CHARLES UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism

Department of Journalism

Master's Thesis

2024   **Armando Peñafuerte III**

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WeChat in Silence?
How WeChat surveillance and censorship experience impacts the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China

Master's Thesis

Author of the Thesis: Armando Peñafuerte III

Study programme: Journalism Studies

Supervisor: Mgr. Jan Miessler

Year of the defence: 2024

Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.

2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.

3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

4. During the preparation of this thesis, the author did not use any external software or tool/service.

In Prague on   Armando Peñafuerte III

July 31, 2024

References

PEÑAFUERTE, Armando III. *WeChat in Silence? How WeChat surveillance and censorship experience impacts the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China.* Praha, 2024. 80 p. Master's thesis (Mgr). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Department of Journalism. Supervisor Mgr. Jan Miessler.

Length of the Thesis: 80 pages; 160,397 characters

Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism FSV UK
Research proposal for Erasmus Mundus Journalism Diploma Thesis

THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY STUDENT:

Student's surname and given name: PEÑAFUERTE, Armando III	**Registry stamp: / Razítko podatelny:**
Start of studies for EMJ (in Aarhus) September 2022	Univerzita Karlova Fakulta sociálních věd
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Study program/form of study: Erasmus Mundus Journalism	Čj: 444 Příloh: Přiděleno:

Thesis title in English:

We Chat in Silence? How WeChat censorship and surveillance impact the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China

Expected date of submission (semester, academic year)
(Thesis must be submitted according to the Academic Calendar.)
Summer semester, AY 2023-2024

Main research question (max. 250 characters):

How do censorship and surveillance on WeChat impact the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China?

Current state of research on the topic (max. 1800 characters):

The popular application WeChat, whose "super-sticky" affordances and interoperability earned it the title "King of the Chinese Internet" (Yu, 2022; Chen, Mao, & Qiu, 2018), is among the many platforms subject to the Chinese government's strict Internet policies. This situation has sparked investigations by mostly Chinese media scholars and Western "China watchers" into how regulators can bar accounts, block users, or ban content (McLeod, 2022; Borak, 2018; Yoo, 2018; Shen, 2018). WeChat's attributes are seen to encourage solidarity with implications in developing civil society (Tu, 2016), maintaining social capital (Pang, 2018), or shaping intimate intercultural relationships (Xiong & Liu, 2022).

Beyond WeChat's social applications, Chinese users find creative ways to evade censorship on the app, including "silent protests" (e.g., the viral "A4 movement" during anti-COVID-19 demonstrations in late 2022; see Movius, 2023; Koetse, 2022; Malleck, 2022; and Zhou & Tobin, 2022) that have been suppressed by regulators.

Now, how do migrant Filipinos in China understand their experience of censorship and surveillance on WeChat? And how do they navigate this phenomenon? For sure, the app removes geographical and temporal barriers and aids migrant Filipinos in their work, helps them find compatriots or employment (Talidong, 2020; Lim, 2018), or connects them to their families. Despite these, Filipinos in China also face the same level of restrictions and censorship on the app. But how exactly do those issues affect them,

particularly how they use WeChat and other unregulated digital platforms to connect to the world outside China? My master's thesis addresses this question through a phenomenological study approach with data from Filipino migrants in China.

Expected theoretical framework (max. 1800 characters):

In this thesis, I will integrate the following theoretical frameworks to situate my research within the phenomenon of digital censorship and surveillance and the experience and acceptance of such by Filipino migrants in China.

- **Normalization of censorship**: In a job market paper under review, Yang (2021) discusses why Chinese Internet users accept or normalize censorship. The most telling strand finds censorship of non-political content seemingly increases support for censorship apparatuses and the regime that does it (p. 24). Yang also advances the alternative explanation of "bundling", where "individuals do not support political censorship yet favor censorship of non-political content" (p. 25).
- **Multi-actor framework of resistance to digital surveillance**: Martin, van Brakel, and Bernhard (2009) proposed a digital surveillance framework that elaborated the relevant actors and the processes underlying the relationships of resistance to surveillance. Besides the surveyed and surveillance authorities, Martin et al. encourage looking at international and commercial actors, surveillance artifacts, and surveyors (pp. 222-225) to understand the power play and implications of surveillance schemes facilitated by digital technology.
- **Censorship and behavioral contagion on opinion expression**: Zhu and Fu (2021) advance a four-layer formulation of censorship exposure. Particularly, they hypothesize that intensive global censorship prompts users to remain silent, while communities act as a buffer to the impacts of censorship. Additionally, they find the phenomenon of "behavioral contagion", where expressions of users' opinions against censorship spread and thus can counteract its influence on them and their immediate communities (p. 3649).

Expected methodology, and methods for data gathering and analysis (max. 1800 characters):

I will conduct a phenomenological study to understand how the phenomenon of WeChat censorship and surveillance impacts the digital communication behavior of Filipino migrants in China.

