose? Is a combination of approaches best? The answers to these questions lie in the answers to two other questions: Who are you? With whom are you communicating?

Your Social Media Presence

It is crucial that you express who you are on social media in an authentic way. Social media users can spot lack of authenticity from afar. Authenticity is really the only way to combat all the negative aspects of social media.

So who are you? Of course you are a Christian – but what else? Do you enjoy taking walks in the countryside? Are you keen on watching movies? Do you enjoy cooking? Love dogs? Find happiness in reading a good book? What are the issues that concern you deeply? Poverty? Politics? Education? Share those parts of you too.

How should you share? How much? First think about this: for some people, you will be the only Christian they know on social media. What do you want them to think Christians are like? Do you want them to imagine Christians are people who rant about what is wrong with the world? Do you want them to suppose that to be a Christian you must talk about

5. Taylor, B. (2016). Sharing Faith Using Social Media. Grove Books. <https://bryonytaylor.com/2016/10/19/sharing-faith-using-social-media-my-new-publication-out-now-from-grovebooks/>

spiritual things all the time, almost exclusively? Do you want them to assume that Christians obsess about certain topics?

We want people to think that being a Christian is a normal thing. Who we are, whether bookworms or ballet dancers, lawyers or labourers, is an expression of the diversity of the Godhead. As someone in Taylor's study put it, they are "trying to ensure being a Christian is seen as something normative rather than exceptional." Or in another person's words, "I'm just me, and what I say and do is a part of that."

In many ways, social media is a bit of a strange way to communicate. As there is a distance, in both time and space, from your social media presence, it requires a delicate, and somewhat paradoxical balance between revealing enough, but not too much. On the one hand, you want to be authentic, to present who you truly are. On the other hand, you are representing Jesus. So you don't necessarily want to show everything!

Actually, it's really no different from what Paul says about the believer's freedom in 1 Corinthians 10:23-24: "I have the right to do anything,' you say, but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything', but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others." In the same way, let's not simply think about what we can share, but about what might be beneficial and constructive to share. Some Christians love dogs—there's nothing wrong with that! But 25 pictures of your dog? Maybe not.

Your Social Media Audience

With whom are we communicating on social media? Probably quite a diverse audience. But let's assume here that our primary aim is to be in touch with international students. Again, they are a diverse group. And yet there are some commonalities in our interactions.

Some helpful suggestions in thinking about an audience can be found in Intervarsity's 'Five Thresholds to Faith in Christ', developed in a book by Evert and Schaupp⁶. The claim is that with all people, the path to faith starts with trust, moves on to curiosity, then to change, to seeking and finally to becoming a follower of Christ.

Certainly those bonds of trust are crucial when

establishing relationships with international students. Away from their culture and family, our audience can be wary, lonely, afraid, or wanting privacy. And yet, they may be 'lurking' on social media, reading what we say, becoming more curious about Christianity. Others may know us already from face-to-face exchanges and be more confident about social media interactions. As we'll see shortly, there are social media options for various levels of relationship.

What Social Media Won't Do

Social media won't replace those wonderful trust-building face-to-face interactions. It won't replace lengthy conversations about problems in people's lives or be a substitute for you responding to a crisis by inviting someone over for a chat.

Social media also won't replace that mysterious work of God: the yeast at work in the bread dough, the mysterious growth of the seed planted, the amazing transformation of the little mustard seed into something that sustains life. In short, it won't replace the Holy Spirit.

It won't save you time in ministry. It will take thought and effort. It will take consistent work to really 'do' social media well. You can't post something and then abandon it – you need to be ready to respond fairly quickly to people's reactions and comments.

It also won't make you someone that you are not. It won't make you suddenly interested in current affairs or some particular aspect of social justice. It won't suddenly make you into a person who loves to share your life publicly. It won't make you someone who is deeply reflective or who loves to quote Bible verses all the time. But that's a good thing – it means you can be you!

