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WECHAT – A CHINESE CYBER-CULTURE PHENOMENON

The main purpose of this article is to understand the phenomenon of WeChat. Due to number of options and its popularity, WeChat is truly one of its kind. China nowadays is a rapidly developing country with a huge potential of e-commerce market. Modern social media play a great role in Chinese economy but also at life of ordinary Chinese people. WeChat Wallet is much more popular in some regions of China than traditional wallet with cash. Social media are no more only means of communication, via WeChat people may pay taxes, prove ID or make grocery. Popularity of WeChat is not limited with Chinese borders, strong Chinese business presence in the world pushed non-Chinese people to download the app.

Keywords: WeChat, eCommerce, China, marketing, social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is a new concept for area of research which emerged at the beginning of 2000's. Most of the scientists are focusing on the psychological aspect of WeChat like Liena C.H. and Cao Y. (2014) or Gan C. (2017). The purpose of this paper is to identify the unique features of WeChat and understand why it is so popular among Chinese people.

Main research question of the article is "What makes WeChat so unique at the social media market". I will try to understand the phenomenon of the WeChat popularity, what makes it one of its kind. The world is constantly changing, technologies used just 20 years ago are considered as antiques today. The rapid development of modern technologies forces companies and technology users to adapt in the new environment. Year 2000 is considered as a birth of a new social media, the new era of rapid communication has just started. Soon everyone on the planet will use one of many available social media apps to communicate, share important moment, follow new trends or even pay taxes or prove ID.

One of the fastest growing social media is WeChat (Chinese 微信; pinyin Wēixìn). WeChat is often compared to Facebook. Many people call WeChat a "Chinese Facebook" (Chernavina, 2019). Is it really a good comparison for the app which soon is going to be a very first social media to be used as an official ID for over 1 billion Chinese people worldwide (Pascu, 2019)? Tencent company (the owner of WeChat) is on a right path to totally digitalize the life of Chinese people.

A breakthrough moment for WeChat was introduction of online payments and virtual wallet on a massive scale. WeChat users are able to transfer money with each other via one application. It is a great step in social media as it opens new frontiers for social media

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development. Social media are no longer only means of information transfer but also a mean of financial transactions.

In addition to the very interesting review made by Christian Montag, Chunmai Gan and Benjamin Backer (2018), I am also going to discuss the financial/business aspect of the application on the example of WeChat Wallet. Finally I will try to understand the reasons of growing popularity of WeChat around the world.

The article consists of eight parts. Each section is related to a certain aspect of WeChat unique features.

- The second section considers socio-economic background of WeChat,
- In the third section I will discuss the origins of WeChat,
- Fourth section “Online Shopping” – due to introduction of WeChat Wallet users split into two groups buyers and sellers. Both with the equal access to the application,
- Fifth section “New online shopping culture” – rapid development of social media in China and lack of access to non-Chinese social media like Facebook led to establishing an unique Chinese online shopping culture,
- Sixth section “WeChat presence in other states” – the success of WeChat is also its presence in other states due to strong Chinese economic presence,
- In the last section we will summarize the article.

2. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF WECHAT

China nowadays is a combination of communist market with a free trade and capitalism. This unique combination of policies led China to the pedestal of world's economy. In 2019 China was a top exporter in the world leaving a gap of 800 billion USD between itself and second in a ranking USA (Workman 2020).

Deng Xiaoping was a man who pushed China towards the “Western Capitalism”. Communist economy with an elements of a free market, that was an idea which many people considered as a pure fiction. However Deng Xiaoping understood that without reforms China will not be able to keep economic growth, thus will not be able to rebuild the country after the horror of the cultural revolution. In April 1979, China announced its very first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) (Fang, 1994). Five SEZ were established next year in Zhuhai, Shenzhen, Xiamen, Shantou and Hainan. That was truly a turning point in Chinese economic history. Since that moment western companies had access to Chinese market. Panasonic was a very first foreign company followed by giants like Coca-Cola, IBM, Motorola, Pierre Cardin and others started to settle their business in China.

Time has passed and new means of communications started to spread around the globe. Facebook popularity in China begins with the inflow of the Western capital and companies. Foreign employees from SEZ preferred to communicate via Facebook instead of its Chinese equivalents. Chinese government was never denying its internet censorship, and put its first serious regulation related to the foreign social medias as a reaction to Tibet riots before 2008 Olympic Games (Gibson et al., 2009). After the 2008 Olympic games, there was a brief policy relaxation, but China banned Facebook in 2009; which was a serious hit to the company (Gibson et al., 2009).