- **Data source and sampling strategy**
  - Twenty Filipino migrants in China, recruited through quota and snowball sampling, will come from the following groups [1] : (1) migrant workers (including professionals, "undocumented" workers[2], and business owners), (2) admins of Filipino WeChat groups, (3) spouses of Chinese nationals, and (4) international students. These migrants must have lived in China for a minimum of two years since 2011[3] to get a context of Chinese censorship and be actively using a personal WeChat account.

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[1] I will ask the participants to sign a consent form. The names and identities of all participants will be withheld to protect them from potential surveillance.

[2] "Undocumented" migrant Filipino workers have their work permits or visas expired but are staying in China to work.

[3] WeChat was launched in 2011 but gained popularity in 2013.

- o Textual and non-textual evidence of resisting or evading censorship and surveillance on WeChat from the 20 participants. This may include messages, videos, or screenshots sent by participants to other people via WeChat or other platforms.
- **Data gathering method**
  - o The participants will be asked beforehand to sign a consent form and collect evidence of their resistance to, circumvention of, or evasion of censorship and surveillance on WeChat. These copies must be sent via a secured email (ProtonMail) to protect them from state surveillance. These documents will be content analyzed to inform the list of questions to be asked to the participants.
  - o I will conduct semi-structured virtual interviews on Zoom or MS Teams between Jan and Feb 2024.[4] The interviews are expected to last 1.5 hours each and will be voice-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Follow-up interviews may be done in early March 2024 or additional evidence may be requested from participants as needed.

Expected research design (data to be analyzed, for example, the titles of analyzed newspapers and selected time period):

- **Research design:** Qualitative phenomenological research (Delve Ho. & Limpaecher, 2022; Neubauer, Wiktop & Varpio, 2019) to understand Filipino migrants' experience of censorship and surveillance and inquire about how this phenomenon impacts their digital communication behavior.
- **Data analysis**
  - o **Content analysis of textual and non-textual data.** These sources will come from existing WeChat conversations, photos, and other textual and non-textual sources within the past three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the height of user data collection by the Chinese government for pandemic control measures. This approach will inform the interview questions and corroborate the themes/patterns arising from the interview data.
  - o **Inductive coding analysis (Vears & Gillam, 2022) of interview data.** To do this, I will systematically assess interview transcripts from each set to find broad themes that will be examined further for emerging patterns or recurring themes. These trends will be coded, grouped, and analyzed to identify how the participants relate and react to the other actors and schemes in digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat.
- **Time period:** The interviews will happen between Jan and Feb 2024.
- **Expected issues:** I anticipate that interviewees may avoid responding to specific questions out of fear or for security reasons. This issue may impact the reliability of data coming from China-based participants. Additionally, not every participant may submit evidence of resistance to censorship or surveillance due to their differences in beliefs and socio-economic statuses in China, and this may pose issue regarding the availability of data. If this happens, I will drop the content analysis method and go directly to the interviews.

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[4] I will try my best to conduct face-to-face interviews during a potential research visit in China in early 2024. In this case, I will ask the participants to sign a printed copy of consent forms and transfer evidence via a VPN-connected laptop to avoid risks of surveillance.

Expected thesis structure (chapters and subchapters with brief description of their content):

Introduction
- Context of censorship and surveillance on WeChat and other Chinese social media platforms
- China as a lucrative work destination for expatriates, including Filipinos
- Current issues related to WeChat censorship and surveillance
- Link to research questions

Theoretical framework and literature review
- Overview of digital censorship and surveillance studies
  - Definitions of digital censorship and digital surveillance
  - What has been done from the Western perspective to more recent research focused on China
  - Normalization of censorship theory (overview and relevance)
  - Multi-actor framework of resistance to digital surveillance (overview and relevance)
  - What are the critiques and gaps?
- Overview of communication behaviors and digital media
  - Previous studies about behavior and media
  - Censorship and behavioral contagion on opinion expression (overview and relevance)
  - What are the critiques and gaps?

Methodology
- Research design: Overview of qualitative phenomenological research approach
- Data source and sampling strategy: Explanation and justification of data sources
- Data analysis: Overview and justification of inductive coding analysis and content analysis
- Ethical considerations and research limitations

Discussion of results
- Answers to research questions
- Future research directions

Conclusion
- Summary of key findings

Bibliography

Appendices
- Research instrument: Questionnaire for semi-structured interviews
- Selected transcripts
- Tables: Inductive coding table, participant profiles

- Images: Evidence of WeChat censorship and surveillance

Basic literature list (at least 5 most important works related to the topic and the method(s) of analysis; all works should be briefly characterized on 2-5 lines):

Critical theoretical frameworks

Yang, T. (2021). *Normalization of Censorship: Evidence from China.* Job market paper, Washington University in Saint Louis, Department of Political Science.