What Social Media Can Do

ALLOW PRIVACY

Remember that privacy is one of the big issues among international students: it may come from the desire for anonymity, or just an unwillingness to share publicly distressing or negative emotions or anything that might cause conflict. This isn't just international students in the UK. When I ran a seminar on blogging with students from all over Europe, their number one concern was not to

6. Evert, D and Schaupp, D. (2008). *I Once Was Lost: What Postmodern Skeptics Taught Us About Their Path to Jesus*, IVP Books. A summary of their Journey to Faith: The Five Thresholds can be found on the InterVarsity USA website. <http://evangelism.intervarsity.org/five-thresholds>



disagree online, nor to challenge anyone publicly nor in any way 'rock the boat'. They would not even get into a discussion online. They would always opt for private messaging to talk. So options like Facebook Messenger and Twitter messaging and WhatsApp offer the possibility of responding privately to something seen publicly.

BUILD TRUST

Social media allows us to build on existing relationships. It can happen anytime, anywhere. It is also a way to show that you have a consistent position on things and are open to discussion. We can demonstrate that we are thoughtful, caring people.

SHOW AVAILABILITY

Social media is also a way of providing an accessible Christian presence. We are not hiding our light under a bushel, but we are out there in the world, engaging with people where they are. We are open to informal, spur-of-the-moment dialogues. We're not just the person who runs a Bible study or chats at a café.

Some Practical Suggestions

There are so many options that it can be really confusing knowing where you should focus your attention. It might be a good idea to google some of the following and other social media options to learn more. An extremely helpful resource is Cru's digital media website⁷. There you can find pages introducing more social media options than you will ever have time to explore, as well as practical, step-by-step instructions on how to get started. They are all from a Christian perspective. Of course an important thing to do is to find out what social media your students are using!

HASHTAGS

Consider creating a hashtag, especially if you are using multiple media channels. A hashtag starts with a # and then has a single string of letters following it. It is searchable, so that if students begin using it, their posts will be seen along with yours. So it is useful in 'open' contexts. It should be short but descriptive.

Here are some examples of popular hashtags that would link your post with the posts of so many others that you would never want to use them: #friends #photooftheday #smile. More useful ones would be the acronym of your group. So a good one for the International English Club at Oxford Brookes University would be #IEC. Check first, however, to see if others are using it by searching on your favourite social media channel. Oops - #IEC is taken already – but #IECBrookes is not! Be careful to keep your

hashtag as short as possible so that people will actually use it.

SNAPCHAT

Snapchat is one of the more popular ways for students to keep in contact. It is quite versatile. You may want to set up a special ministry account and use Snapchat to send reminders for meeting, or pictures or a video clip from a previous gathering. A feature called *My Story* can tell people who you are and what you are doing. You can use Snapchat just to encourage people with an inspiring quotation or song. You can also do live video chat.

INSTAGRAM

Instagram is a bit similar to Snapchat. You can post pictures, videos, message people privately, add filters and emoji's. However, the emphasis is on pictures – and of course, we need to be careful that we don't post pictures of anyone without their permission.

WHATSAPP

Through WhatsApp you can connect by sending messages, photos and other forms of media. It is widely utilised because it is free. In some countries it takes up very little data allowance which makes it a tool of choice for many. It is private and can be used one-to-one or a group.

WhatsApp has been used for Bible study in some countries. For good discussion, keep the group small – five to eight people. The advantage of WhatsApp is that it doesn't require people to meet together. It may work especially well with international students who might be hesitant to share what they think face-to-face.

SKYPE/ZOOM/FACETIME

Face-to-face contact can still take place even when you can't physically meet. This is great for keeping in touch with students who have returned home. It is private and can be used one-to one or with a small group. You can chat for a short or long time, have a Bible study, talk through difficult issues or just catch up on life.

What Would Jesus Use?

To communicate with people, Jesus employed every means available in his time. He quoted written documents, modelled in his behaviour and face-to-face interactions, preached sermons, told parables and stories, used object lessons and short but memorable sayings, asked difficult and

7. Cru's digital media website <https://www.cru.org/us/en/digitalministry/training.html>

open-ended questions. He spoke within and across cultural boundaries. I think he'd be online!

As you think about how to mirror Jesus, reflect on this poem by Meredith Gould, adapted from Saint Teresa of Avila's well-known prayer, Christ Has No Body⁸.

Christ has no online presence but yours,
No blog, no Facebook page but yours,
Yours are the tweets through which love
touches this world,
Yours are the posts through which the Gospel
is shared,
Yours are the updates through which hope is
revealed.
Christ has no online presence but yours,
No blog, no Facebook page but yours.