China already had one big social media called QQ which was still far behind Facebook in terms of popularity. Chinese needed well developed and modern social platform for communication. Just a year after Facebook ban in China, Tencent a Chinese social media

leader started to develop WeChat a platform which has changed not only Chinese social media but the entire Chinese culture.

3. THE ORIGINS OF WECHAT

In October 2010, a small group of passionate application developers from Tencent Holdings Limited started to work on a new application called WeChat (Millward, 2018). Next year on January 21st (Millward, 2018), Tencent released a very first version of WeChat. The very first version of WeChat had much less options in comparison to current WeChat. Its main function was sending and receiving messages (text, picture and emojis). However, the creators of WeChat had much more ambitions than creating another application like already existing popular among Chinese QQ (IMQQ ©2018).

WeChat gained popularity among Chinese users much faster than Facebook. The rapidly growing number of users gave incentives for further developments of WeChat and worldwide expansion what is presented on chart 1. It is important to mention that at its first years WeChat attracted mostly users from China.

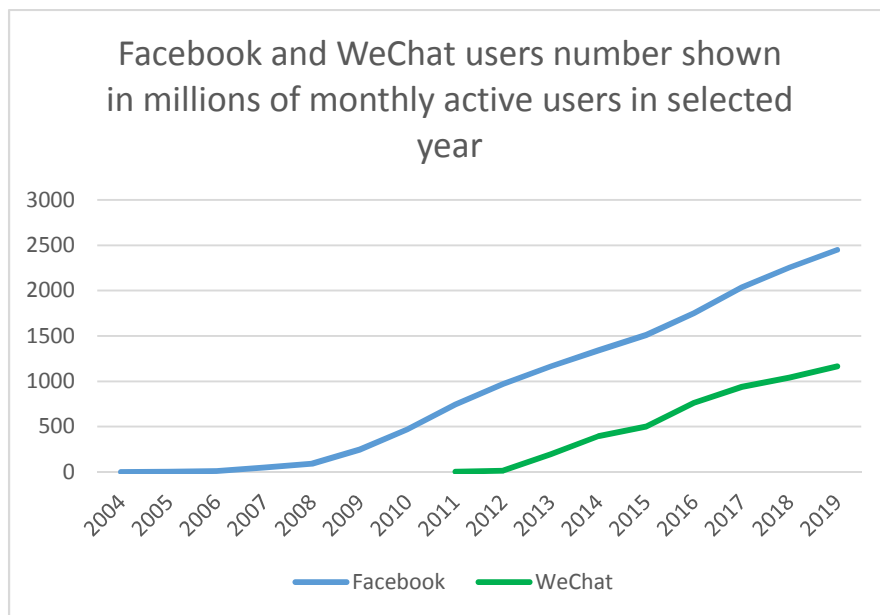


Chart 1. Facebook and WeChat users number shown in millions of monthly active users in selected year

Source: Based on data from Statista (2020) & Richter (2019).

4. ONLINE SHOPPING

In August 2013 (Millward, 2018) WeChat announced its new feature New function let people to use their use WeChat as a tool for money transfer. Since that very moment WeChat users could send each other money with only one click on their phone.

WeChat wallet might be simply top up with many ways, the most popular ones are (Graziani, 2019):

- TopUp with a Card – user adds a Visa/MasterCard to their accounts and choose the amount they want to transfer to WeChat Wallet,
- TopUp at a Retailer – at the retailer store user pays a selected amount of money for an EasyPay barcode which should be scanned by WeChat in order to transfer money,
- TopUp with Instant Money – clients of some banks like Standard Bank may top up their WeChat accounts at ATM's, via Cellphone Banking or Internet Banking.

Proceeding with the payment at WeChat app might occur in various ways. First option is transferring money as an end-user (mostly refer to individual clients), second option is money transfer of Companies (refer to corporate clients).

For end-users WeChat structure is rather simple. WeChat Pay end-users may transfer money to other users (both end-users and companies); pay bills; order taxi; invest in various funds; purchase products via WeChat based e-commerce platforms. In the context of online payment WeChat Wallet is a revolutionary app which substituted “real wallets” of many Chinese. Most of Chinese use WeChat as a mean of payment for their grocery, hairdressers, food etc.