- This job market paper offers an entry point to the complex censorship realities in China, mainly how the Chinese seemingly accept censorship and surveillance schemes on digital platforms. Additionally, this dissertation chapter grounds the discussion about censorship in China, which has been approached through Western perspectives.

Ollier-Malaterre, A. (2023). Living with Digital Surveillance in China: Citizens' Narratives on Technology, Privacy, and Governance (1st Edition ed.). London: Routledge.

- *Living with Digital Surveillance in China* is a newly published book I have yet to read thoroughly. Its opening chapters give working definitions of surveillance and privacy, while its last section explores the emotional and mental weight of surveillance, which will offer deeper insights into my thesis on the impact of censorship and surveillance on digital communication behaviors.

Martin, A. K., van Brakel, R. E., & Bernhard, D. J. (2009). Understanding resistance to digital surveillance: Towards a multi-disciplinary, multi-actor framework. *Surveillance & Society, 6*(3), 213-232.

- Martin, van Brakel, and Bernhard's digital surveillance framework provides a nuanced approach to understanding the elaborate relationships happening during digital surveillance. This framework is essential in situating this study within the larger contexts of censorship and surveillance, which have been traditionally viewed as a top-down power-play phenomenon.

Brunner, E. A., & DeLuca, K. M. (2019). Creative Confrontations: Exploring Activism, Surveillance, and Censorship in China and the United States. IAFOR Journal of Psychology & the Behavioral Sciences, 5(SI), 75-88.

- This research adds more perspectives regarding resistance to surveillance, but in the context of activism and whistleblowing.

Zhu, Y., & Fu, K.-w. (2021). Speaking up or staying silent? Examining the influences of censorship and behavioral contagion on opinion (non-) expression in China. *New Media & Society, 23*(12), 3634-3655.

- This study is vital in advancing my thesis toward the potential actions of surveilled or censored users in a regulated platform such as WeChat. Zhu and Fu's finding on behavioral contagion as a counteracting force against censorship needs to be examined in the context of migrant/expatriate

communities in China, especially since these groups are subject to governmental regulations and thus may not have enough political capital and power to spread behavioral contagion.

On the research design and methodology

Neubauer BE, Witkop CT, Varpio L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. Perspect Med Educ. 2019 Apr 8(2):90-97. doi: 10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2. PMID: 30953335; PMCID: PMC6468135. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6468135/>

- Neubauer et al.'s review of phenomenological studies provides a critical overview of the strengths and limitations of such research design. This review also helps clarify the direction of my thesis in terms of operationalizing my theoretical frameworks.

Delve. Ho, L., & Limpaecher, A. (2022c, March 17). What is Phenomenological Research Design? Essential Guide to Coding Qualitative Data. <https://delvetool.com/blog/phenomenology>

- This website explainer article overviews the process of conducting a phenomenological study, which is the main research design of my thesis.

Vears, D. F., & Gillam, L. (2022). Inductive content analysis: A guide for beginning qualitative researchers. Focus on Health Professional Education, 23(1), 111-127.

- This paper provides a reference for conducting inductive coding analysis (ICA). I used such approach in a previous exam paper about a related topic about WeChat for the Journalism, Media, and Cultural Globalization course in the Mundus Journalism program at Aarhus University.

Related theses and dissertations (list of B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. theses defended at Charles University or other academic institutions in the last five years):

Uildriks, T. (2021). On the use of WeChat among Chinese international students to create a sense of home. Leiden, Netherlands. Master's thesis. University of Leiden, Netherlands. < https://staff-studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A3275540/view>

Deutmeyer, Dana Lee (2021). Divergent Narratives on Chinese Internet Censorship: Western-centric versus Local Perspectives. Master's thesis. University of Minnesota. <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/223096>

Stepar, Roman (2020). China's Sharp Power: How China Seeks to Influence and Coerce its Neighbours. Master's thesis. Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Studies. Department of International Relations. Supervisor doc. PhDr. Jan Karlas, Ph.D., M.A. <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/118653>

Yan, Yumin (2018). "Facebook and WeChat: Chinese International Students' Social Media Usage and How It Influences Their Intercultural Adaptation". Master's thesis. Marquette University. <https://epublications.marquette.edu/theses_open/471>

Date / Signature of the student:		14.11.2023

THIS PART TO BE FILLED BY THE ACADEMIC SUPERVISOR:

I confirm that I have consulted this research proposal with the author and that the proposal is related to my field of expertise at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

I agree to be the Thesis supervisor.