8. Christ has no Body by Teresa de Avila. Journey With Jesus: A weekly webzine for the global church, since 2004. https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml





Reaching Across the Social Media Divide



**Sarah
Dawkins**

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Picture a newly arrived international student. What comes to mind? Perhaps the image of someone on their own, feeling apprehensive as they navigate an unfamiliar city, country and culture, or a student keen to learn everything that there is about being British, or maybe something in between? But what if the image was, instead, of a student sitting down to eat lunch in their halls of residence bedroom, while simultaneously joining in with their family dinner in Thailand via Skype? Probably not what we might expect.

This, however, is the reality, since the advent of social media has made it possible for students to video-call their family and join in with the familiarity that is the family mealtime. For students preparing to head far from home, this increased connectivity is a huge comfort, both to themselves and their parents, knowing that they are just a phone call, text, tweet, or video call away.

This begs the question: where is that international student *living*? Not in terms of their address, or type of accommodation, but whether they are experiencing reality in their UK city, or back at home via social media. It's likely that they are in both, and this has implications for ministry amongst them.

It has long been accepted that one of the key felt needs of international students is that of friendship and

belonging. That's why hospitality schemes are so popular, and friendship-based events such as cafes and day trips see consistent numbers attending. However, what if the student now doesn't feel 'alone': will they continue to seek out such things? If they are able to google the significance of Bonfire night, then why go to an event? If they are able to have coffee whilst chatting to a friend thousands of miles away, then why go and engage with the unknown at a Globe café? Friendship and belonging might no longer be felt needs because students feel as though they have them through devices. Belonging, after all, comes from being able to find out the information that they need or want to know with ease; friendship comes through the ability to continue relationships from home as if they were there.

The truth is, students may *feel* their needs are being met, but that doesn't mean that they are. Social studies Professor Sherry Turkle says: "Computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship...[then] the illusions of friendship without the demands of intimacy". Students may feel that they have companionship on demand, but the reality is that those relationships are shallow and lacking. A friend from home may know you well and understand the culture from which you have come. They can't understand the culture you're currently in and the challenges you face. However great it is to video-call into a meal time or a coffee, it is in no way the

same as a face-to-face coffee, an invitation to have dinner or an evening of games and laughter with other human beings.

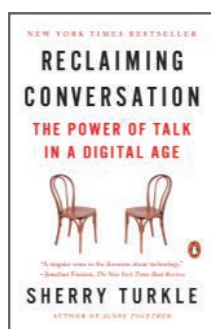
This is what international student ministry can offer. We still offer to meet the need that all humans have: to be known and to be in community. We're created in the image of God - the triune God who has always been in community. That is the ultimate community we all need and our cafes, outings and other activities simply provide the opportunity to show students what that looks like. It's immeasurably better and more necessary than anything that can be found on a screen.

That said, technology isn't all bad. Social media has many uses that aid us as we seek to share the gospel and disciple those who study in the UK from overseas. There are things that we can easily do now that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago: being able to video call a friend once they have returned home, or being able to give instant advice to returnees facing challenges. The greatest advantage of social media is real life. It is real people making real connections with real people.

We're faced today with a generation of young adults who live their entire lives on social media. And since Jesus calls us to go to the nations with the gospel, we need to go where the international students live. For the first time, it's possible that this isn't just about geography. Social media isn't our end goal, but in the same way that Paul used cultural symbols and concepts to win people to Christ in Acts 17, we can use social media to win this generation to the true community and belonging that is found in Christ.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

With that in mind, here are some books which might help develop your thinking on social media:



Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age – Sherry Turkle
(Penguin Books, 2015)

A secular look at how we are losing to ability to converse with one another despite being more connected than ever. Turkle calls for us to start conversing better by learning to converse with ourselves alone.



12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You – Tony Reinke
(Crossway Books, 2017)

We all know that mobile phones have made a huge difference to how we live our lives, but have we considered the ways in which we are being changed? This book isn't all about the evils of technology, but rather about opening our eyes to good and bad ways we are being changed by our phones.



Will You Be My Facebook Friend? – Tim Chester
(10Publishing, 2012)

Facebook is probably the most well-known social media platform in the West and has changed how we communicate. This short book contains an introduction to some of the challenges we face when using it.