WeChat is strongly focusing on online shopping, thus many functions are introduced in order to make B2C contact much more intuitive at the online environment. In order to do so, WeChat has created various ways to proceed the payment such as QR Code Payment, In-App Payment, Mini-program payments, Quick Pay. Picture 1. presents the QR codes at Chinese market, clients may purchase meat using WeChat Wallet as a payment method.



Picture 1. QR codes at one of the Chinese apple shops

Source: Picture from The Foreign Policy (Yoshida & Matsuda, 2019).

QR Code (WeChat Pay ©2020) – is a simple and one of the most popular method of payment among SME who are using WeChat as a mean of payment in China. WeChat is

first social media platform that is using QR Code Payment method on such a scale. There are four steps to transfer money from WeChat Wallet to the Company's Wallet.

- A user scans the QR Code with WeChat QR Code scanner.
- A user enters the amount of money for transfer.
- A user enters a payment password.
- A user receives the confirmation of the payment transferred to he's WeChat Account.

WeChat Wallet is using blockchain is a technology. The technology is also used by fintech leaders including Bank of China (Cant, 2019). Blockchain technology is a tool that uses a complicated set of algorithms in order to enable safe online money transfers from one WeChat account to another. Each transaction must be verified and registered in order to complete transaction.

The number of online payment users is constantly growing, soon all Chinese population is going to use online transactions instead of cash (Statista, 2020). As seen in Chart 2, 2015 and 2020 saw the greatest increase in the number of online payment users. At the first quarter transactions made via WeChat grew to 805 million USD. People tend to use more online transactions while the economic situation is unstable than when the situation is under control. In 2015, China experienced a stock crisis which caused many people to lose their jobs and panic within the market (Allen, 2015). The current situation caused by COVID-19 also influenced WeChat users to make online purchases instead of traditional shopping purchases (European Parliament Think Tank, 2020).

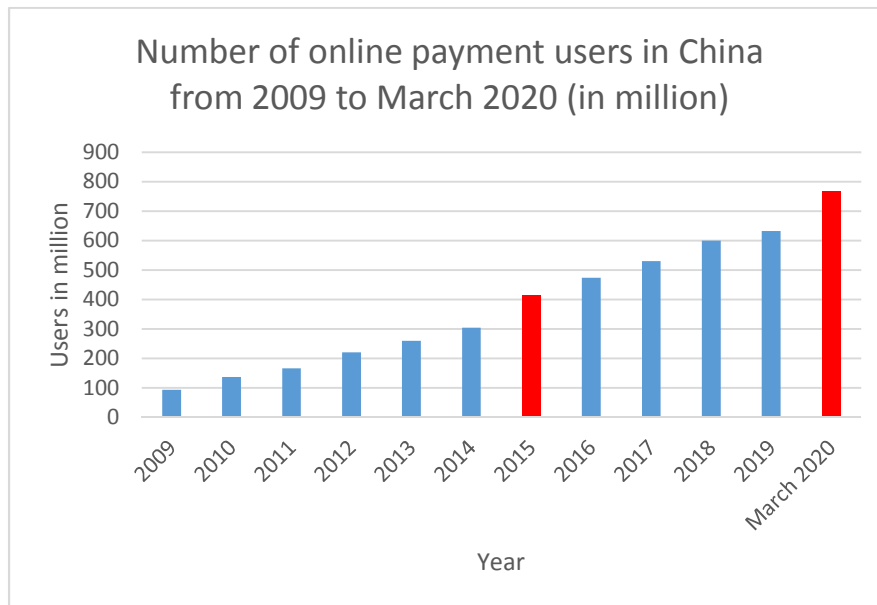


Chart 2. Number of online payment users in China from 2009 to March 2020 (in million)

Source: (Statista 2020).

Everyday millions of users transfer money via WeChat Wallet. Is WeChat going to get a first place in world's e-commerce market? WeChat has all the necessary tools to become a global leader. The question is if WeChat decides to use cryptocurrency? Nowadays both WeChat and Alipay do not allow any cryptocurrency related activities (Valera, 2019). The prohibition of using any sort of cryptocurrency in China may soon cause problems for WeChat. Facebook has announced a new cryptocurrency Libra which might be released in 2020 (Wąsowski, 2019). Libra is a huge threat for WeChat in terms of its current superiority as the leading social media with financial transaction options, the statement of the company proves the fear of new Facebooks currency "If Libra successfully launches, it will undoubtedly significantly bring an impact on the global payment space, and the entire financial industry around the world. It will drive the industry's innovation and development in user experience, service cost, technology and business model, it will also lead to further industry reshuffle" (Ejinsight, 2019).