MIESSLER JAN

14.11.2023

| Surname and name of the supervisor | Date / Signature of the supervisor |

Further recommendations related to the topic, structure and methods for analysis:

Further recommendations of literature related to the topic:

The research proposal has to be printed, signed and submitted to the FSV UK registry office (podatelna) in two copies, **by November 15**, addressed to the Program Coordinator.
Accepted research proposals have to be picked up at the Program Coordinator's Office, Sandra Lábová. The accepted research proposal needs to be included in the hard copy version of the submitted thesis.

RESEARCH PROPOSALS NEED TO BE APPROVED BY THE HEAD OF ERASMUS MUNDUS JOURNALISM PROGRAM.

Abstract

Filipino migrants in China tread a fine line between tacit subservience and surreptitious circumvention as they experience digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. Through descriptive and reflexive phenomenology, this master's thesis delves into the lived experiences of fifteen Filipino migrants who have worked or stayed in China to find out how they understand the phenomena, scrutinize the issues they have faced with them, and determine whether these experiences impact their digital communication behaviors. Their lived experiences, fleshed out by my reflexive role as a researcher-translator, reveal a potential "pseudo-surveyor" role, shedding light on the boundaries of agency in resistance to surveillance. This is crucial, especially with how Filipino migrants on WeChat self-censor and regulate group communication dynamics to address the app's tendency to become an online dragnet for digital surveillance and censorship. The experiences also suggest an ambivalence toward change in digital communication behavior since digital communication attitudes and diversionary tactics on WeChat may contribute to stronger resistance.

This study expands the discussion about digital authoritarianism, particularly in light of growing concerns among journalists and academics about how China's digital surveillance and censorship technologies and strategies can be imported or are already being used by other states for discriminatory, commercial, or political purposes. This study's findings can inform mechanisms, regulations, or research in local communities and global contexts where digital surveillance and censorship strategies intersect with digital governance and social media lifestyles.

Keywords

Digital censorship, digital surveillance, WeChat, phenomenology, Philippines, China, digital authoritarianism, surveillance capitalism

Title

WeChat in Silence? How WeChat surveillance and censorship experience impacts the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China

Abstrakt

Filipínští migranti v Číně se pohybují na tenké hranici mezi tichou podřízeností a skrytým obcházením prostřednictvím digitální cenzury a dohledu na WeChatu. Tato magisterská práce se prostřednictvím deskriptivní a reflexivní fenomenologie zabývá životními zkušenostmi patnácti filipínských migrantů, kteří pracovali nebo pobývali v Číně, aby zjistila, jak těmto jevům rozumějí, podrobně prozkoumala problémy, kterým v souvislosti s nimi čelili, a zjistila, zda tyto zkušenosti ovlivňují jejich chování v digitální komunikaci. Jejich žité zkušenosti, doplněné mou reflexivní rolí výzkumníka-překladatele, odhalují potenciální roli „pseudoprůzkumníka" a vrhají světlo na hranice schopnosti odporu vůči dohledu. To je zásadní, zejména s ohledem na to, jak filipínští migranti na WeChatu autocenzurují a regulují dynamiku skupinové komunikace, aby se vypořádali s tendencí aplikace stát se online drahou pro digitální cenzuru a dohled. Zkušenosti také naznačují ambivalenci vůči změně chování v digitální komunikaci, protože postoje k digitální komunikaci a taktiky odvádění pozornosti na WeChatu mohou přispívat k silnějšímu odporu.

Tato studie rozšiřuje diskusi o digitálním autoritářství a zohledňuje rostoucí obavy novinářů a akademiků z toho, jak čínské technologie a strategie digitální cenzury a dohledu byly importovány nebo jsou již využívány jinými státy k diskriminačním, obchodním nebo politickým účelům. Zjištění této studie mohou být využita pro mechanismy, předpisy nebo výzkum v místních komunitách a globálních kontextech, kde se strategie digitální cenzury a dohledu protínají s digitální správou a životním stylem na sociálních médiích.

Klíčová slova

Digitální cenzura, digitální dohled, WeChat, fenomenologie, Filipíny, Čína, digitální autoritářství, kapitalismus dohledu

Název práce

Povídáme si v tichosti? Jak zkušenosti s cenzurou a sledováním na WeChatu ovlivňují digitální komunikaci filipínských migrantů v Číně?

Acknowledgments

In the two years of conceptualizing, procrastinating, writing, and finishing my master's thesis, I faced exciting changes in my personal and professional life. This research became a reflective and cathartic project summarizing my migrant experience in China. It helped me articulate my observations and reconsider many professional options. As I write this short piece in Tübingen, I cannot help but recall the mixed yet fantastic emotions I have had upon beginning my Erasmus Mundus Journalism program.