Virtually Human – Ed Brooks and Pete Nicholls
(ivp, 2015)

The digital revolution happened so fully and completely that many of us didn't evaluate the good and bad. This book seeks to help us honour Christ as we engage online.

HELPFUL ONLINE RESOURCES FROM CRU

1. Social Media Training (www.cru.org/us/en/digitalministry/training.html)

2. Social Media is weird – a how-to guide for using social media in ministry (www.cru.org/content/dam/cru/communities/city/city-social-media.pdf)

Fumbling with Facebook? Thwarted by Twitter? This free downloadable booklet contains everything you need to use social media effectively for ministry, from a basic introduction to the different platforms, to how your social media presence can strengthen individual and corporate witness (eg. for citywide work).





你扫还是我扫? "You Scan or I Scan?"



Peter Booth

Peter Booth was a Friends International Reach Volunteer 2009-2010, and has since lived and worked in China. He is married to Rachel, who is from Chengdu, China.

You scan or I scan? Don't worry, you haven't picked up the wrong journal. As much as this might make almost no sense without a context in English, every young Chinese person below the age of around 40 will immediately know what you're talking about – assuming you ask in Chinese, of course.

Papermaking, Gunpowder, Printing and the Compass

Before we think too much about who's scanning who, it would be worth taking a quick look at history. China has a long history of inventing things, and is especially credited with the 'four great inventions' (as many Chinese will refer to them) of papermaking, gunpowder, printing and the compass. China also has a history, particularly in more recent years, of taking an idea, process or technology, and making it many times better. This is accomplished whilst bringing it to a much wider audience in a short space of time, often bypassing certain 'superfluous' intermediary steps. Take, for example, online payment technology. Contrary to what the Chinese media may like to suggest, this wasn't invented in China, but rather in Norway (or the US, depending on which history book you read). Tech companies in China have, however, taken online payment technology, developed it, and made the final products far superior to their western counterparts. What was the superfluous step that was missed? Credit cards. Credit cards never really

took off in China, at least when compared to the West. In fact, since the development of online payment technology, they have been relegated to the history books before ever becoming 'a thing'. A bit like Sony minidisc players! Remember those?

Similar to online payment technology, the ideas and technology behind social media have also been taken by Chinese tech companies and developed, improved and marketed to the masses. What was the superfluous step that was largely missed in this communication development process? Emails.

The Superfluous, a Very Necessary Thing?

Love them or loathe them, for the past decade or so, emails have become a staple of modern western life. We rely on them for personal communication as much as we do for business, particularly when communicating in groups or with people overseas (where picking up a phone becomes relatively impractical). We therefore have a natural tendency to use email when trying to maintain contact with our international friends after they have returned home. This might be practical and reasonable when communicating with friends who have returned to North America, Africa, South Asia or Europe, but it's wholly impractical when trying to follow up friends who have returned to China. While our Chinese friends might have used email whilst studying overseas

(often a requirement of their university/school), it's unlikely for them to continue the habit upon return – emails are, after all, that 'superfluous step' in China. Where little else relies on emails aside from internal email traffic within some large (often international) corporations, the habit of checking is lost. Amongst friends and family, communicating by email is simply unprecedented, and there's also a strong likelihood that whatever email service our friends were using overseas isn't easily accessible in China anyway. A friend in Chengdu, Tom, who incidentally does work in a large international corporation, recently summed it up this way, "[People in China] may very occasionally use email systems for work, but generally speaking there is simply no habit. Apart from the times when a password needs to be changed for another service [such as banking], people don't use emails as part of normal daily living."

Pragmatism and efficiency are as much a part of modern Chinese culture as more 'traditional' cultural values such as patriotism, harmony, benevolence and honesty. Emails tend to be quite formal, are not particularly personal and thus do not build much relationship. Importantly they also tend to be quite slow, challenging those values of pragmatism and efficiency in particular. In this respect, it's not just that emails became another 'superfluous step', it's that they just never really suited the modern Chinese mind-set in the first place.

A Better Fit

Enter social media. Most business in China is done face to face, over the phone and via social media. Social media aids face to face communication and telephone conversations, as it's quick, personal, and demands a fast response. In these respects, it fits much better into modern Chinese values.