In order to open an online shop, a company has to register itself at the TenPay Account. The TenPay account is a financial platform established by Tencent Company for the purpose of providing advanced financial service for Corporate clients who aim to open online shop at the WeChat app (Alternative Payments ©2020). TenPay uses WeChat wallet for financial transfers, making online B2C contacts possible. Online shops at the WeChat app are called Weixin Xiaodian (in Chinese 微信小店).

The problem arises when non-Chinese nationals wants to open an online shop at WeChat, as WeChat restricted WeChat online shopping option for only Chinese citizens. However, this restriction is used as an opportunity for a number of Chinese and international companies to circumvent the restriction. The most popular method for opening the online shop for a foreigner is to change VPN or register the account with a Chinese phone number.

Online shops have advantages over "real shops" as there are only pre-paid transactions, so the seller does not have to purchase the products at first. Pre-paid transactions help sellers reduce the risk of investing in product which people would not be willing to buy. In a broader perspective, pre-paid transactions may reduce the price of products as the sellers reduce the risk, thus the clients have more money to purchase more products and the factories have more orders. This is the breakthrough moment not only for WeChat users but for the entire economy, as the WeChat redefined the definition of shopping.

5. NEW ONLINE SHOPPING CULTURE

China has rapidly changed in a past decade. The change relates to both economic and cultural standards of the Chinese nations. Chinese society nowadays is focused on working for money and spending money. China has a population of 1,438 million people, out of whom over 350 are billionaires USD according to Forbes Magazine (Forbes China, 2019). People tend to buy luxury products in order to show off their status. In Chart 3, we see that the market for luxury goods in China is blossoming. Since 2012, the market of luxury goods in China is constantly growing. According to analytics, the growth may reach US\$50B in 2023.

In 2020 due to pandemics, the demand for luxury goods is expected to fall, nevertheless the trend of luxury shopping in China is constantly growing. Consumerism of Chinese population has three levels. In the movie “Have a nice day,” (IMBD ©2020) those three levels are divided as three freedoms:

1. Farmer Freedom – a situation when a person has unlimited access to the farm products.
2. Supermarket Freedom – a situation when a person has unlimited to all products available at the supermarket.
3. Online Shopping Freedom – a situation when a person has unlimited access to all the goods available at the online shopping.



Chart 3. Revenue of Luxury market in China (in million USD)

Source: (Statista 2020).

WeChat undoubtedly helps to achieve “Online Shopping Freedom” in a way it enables people to trade online. Every WeChat user has an access to the growing number of online shops, easy access and intuitive layout of the application makes it a perfect spot for online trade.

The culture of shopping is an irreversible process of changing the mentality of people. Since 2017 the number of users have raised by over 200 million, soon the number of e-commerce users in China will exceed one billion users. Shifting shopping malls to the virtual reality is only question of time.

Showing off the standards of the life is getting a priority among many Chinese people, especially the ones who are not living at the major cities. Such a trend has its benefits and drawbacks. The pursuit of money in China led to higher depression symptoms (DS). Pressure to show a status is much higher among villagers from the rural area than inhabitants of Shanghai, thus they are much more prone to DS (Liu et. al., 2018).

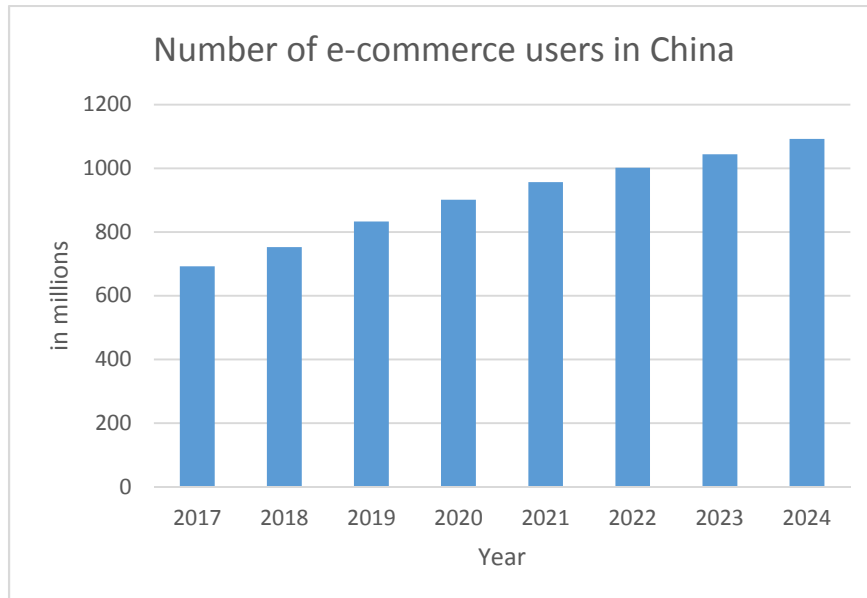


Chart 4. Number of e-commerce users in China

Source: (Statista 2020).