I am grateful to my family in the Philippines, especially my parents Maria Corazon and Armando, for their moral support and prayers. Also, to my closest friends who have always believed in me, that I will push through any obstacles unharmed and intact: this academic project is yet another proof that I did it, with your help and trust. My Mundus Journalism instructors and peers also deserve a special mention. Bettina Andersen, Jan Miessler, Katerina Turkova, Sandra Labova, Teke Jacob Ngomba, Cecilia Arregui Olivera, Steffen Moestrup, Christoph Raetzsch, Jay-vee Marasigan Pangan, Qixuan He, Dinh Vu Bao Hoa, Shirsha Chakraborty, Brenda Asuma, Nariman Moustafa—and all fantastic Mundusians who made this two-year journey worthwhile and memorable—thank you very much. I am grateful to Perlita Pengson, Reysa Alenzuela, Marison Rodriguez, Razel Olifernes, Louise Althea Bukas, Kiarra Manlapig, Nica Eleazar, Šimon Charvát, Martin Světnička, and many others for the support.

I also thank the Charles University Faculty of Social Sciences for awarding me the EMJ MA Thesis Research Support Grant 2023/2024. Likewise, I express my appreciation to the participants who shared their lived experiences with me. I hope this research will help Philippine authorities find solutions to unfortunate situations faced by Filipino migrant communities worldwide.

As I expressed in my previous academic publication, and as a personal reminder: "Good things come to those who wait; better things come to those who keep their faith." Indeed, great things come in God's perfect time.

Andy Peñafuerte III in Tübingen, Germany | 29 July 2024

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Introduction

It was usual for the members of a private WeChat group of book enthusiasts to share cover images of recommended publications. However, in one conversation at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, an image of a gray rectangle hovered beside a member's avatar. No one knew what the image was all about, as tapping it would enlarge the mysterious box. However, the group's Filipina administrator saw its content: *The Economist*'s February 2020 issue, whose cover showed a globe donning a facemask printed with the Chinese flag. Later, the group was suspended, and the sender's WeChat account was shut down for "violating rules".

Such a scenario happens almost daily on WeChat, where the Chinese government keeps a tight grip on the content created and shared across the platform. Especially during the coronavirus pandemic, Chinese Internet censors worked aggressively to block keywords, topics, and names of entities on the app to control the already-politicized narrative (Matsakis, 2020). Yet, Chinese users found clever ways to counter surveyors and censors, like what millions did in the "A4 protests" in late 2022, when they brandished blank A4 paper sheets on streets or posted its emoji format on WeChat, Weibo, and other social platforms to express their muted disillusionment over the Chinese government's handling of the paralyzing outbreaks and response to mounting complaints nationwide. Throughout this unfolding event existed the parallel reality of thousands of migrants in China equally unsettled by the uncertainty. The Filipina administrator from the WeChat bookworm group and managers of many other digital Filipino communities urged members to eschew reposting any content about the pandemic to avoid the risks of banning or deletion of their WeChat accounts. And yet, this compliance with stringent restrictions due to state surveillance and censorship did not just happen during the coronavirus pandemic. It has been a part of anyone's reality in China: obey and shut up, or else face harsh punishment. But it is not just always about blind following or clueless subservience that admins and users experience on WeChat and other similar social platforms.

As for the Filipino diaspora in China, migrant workers Filipinos have used WeChat to find compatriots, search for jobs, and connect to families back home (Talidong, 2020; Lim, 2018), while some community groups have mobilized and promoted the country's culture and cuisine through the app (Peñafuerte, 2018). Still, within the Philippine context, WeChat remains an "understudied and emerging platform" with a "disinformative potential" (Lanuza et al., 2021, p. 70; 73). For instance, I saw as a journalist and a Filipino expatriate in China how several WeChat groups of migrant Filipinos became rife with disinformation, where users sent unverified information during the pandemic or outright fake content about electoral candidates before the 2022 Philippine general elections.[1] This situation remained unexplored in the media and the academe due to the relative interpersonal contexts of such conversations and the different focus on reporting of these issues (especially since journalists, academics, and civil society put their attention on the coordinated inauthentic behaviors on Facebook and TikTok and their impact on the recent Philippine elections.[2]

Research questions and theoretical framework

WeChat certainly removes geographical and temporal barriers and aids migrant Filipinos in their lives in China. Despite these, they can be caught in the wide-ranging dragnet of state surveillance and censorship on the app. But how exactly do they understand and navigate these phenomena?

I tapped into my own experience of surveillance and censorship in China, where I worked as a migrant journalist, to establish a research inquiry. As my lived experience alone would hardly articulate or detail the general understanding of surveillance and censorship in China from the Filipino migrant perspective, I deepened my probe by interviewing fifteen Filipino migrants living or who have lived in the country. My lived experience and theirs are distinct, and so I combined descriptive and reflexive phenomenology methods to investigate the following research questions:

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[1] This is a personal anecdote as I was a member of such WeChat groups.
[2] For examples, see Yu W. E., 2023; Yu W. E., 2021, Mendoza et al., 2023, and Uyheng & Carley, 2021.

RQ1. How do migrant Filipinos in China understand their experience of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?