So what about Facebook? It is, after all, true that many of our Chinese friends do set up Facebook accounts when they come to study overseas, but from what I've observed personally, most (probably around 9/10) cease using Facebook upon return. Of course, it has been blocked by the government's famous Great Firewall for a long time, and as with email, there just isn't any day to day incentive or need to try to get over the firewall and login.

This brings us back to who scans who. I am, of course, talking about WeChat, a product of Tencent Holdings Ltd., currently the fifth biggest company in the world by market capitalisation¹, and quite possibly a company of which you've never even heard! When adding a new contact or 'friend' in WeChat, one person provides the QR ('quick response') code which identifies them; the other scans the code within the WeChat app, and within a second they are connected. That short sentence, "you scan or I scan?" is one of the most commonly uttered sentences in China today.

Social Media, But Not as You Know It

WeChat is a social media messaging app like WhatsApp, but it's also a payment app like PayPal, and it's also a taxi hailing app like Uber, and a travel app like Kayak. It's also... In the West, we don't really have a one-app-does-all example, so it can be hard to comprehend just how important WeChat is in daily life. There are many other social media and live-streaming platforms in China, the main rivals being QQ (also a Tencent product) and Weibo (which can be compared to something like Twitter), but ultimately everything always comes back to WeChat. For it's through WeChat that families communicate, meetings are tabled, business deals are done, small group Bible study notes are shared, gas bills are paid, cinema tickets are booked, taxis are hailed, bicycles are hired, flight tickets are purchased and a bag of rice is bought at the local market. Commenting on the 'all-in-one' nature of WeChat, Ben Thompson (analyst and founder of the tech news blog Stratechery) wrote last year that "for all intents and purposes, WeChat is your phone, and to a far greater extent in China than anywhere else, your phone is everything."²

At this point it might be worth mentioning that WeChat recently hit 1 billion active monthly users, and also that this is not just an app that the younger generations use.³ This is an app that's used right across the age spectrum and across every other demographic. Again, this is hard to comprehend when to a certain extent in the West, social media remains the concern of the youth. According to a recent survey by Deloitte, more than a third of the adult population in the UK over the age of 65 don't even have a smartphone, let

1. 'List of Public Corporations by Market Capitalisation', Wikipedia, March 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_public_corporations_by_market_capitalization

2. Ben Thompson, 'Apple's China Problem', Stratechery blog, May 2017, <https://stratechery.com/2017/apples-china-problem/>

3. Rayna Hollander, 'WeChat Has Hit One Billion Monthly Active Users', Business Insider, March 2018, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/wechat-has-hit-1-billion-monthly-active-users-2018-3>



alone use social media.⁴ (To be clear, I'm not suggesting this is a bad thing in and of itself!)

I Am Who I Say I Am

WeChat is, or will potentially soon be, more than just a social media platform, online shopping platform, household management app and electronic wallet. There are reports that WeChat is also poised to become the nation's electronic ID system. A couple of years ago, WeChat started using 'real-name authentication' for accounts based in China (linking an account to a person's ID card) and last December (2017), trials began taking place (which were expanded in January), to allow people to register for a digital ID card within the app. This system was designed by Tencent in collaboration with the research institute of the Ministry of Public Security, and according to a recent report by the state-run media group Xinhua, "citizens can input their unique identity into the WeChat wallet and produce an electronic ID card replacing the original physical citizen ID card [which all Chinese citizens need and use on an almost daily basis], and when they go out of the door, all they need is their mobile phone. They arrive at a point where they need to produce ID, scan their face in the app, and prove that 'I am who I say I am'".⁵

Should WeChat actually fully replace the physical ID cards that all Chinese citizens need to carry and use each day, it would be very easy for the government to then link WeChat to a digital 'Social Credit System' which the government is starting to introduce (with full implementation expected by 2020, if not before).⁶ This system gives citizens a score based on their business practices, general behaviour in the real world (such as loan repayments, speeding tickets etc.), internet shopping habits, social connections, and crucially, online chat history and interactions. Further questions are then raised about how that in turn might link with any potential widespread implementation of the revised Religious Affairs Regulations (which took effect from the 1st February 2018). The revised policy places severe restrictions on unregistered churches, their pastors, meeting places and the Christians attending such churches, and has been widely criticised.