WeChat plays a very specific role in the ecommerce market, it both drives the changes and absorbs the signals from the market. Most of the new trends on a Chinese ecommerce market found its reflection in WeChat functions, but at the same time WeChat is the company that promotes its new functions and creates supply for its service.

6. WECHAT PRESENCE IN OTHER COUNTRIES

WeChat is the biggest social media in China and one of the biggest players at social media market in the Asia-Pacific region. What is the potential of WeChat? What are the directions of WeChat expansion? Those are the questions with two simple answers. Answer for the first one is “huge”. From the social media platform which has only a purpose of connecting people to an advance financial tool for e-commerce transaction, WeChat has truly a great future. The answer for the second question is “everywhere where Chinese people or where Chinese’s business partners are”. Popularity of WeChat is strong enough to attract non-Chinese users to download the app. WeChat symbolize two elements of Virtual China, which are culture of communication and commercial services. Thus non-Chinese people who interact with Chinese people or Chinese business are to certain extent obligated to download the app in order to have contact with their friends or business partners/clients.

WeChat has a great potential for expansion to other Asian countries. About 2/3 of Chinese population is using mobile social media (about 926 million people) (Thomala, 2020), it is a relatively high number comparing to India where the number of mobile social media users is much below 1/2 of the country’s population (about 448 million people) (Keelery, 2020). Low prices of electronic devices and safety of WeChat Wallet in

comparison to caring money may create space for various social medias to fight for future users.

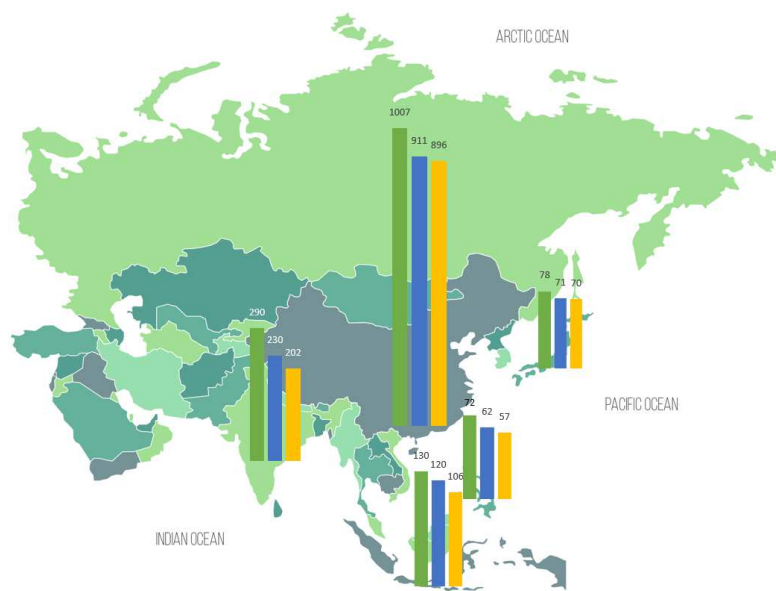


Chart 5. Top 5 countries of Asia-Pacific region with the highest number of active mobile social media users from 2017 to 2019, by country (in million)

Green – number of active mobile social media users 2019;

Blue – number of active mobile social media users 2018;

Yellow – number of active mobile social media users 2017.

Source: Chart based on the information from Moor (2019) and design taken from Freepik (©2020).

Clearly the biggest competitor of WeChat is Facebook. Facebook is the most widely spread social media in the world. Why is Facebook more popular? Simply because Facebook was a first social platform of its type. Moreover Facebook was developed by American Mark Zuckerberg, thus the interface fits more into western culture of its users who had much more access to the Internet compare to Africa or Asia at the time when Facebook was invented. The cultural barrier between China and West might be very difficult to overcome. Previously mentioned India is country with great potential for social media market development. However the question appears when it comes to the cultural approach to social media. India as a part of Commonwealth is in favor of Western life style, thus in favor of Facebook.