RQ2. What issues do they face with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?

RQ3. How do the experiences of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat impact the digital communication behaviors of migrant Filipinos in China?

I situated these questions in the research of Zhu and Fu (2021) on censorship exposure and its relationship to behavioral contagion and opinion expression and of Martin, van Brakel, and Bernhard (2009) on the relevant actors and the processes underlying the relationships of resistance to surveillance. Zhu and Fu's study found several effects of censorship on opinion expression (i.e., a **chilling effect**, a **backfire effect**, and their hypothesized **minimal effect**) (2021, p. 3645; 3647), while Martin et al. encourage looking at **international** and **commercial actors**, **surveillance artifacts**, and **surveyors** (pp. 222-225) to understand the power play and implications of surveillance schemes facilitated by digital technology. I further discuss these frameworks and their place in the extensive literature on surveillance and censorship in the next chapter.

Significance of this research

The regulatory practices in digital surveillance and censorship have implications for the daily lives and realities of citizens and foreigners in China. My phenomenological analysis of participants' lived experiences suggests a potential "pseudo-surveyor" role, in which they perform surveillance and censorship over other WeChat users. This amplifies self-censorship and group gatekeeping already practiced by many Filipino migrants on WeChat, considering its tendency to become an online dragnet for digital surveillance and censorship. Moreover, participants express an ambivalence toward change in digital communication behavior since digital communication attitudes and diversionary tactics on WeChat may contribute to stronger resistance.

This study expands the knowledge about digital authoritarianism, considering the mounting concerns of journalists and academics about how China's digital surveillance and censorship technologies and strategies have been imported or are

already being used by other states for discriminatory, commercial, or political purposes (Limbourg, 2024; Andrzejewski et al., 2023). This study's findings can inform mechanisms and regulations in global contexts where digital surveillance and censorship strategies intersect with digital governance and social media lifestyles.

Differences from the proposal

In my original research proposal, I used the title, "WeChat in Silence? How WeChat censorship and surveillance impact the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China". I changed it to the current title, "WeChat in Silence? How WeChat censorship and surveillance *experience impacts* the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China", to emphasize experience as the research focus and align with the titling conventions of other phenomenological studies. Additionally, I reversed the order of "surveillance and censorship" in the thesis and research questions to follow my arguments in the literature review and for consistency.

I had four research questions, with the last (RQ4: "How do they navigate this phenomenon?") having two sub-questions (RQ4A: "Specifically, how does the phenomenon affect their digital communication behavior of using WeChat?" and RQ4B: "How does the phenomenon affect their use of digital platforms to connect to the world outside of China?"). It became apparent from the interviews that these questions were redundant, hence their dropping. I reordered RQ2 and RQ3, which were reversed in the original proposal, for a more logical flow.

I also intended to use Yang's (2021) research (conditionally accepted in a journal) on how the phenomenon is normalized in China as a theoretical framework. Ultimately, I incorporated it into the literature review to reinforce my arguments about China's information cyberculture order.

The proposal and actual thesis had two more significant differences in the research approach and categorization of interviewees. I wanted to conduct a qualitative mixed-methods approach using two data sources: (1) evidence of surveillance and censorship on WeChat from the participants, which would have been content-analyzed using framing analyses to inform the questionnaire and corroborate themes or patterns that would arise from the interview data; and (2) participant interviews. For the first intended data set, I hoped to collect existing WeChat

conversations, photos, and other textual and non-textual evidence (e.g., screenshots of explicit censorship, conversations using doublespeak or any forms of language circumvention, and other related and relevant pieces) within the past three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, during the height of user data collection by the Chinese government for pandemic control measures. However, it became apparent during the interviews that nearly all participants did not have or save evidence of surveillance and censorship on their WeChat accounts out of safety concerns or simply because they did not find the need to do so (see **Chapter 4** for the elaboration). The dropping of this data source barely had any implications for the quality of interview data.

Regarding the participants, I originally identified four classes of interviewees, with each category having five people: (1) **migrant workers**, including professionals, business owners, and undocumented workers; (2) **international students** taking a bachelor, master's, doctorate, or postgraduate degree at any Chinese educational institutions; (3) **spouses of Chinese nationals**; and (4) **administrators of Filipino WeChat groups** with membership beyond 100 people and that have mobilized communities, organized activities for, and spread information to the Filipino diaspora in the past two years. Although the classes intended to capture the usual groups of Filipino migrants in China, such categorization did not account for intersectionality and limited the search for participants, and thus prompted me to modify my sampling strategy. The criteria and snowball sampling techniques allowed for greater flexibility and introduced unexpected participants who provided much more nuanced and contextualized discussions. Additionally, during the data-gathering period between late February and early May 2024, I trimmed the sample size to fifteen participants from the proposed size of twenty to concentrate on my contact time with the interviewees and achieve high-quality conversations (Marshall et al., 2013, p. 20).

