

Cara Wallis, **Social Media and Ordinary Life: Affect, Ethics, and Aspiration in Contemporary China**, New York: New York University Press, 2025, 286 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

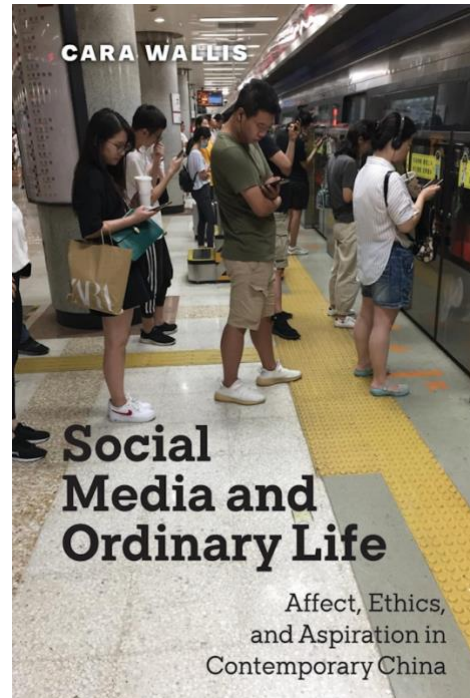
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In ***Social Media and Ordinary Life: Affect, Ethics, and Aspiration in Contemporary China***, Cara Wallis offers a diverse spectrum of voices from marginalized social groups, drawn from their everyday social media practices. Wallis conceptualizes China through a neo/nonliberal framework without reducing it to either category. Neo/nonliberal China attempts to capture “how certain neoliberal economic tenets that were implemented decades ago, . . . have occurred in tandem with greater economic inequality and the growth of individual wealth” (p. 20). This framing situates media practices of ordinary Chinese people within the sociotechnical and political transformations in contemporary China in both urban and rural settings.

This multisited ethnography contributes to the intersecting fields of global communication and China studies with a distinctive focus on affect and ethical self-cultivation. Communication studies on China have long focused on the role of the Chinese state through censorship and surveillance of media environments. Scholars have also explored how citizens and civic organizations use media technology, particularly digital media, to voice dissent, self-organize, and transform public life. Yet ordinary people, who mostly use social media for nonpolitical purposes, still need more scholarly attention. Methodologically, Wallis uses ethnographic observation and textual analysis to capture subtle emotions and mundane ethical considerations in daily media use. This book, with its ethnographic work spanning from 2013 to 2020, offers a fascinating window into understanding everyday aspirations, pains, and joys that constitute the bulk of contemporary Chinese social life.

Each chapter introduces a distinct social group. Chapter 1 focuses on marginalized young creatives in Beijing and their personal aesthetics. When thinking about innovation and creativity in China, we typically think of policy makers, engineers, software developers, businesspeople, students, artists, and people alike with a middle-class background or elite education. This book invites us to the world of a disparate group of marginalized young people from far modest backgrounds. They come from rural areas with basic and nonelite education. They choose to move to major cities like Beijing to pursue their creative dreams with limited resources. They try hard to cultivate “personal aesthetics” (p. 41) that both conform to and challenge the state-endorsed notion of innovation. Specifically, Wallis shows how young creatives use social media to develop their interrelated types of self—the apprentice self, curated self, and commercial self—to search for meaning that is personally fulfilling. Young creatives are avid learners of online content and unafraid to learn



through copying. Meanwhile, they challenge the idea that China is merely a copycat nation lacking originality. By producing, curating, consuming, sharing, and commenting on content online, these young creatives struggle to navigate between personal values and familial demands and between ethical choices and practical needs.

Chapter 2 delves into the thickness of relations among microentrepreneurial couples in rural villages in Shandong, particularly through the life experiences of local women. Wallis includes not only fieldwork observations from the Xi era of rural revitalization through e-commerce but also those from the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao era. This historically informed ethnographic approach gives readers a concrete sense of how rural life has changed over the past two decades and how the rise of digital technology has shaped local dynamics. Wallis argues that affective relational ties and ethical obligations are “constitutive elements of women’s productive labor as it was articulated to technology use” (p. 105). One important observation is that women, despite the normative patriarchal expectation to engage in entrepreneurship, are the ones who actually run Internet cafés, small shops, and online businesses. Their business spaces are often simultaneously turned into a communal space for villagers to hang out and for children to play. These women must carefully manage personal popularity and interpersonal relationships to survive in a tightly knit local community. Such affective labor, as Wallis argues, is often absent from official discourses on rural digitalization and economic development.

Chapter 3 shifts attention to female domestic workers in Beijing and their communities of care. Wallis followed a group of women—who are all above 35 years of age, mostly from the countryside around China, and mostly living in their employers’ homes—to observe how they use social media to form communities. Too often, domestic workers in China face various forms of discrimination because of social classes, economic status, educational levels, gender, state policies, service agencies, and biased media representation. Some domestic workers report their experiences of suffering from “cold violence” or emotional and symbolic violence from their employers (p. 115). Social media, as Wallis points out, offers a communicative space for these women to care for each other and gain agency and voice. One major type of social media posts, for instance, revolves around food. Women post the dishes they prepare not only to share the images of food but, more importantly, to showcase the labor involved in food preparation and to share the new culinary skills they learn at work. These mundane acts of social media use play a significant role for domestic workers to represent themselves as ethical, responsible, and emphatic citizens. Yet, Wallis also warns against an idealistic reading of these workers’ conditions, as technology alone cannot solve structural inequalities.

Chapter 4 turns to young feminists across China, focusing analytically on their sharing of feelings and cultivation of ordinary ethics in a patriarchal society. Since the early 2010s, Chinese feminists have faced backlashes in antifeminist state policies and popular discourses. With the ending of the One Child policy and a growing emphasis on women’s traditional role as family-oriented caretakers, younger generations of Chinese women tend to express diverse feelings ranging from anxiety, shame, and depression to optimism and hope through social media. Wallis calls this affective formation a “‘networked feminist killjoy assemblage,’ which is an affective assemblage comprised of multiple articulations of bodies, discourses, emotions (anger but also joy), objects, technologies, and practices” (p. 140). This concept enables the author to thread a spectrum of feminist narratives and media practices. Some notable examples that have

received relatively less academic attention are livestreaming, fansubbing, and video production. While constantly facing misogyny and state censorship, these feminist killjoys continue to produce content that channels their discontent while bringing joy and hope to themselves and their audiences.

A common thread that goes through disparate social groups in this book is the author's commitment to the marginalized voices in Chinese society. From young creatives to rural couples, from domestic workers to young feminists, Wallis invites her readers to understand these underrepresented groups not through grand narratives but through their lived experiences and feelings. It is also worth highlighting the author's consistent analytical attention to women—young, middle-aged, and old—in urban and rural contexts through their daily media use and ethical considerations.

This book is essential reading for scholars and students of social media, affect theory, and China studies. Its analytical and methodological attention to everyday life through affect and ethics is inspiring for anyone interested in exploring the affordances of digital media in contemporary society beyond the Chinese context. Scholars, students, activists, media professionals, and policy makers will find the book's commitment to understanding marginalized communities and their digital practices illuminating in a world where big narratives of technology often overshadow human stories.