Since its launch in 2011, WeChat has been subsidised and supported by the Chinese

government. In a 2016 report by Amnesty International, Tencent scored a flat 0 out of 100 for end-to-end encryption and user privacy / freedom of speech, based on 5 criterion.⁷ There is no doubt that WeChat, like Weibo, QQ and everything else on the internet in China, is censored, and users do have to be careful with what they write in private messages, group chats and shared posts or 'moments'.

Mind Your Language

This brings us on to the tricky and much-debated topic of security. Messages in WeChat are effectively electronic postcards. The difference is that ALL messages go through filters, and it's not just the odd 'postcard' that the proverbial curious postal officer reads.

In respect of this security issue, the question in the past might have been, "*Should* we be using WeChat to communicate with our Chinese friends, particularly brothers and sisters in the Lord?" To a large extent, we should see that evidently this is a 'non-question'. WeChat is at the centre of everything in China, and if we want to continue to encourage our friends after they've returned home and to build relationships, we have to start using WeChat if we haven't already done so. The question is really: *how* should we safely use it, bearing in mind that everything can be read on it, and that soon it could be an electronic ID and citizen score card?

As I alluded earlier, most Christians in China use WeChat in the same way as everyone else. Church meetings are arranged, prayer requests are shared and Bible studies are prepared using the app. For various reasons, including a crackdown on cults in recent years, the Church has generally taken to WeChat, being very open in what is said on it, whilst acknowledging that potentially there are watching eyes. Ultimately, many churches in China believe that being open and clear about activities is much better than being secretive and sending coded messages: at the end of the day, what looks more like a cult to the average local official? Likewise at a local level at least, officials from the Ministry of Public Security are generally very aware of the different groups meeting and who leads them – that being the case, many believe there is no good reason to be secretive. Having said that, since March of this year, some churches and small groups, particularly those with links overseas such as returnee small groups, are starting to omit certain words.

4. 'State of the Smart, Global Mobile Consumer Survey 2017', Deloitte, 2017, http://www.deloitte.co.uk/mobileuk/assets/img/download/global-mobile-consumer-survey-2017_uk-cut.pdf#page=16

5. Xinhua Net, December 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-12/26/c_1122165668.htm

6. D Galeon & B Bergan, 'China's Social Credit System Will Rate How Valuable You Are as a Human', December 2017, <https://futurism.com/china-social-credit-system-rate-human-value/>

7. 'For Your Eyes Only?', Amnesty International, October 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/POL40/4985/2016/en/>

So what does this mean for us when communicating? To a large extent, we need to take the lead from our returnee friends. We don't want to scare them into using a certain type of language that in reality they're not going to use when talking to church friends in China, and for this reason, I would encourage freedom with language. However, we also need to be aware of the situation to which our friends are returning. If they're visiting scholars and going back to a prestigious university, or have been sponsored to study overseas by the PLA (People's Liberation Army) or government and going back to an internal post, or if they're returning to a particularly sensitive city or area of the country or even serving in a particular context, such as returnee ministry, then extra caution should be exercised.

Let us pr@y-PRAY!

The biggest problem here, though, is that whatever the situation is today, ultimately we simply can't predict what tomorrow will bring. We don't know to what extent the revised Religious Affairs Regulations policy will be implemented nationally. We don't know how the repercussions for violating such regulations might tie in with the new Social Credit System and WeChat ID system. We don't know to what extent the current trajectory of China could bring more problems for the church in China. All we do know is that the Lord knows and it is all in His hands.

It's possible that things will get much more difficult for brothers and sisters in China, and indeed there have been reports in the last couple of months of a tightening grip at a local level on some unregistered churches. One church in Beijing, for example, was recently forced to stop meeting in groups of more than 12 people at a time, and many more have been forced to close altogether. Just recently a famous unregistered church in Chengdu was surrounded by police with several church members arrested including the lead pastor, who for a long time has been a very vocal critic of the government at a national level. In addition, at the start of April, there was also a big crackdown on the sale of Bibles online and in Christian bookstores. This was, in fact, an implementation of an old policy regarding the distribution of Bibles, but it is nonetheless significant, and will have an impact on both the availability of Bibles in general, and also the ability to get hold of more recent and accurate translations, such as the 新译本 (CNVS). Are these things outside of the Lord's sovereign control? Of course not.