According to chart 6 World might be easily divided into two areas of influence, Chinese and American sides. Facebook is more popular in countries of Europe and both Americas, while WeChat is widely spread at the countries of Asia and is commonly used by Chinese diasporas all over the world. Such a division nowadays in many cases is much more visible than political agreements as it allows WeChat and Facebook influence their users and exercise censorship over unwanted information.

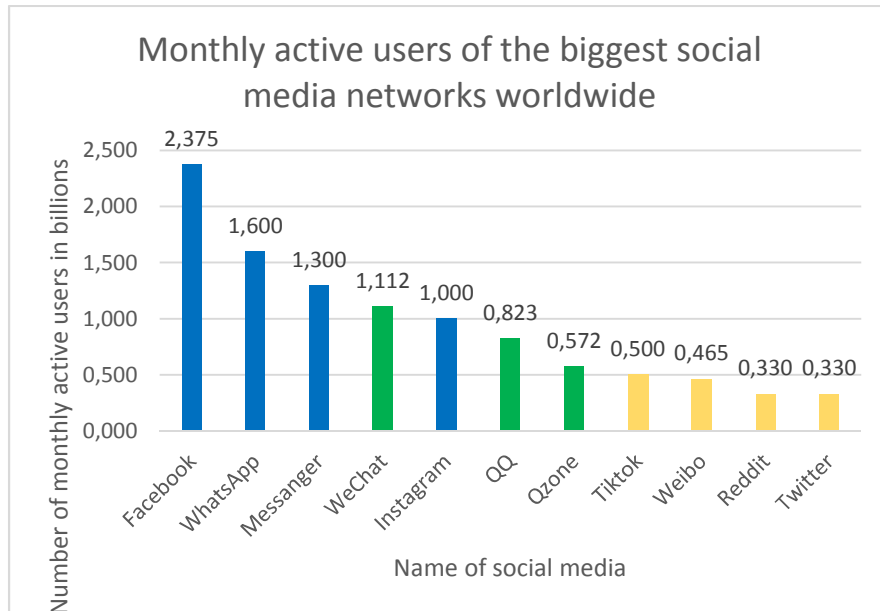


Chart 6. Number of monthly active users of biggest social media network worldwide

Blue – Facebook, Inc.;

Green – Tencent Holdings Limited;

Yellow – Others.

Source: Chart made based on information from Zia (2019).

Based on Table 1, WeChat deserves its international recognition due to much wider range of options. In comparison to its biggest competitor Facebook WeChat has well developed financial system that allows users from all over the world to transfer money. Moreover Facebook does not provide so well developed opportunities for online shops. Facebook is still associated with communication only, even though Facebook introduced marketplace (Facebook ©2020) a platform which connects sealers with a buyers, its recognition as a ecommerce platform is still far behind WeChat.

Table 1. Comparison of WeChat and Facebook

	WeChat	Facebook
Paying taxes via application	✓	✗
Fast financial transactions	✓	✗
Advanced system of online shopping	✓	✗
Main target Chinese customers	✓	✗
Client to client platform for trade	✓	✓
Worldwide mean of communication	✓	✓

Source: Own study.

7. SUMMARY

China is a country with a very rich history and culture. Through the past 50 years, China has made an incredible step forward; from being exhausted by the wars and revolutions to a world export leader with a bright innovative ideas. WeChat is a symbol of China's progress as well as a strong communications tool and financial operations platform.

Same as the Chinese economy, WeChat has made a rapid progress over only 10 years' time. The success of WeChat is a combination of several social, economic and political factors. Chinese government decision on Facebook censorship of WeChat in 2009 was a main factor which made a space for WeChat. Second is a cultural aspect used by WeChat designers.

As opposed to Facebook, WeChat was designed by Chinese people for Chinese people. WeChat users felt much more affiliated to the Chinese WeChat community than to multicultural American Facebook. Finally, financial services provided by WeChat Wallet made every day with WeChat much more convenient. WeChat users could pay their taxes, bills, or even buy grocery with a help of one click at the app. Chinese business was probably the most important factor of WeChat spread among the Asian countries. Over 1 billion people worldwide are using WeChat due to influence of Chinese business. China's first place at world export puts WeChat as a major tool of communication between foreigners. WeChat is clearly unique due to its multitasking and perfect design for Chinese users.

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