In my proposal, I also expressed my anticipation that interviewees may avoid responding to specific questions out of fear or for security reasons, which may impact data reliability. On the contrary, all interviewees expressed their willingness to answer questions about their experiences with digital surveillance and censorship, save for the diplomats who asked me to remove any references to their postings for security reasons. Their answers are elaborated in the succeeding chapters.

In analyzing data, I proposed using inductive coding analysis (ICA) (Vears & Gillam, 2022) to find codes from interview transcripts. However, in my subsequent method informed by reading authoritative literature on phenomenological research, I dropped coding and used the logic of ICA to structure my analysis, following van Manen's dictate that codifications or conceptual abstractions "can never adequately produce phenomenological understandings and insights" (van Manen, 2014, p. 320). I combined ICA with several phenomenological methods, which I explain further in **Chapter 2**.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Arguments

In this chapter, I critically review the literature about digital surveillance and censorship in China, situating them in the extensive academic perspectives from recent years. The first subchapter provides historical contexts and several working definitions throughout surveillance and censorship studies. In the second subchapter, I outline key themes in the still-expanding conceptualizations of China's information cyberculture order, including the theoretical arguments on digital surveillance and censorship that support the framework of this study. In the final subchapter, I discuss the repercussions of this information order globally and in the Philippine setting.

1.1 Perspectives about surveillance and censorship

A considerable amount of the literature, arguments, and commentary on surveillance and censorship in the preceding century were built on the Foucauldian idea of the panopticon, or the metaphorical gaze whose presence and power control over individuals mentally (Foucault, 1980, p. 155, as cited in Kperogi, 2023, p. 2). This perspective has since been recalibrated and repurposed for different social aspects, mainly in the mass media, on electronic networks (or the "SuperPanopticon", from Poster, 1990; Poster, 1995, as cited in Selwyn, 2000) and on social media (or the "omniopticon" from Kandias et al., 2013, p. 271); socio-economic practices (or the "panspectron", from Hookway, 2000); migration (or the "banopticon", from Bigo, 2008); and more. The different manifestations of the panopticon engendered surveillance whose foci and objects—us—are seen as a "discrete atom, self-sufficient and autonomous, but subject to individuation for classification" (Lyon, 2001, p. 179). From this perspective, our actions and outputs are considered data that can be harvested. Western states' investment in and deployment of surveillance methods increased considerably following the "War on Terror" campaigns of several Western countries and Edward Snowden's exposes of global surveillance programs in the

2010s.[3] Amid these, scholars have called for holding surveillance systems accountable in the face of "dataveillance" or digital surveillance that jeopardizes our rights for economic or political purposes (Lyon, 2001, pp. 171; 179-180; Clarke, 2019).

To be sure, there are numerous working definitions and conceptualizations of digital surveillance. For the sake of argument, I refer to Gohdes's (2024) syntheses of the literature, in which she describes the occurrence of digital surveillance on two levels: (1) content, which includes all forms of text and media that can be subject to state censorship and (2) metadata, or details that describe the essential attributes of an information object (Gill, 2008, as cited in Gohdes, 2024, p. 35). States can effectively restrict citizens' access to the Internet through mass surveillance methods facilitated by constraints to anonymity (such as biometric data registration) or security controls (such as using government-issued identifications, registering SIM cards, reducing access to virtual private networks and encrypted apps, and more) (Gohdes, 2024, p. 37). In effect, digital surveillance systems engender a hostile environment that can lead to censorship and self-censorship, which previous research has already established (Stoycheff et al., 2020, p. 484). And other information that passes through or has already been subject to surveillance can still be monitored for censorship. The pervasiveness of censorship can happen on three layers:[4]

1. Top-level or infrastructural-layer censorship occurs when states obstruct access to networks, typically through complete Internet shutdowns, "curfews" or timed preventions, or politically motivated or intentional exclusion of areas for network coverage.
2. In domain-level or network-layer censorship, states restrain access to websites or applications by banning software and Internet service providers (ISP) locally, conducting denial-of-service (DoS) or distributed DoS (DDoS) attacks to block global users from entering websites, or redirections and blacklisting of specific keywords web addresses.

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[3] Ball and Webster, 2003; Lowe, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Mackenzie, 2021 as cited in Gohdes, 2024, p. 34.
[4] Based on Gohdes, 2024, pp. 21-23, 25-29, 30-32 and Kawerau, Weidmann, & Dainotti, 2023, pp. 61-62.

3. For content-level or application-layer censorship, states can remove, ban, or hide specific types of information from online resources they do not manage or control by conducting aggressive and threatening tactics such as harassing content producers (or offline repression), drowning out content (or injecting misleading information), or forcing websites to moderate or remove content.