Emmanuel reigns! May we take comfort in that, and let us pray that whether through trial or through times of comfort, the Lord would bless His Church in China. May the Church grow both in width and in depth.

Top WeChat Tip #1 – once you've been 'pulled' into a group chat, you can switch notifications for an individual group to silent. This means your phone doesn't keep going off and you don't get hundreds of notifications. Go into the group and click on the group icon in the top right hand corner to bring up some options.

Top WeChat Tip #2 – occasionally post something in 'moments', such as a picture of food you're eating or a walk you've been on. Your returnee friends may well see it, and it might cause them to get in touch.

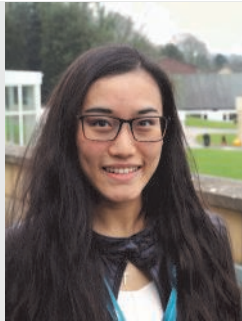
Top WeChat Tip #3 – if you're in many group chats, WeChat can start to take up a lot of space on your phone. Go into the general settings menu, click storage, and then 'manage chat scripts' to delete selected group chat content.

Top WeChat Tip #4 – if you're using WeChat for arranging Bible study group activities in the West, be careful who you allow to join the WeChat group: only allow people who are regularly attending. Many students/scholars are now more cautious about who is in WeChat groups, having heard of friends or connections being 'watched' whilst overseas, and subsequently facing problems upon return.





Staying Connected After Return



Nicole Liu

Friends
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(2017-18).



**Bao Ngoc
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For new or young believers, going home after graduation presents fresh challenges as the excitement of finally being home tapers off, when feelings of isolation and loneliness can set in. This is particularly true for those who had no knowledge of Christianity prior to arriving in Britain. Settling back into life at home, they face the daunting tasks of working out their new Christian identity in a familiar and yet changed context. There is an urgent need to find a church and develop meaningful Christian fellowship in their home culture. The pressures of long working hours and family responsibilities can be overwhelming, crowding out time spent with God in prayer and in Bible reading.

Whatever we might feel about social media, there is no doubt that the internet provides unprecedented access to people and resources which can be a lifeline to returnees, and not just in the early days of return. Here, two recent returnees share their experiences and reflections on what has helped, as well as the ways in which the different forms of online presence can be a blessing to others.

**NICOLE LIU,
REACH VOLUNTEER IN GLASGOW**

Going It Alone?

In Acts 10, right after Philip baptised the Ethiopian eunuch, “the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.”

I wonder how you feel when you read this. I couldn’t believe my eyes the first time I came across this verse. I was surprised and confused; my jaw dropped and I shouted, “What? How could God take Philip away right after the baptism, leaving the Ethiopian eunuch ALONE? What was the rest of his journey like? What lay ahead for him?”

Not long after I was baptised in the UK, I had to return home. With my new Christian identity, going home was thrilling but a bit scary. I felt like a newborn baby leaving the arms of her parents. Would I be able to survive, get fed, be looked after and grow up into maturity?

The first 6 months were vital and really difficult. It felt like life or death - if I was not fed (spiritually) and not plugged into church/fellowship/community, then as a newborn baby Christian, I would die. I was desperate. I needed fellowship and discipleship.

Although it seemed so hard, God wasn’t absent. To cut a very long story short, I

finally joined a church around Easter. I still remember sitting in the Easter service, tears flowing down without restraint throughout the whole sermon. I finally felt I belonged once again, sitting in God's presence, worshipping Him with my fellow brothers and sisters.

As I was settled, I started to have Christian friends on my social media to keep in contact. From there, I discovered a resource that I never knew existed - ministry through media.

Sharing Faith Online

Christian friends share faith-related articles/videos/songs on their social media. These can be traced back to the 'Subscription Account' where these things were originally posted. Simply by clicking 'following', I can stay updated with the account.

People are very creative with these Subscription Accounts, and they use different approaches. Some accounts are very directly faith-related. They write or video biographies or testimonies by Chinese Christians, sharing their ministry and their spiritual walk with God. Some accounts focus on Bible teaching and devotional material, translating sermons and devotionals from original sources.

Other accounts are less direct. They post faith-related articles bilingually as English/culture study material, or they create beautiful pictures with Bible verses, or paraphrased Bible verses to make it less obvious. People also use social media to create online chat groups to do Bible studies together, across different districts of the city, or even across cities within China. These can be started either by individuals to share their own story of God, or by a group or organisation, to share more structured content (almost like a magazine).

Sometimes I look at these resources and feel really moved. Following Christ comes with real limitations in China, yet people are being so diligent and creative to make it happen. (I avoid mentioning any specific names for the safety of the subscription account, because there are some which, sadly, have been closed by the authorities).

I wonder what happened to the Ethiopian eunuch later on his journey. Did he find life lonely and difficult after returning home as a believer?

When students leave the UK, whether or not they have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, their

lifeline has been changed more or less by the touch of our God. Upon returning home, not only do they experience reverse culture-shock, they also undergo what could be described as 'Christian worldview culture-shock'. Returning with this renewed mindset is confusing. The support they need is NOT LESS than that which they needed when they were here, and the opportunity for them to seek God and testify what they have learned from here is EVEN MORE. The task is not finished.

Philip had no means to 'keep in touch' with the Ethiopian eunuch once he was taken away. But we live in the 21st century now - what a privilege to be blessed with the internet!

God truly provides! I believe we are part of His provision to the returned students, as an extension of His very present and unfailing love.

Before students leave UK, ask about a tool of social media they will continue to use in their home country to keep in touch. And then, take the initiative to make contact, just as God did with us: send them your greetings, reminding them that God hasn't forgotten them and is with them wherever they are, and that God has a plan for them. Not every conversation has to be super spiritual; God can use even very casual chat. He can work in ANY situation, even the smallest daily matters they experience. We simply partner with Him to remind and point students back to God in ALL situations. Over time, they will testify and witness by themselves, and you will be amazed to see how God is at work in their lives. Isn't it amazing?

**BAO NGOC NGO,
FORMER REACH VOLUNTEER IN OXFORD, NOW
RETURNED TO VIETNAM**

Dealing With Up-and-Down Emotions

When I first came back to my home country, one of my biggest fears was loneliness. It seemed like one moment I was standing among many friends from my church family in Oxford. But just a 15-hour flight later, I was back at home, with only one Christian friend among the nine million people in my city. Loneliness made me feel so emotional and fragile in the first 3 months. Within a space of five minutes, my mood would change from being uplifted by a Christian song, to feeling angry or



upset by words that were spoken to me. It was so easy for conflict and miscommunication to happen with the people around me. It became an even bigger challenge to control my emotions.

Facebook Messenger has been a very useful tool in helping me to deal with this. When I experience something annoying or frustrating, my first action is to keep calm and send a text to *L – the one who disciplines me all the way from the UK.

“My family don’t understand me...

“Why do people do this in this country?!...

“Today my pastor said that...

Getting responses quickly from *L makes me feel that I’m not facing these situations alone, which has significantly helped to shape my personality to become more stable, more content. If I had to wait for a Skype call once a month, all these emotions could not have been fully discussed and worked through. Through our texts, we have also discussed many things about the differences between my home church culture, and British church culture.

In addition, Facebook has played an important role in connecting me with the church family that I so sadly left behind. I’m able to see them and they are able to hear from me. The two periods of my life are connected: the past, which I lived in Oxford, and the present, which I’m living in my own country. Without this link, I would probably feel that what happened in the UK was just a dream from yesterday. Feeling supported, loved and encouraged by friends from the UK has helped me a lot to develop new friendships within my current church family here at home.

Security Considerations

When I first returned to my home country, I was extremely worried about the security warnings that I had heard in the UK. I signed up for “the world’s best security email system” and even used a password to send a Word Doc prayer letter to my friends. When using WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook, I carefully used codes for sensitive words, such as ‘father’, ‘home’, ‘master’. While these attempts were practical and helpful, I slowly learned that my local Christian friends are actually quite relaxed. As our church has a public Facebook Page, our pastors and other church leaders openly share our sermons and church activities on Facebook, keeping everything updated for church members.

One friend advised, “As long as you are not the person who organises activities or things outside

the church, you’re fine. It’s the pastor and the foreigners that they pay attention to.” Now, after eight months, I am quite comfortable talking/chatting to my British friends about my church and Christian life here. However, I am still aware of how sensitive our emails should be when discussing “missionary matters” in order to avoid any potential problems.

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