The Chinese government's use, combination, and deployment of these surveillance and censorship strategies for internal political legitimacy and geopolitical issues have been extensively investigated by international organizations, journalists, and scholars from within and outside the country.[5] However, as I discuss in the following subchapter, some scholars note the risk of viewing Chinese actions from a binary perspective and thus advance a more nuanced view of the country's information cyberculture order.

1.2 China's information cyberculture order

1.2.1 Chinese governance and Internet media dynamics

A prevailing perspective in the journalistic coverage of or commentary about the Chinese Internet is that it is dystopian or dysfunctional,[6] and yet a parallel universe exists beyond the "Great Firewall". Such a "black-and-white" and antithetical view pits the Chinese Internet dynamics against Western-centric democratic principles or perspectives (Deutmeyer, 2021). For some Chinese researchers, this dichotomous stance, especially about digital surveillance and censorship, conflicts with the experience of many Chinese who support such a regime for reasons like dealing with security concerns and preferring a "stable" social environment (Su et al., 2022, p. 389). Chinese also have a low demand for uncensored content, likely due to the regime's

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[5] Among the countless studies on China's surveillance and censorship, some interesting insights come from the following sources: Amnesty International's report (2002) on the state of Chinese Internet at the beginning of the 21st century; the extensive works of King, Pan & Roberts, including censorship and collective expression (2013), reverse-engineering of censorship (2014), and content fabrication online (2017) among others; Perry & Roda (2017) on comparing censorship technologies and freedom of expressions in China and Europe; and Tai & Zhu (2022) on China's cyber-sovereignty.
[6] For example, Mozur, 2018; The Economist, 2018; Kuo, 2020.

concerted strategies to shape public knowledge through education, media, and governance (Pan, 2022, p. 1). It would make sense for the Chinese Communist Party to carry on digital surveillance and censorship, but several researchers have pointed out a subtle tradeoff or an upside in avoiding so. Government officials can data-mine social media opinion to develop strategies for positive propaganda or neutralize negative comments, leading to a rise of a lucrative opinion monitoring market (Hou, 2017, pp. 420-421). The regime also learns information from diverse commentary and content online to identify opponents and adapt repression to address social problems before they go haywire and engender collective action (Qin et al., 2017, p. 137; Xu X., 2021, p. 323; King et al., p. 497).

Still, there is an undeniable tension in those scenarios. WeChat and other social networking and communication platforms subject to the Chinese government's political regulation have become an "information pipe"—a physical infrastructure or virtual mechanism that regimes can control to govern rules for or covertly influence information flows (Kurlantzick, 2023). To be sure, a broad strand of research and commentary on WeChat has touched upon its social dimensions in the Chinese context[7], considering its immense popularity[8] and user-friendly affordances that make it an all-around "mash-up" app (Tinmaz & Doan, 2023) and an integral tool for businesses and authorities to connect to audiences (Thomala, 2022). WeChat's features that have made it so wildly successful in China (such as e-commerce, in-app payments, and third-party app plugins) are being emulated by Western tech companies to create an "everything app", as envisioned by Elon Musk for X (Ray, 2023), or the eventual "WeChat-ification" of Facebook (Crouch, 2016).

However, the biggest baggage of WeChat and other Chinese social platforms is their political expediency linked to Chinese governance and media dynamics. For instance, information flow on WeChat is a "distinctly socially driven experience" determined by "organic networks and their varying degrees of affinity and trust" (Yu & Sun, 2023). The amount and type of content passing through these platforms, like those highly sensitive and political posts related to corruption allegations or protests, can become so overwhelming that it generates an "information shock", which the

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[7] For instance, in emergencies, as researched by Xie et al., 2017 and Chen et al., 2018.

[8] As of the third quarter of 2023, WeChat had over one billion monthly users (Thomala, 2024).

Chinese government addresses by gauging social media opinion, pervasive policing, and censorship (Qin et al., 2017, pp. 119-120; Han, 2018b, p. 55).

1.2.2 Cyber-Leninism: China's information cyberculture order

The tension in China's dynamic policing of information may be explained by the provocative "shades of gray" perspective: to understand Chinese surveillance and censorship, one must examine local contexts (Deutmeyer, 2021, p. 1). Chinese society largely operates through the unlikely union of two belief systems that call for discipline to pursue and maintain harmony: (1) communism, as a political construct, promises egalitarian progress, while (2) Confucianism encourages obedience and filial piety (Creemers, 2017, p. 260). In imperial China, harmony was thought to bring peace and security and was valued by the public to achieve "peaceful coexistence among different nations" (Yan, 2021, p. 89).[9]

The idiosyncrasies and contradictions of communism and Confucianism, combined with social upheavals and political restructuring in China, most especially in the establishment of its People's Republic, engineered the country's current political and information culture. This arrangement prescribes (1) combining "legitimate values, preference, and interests" harmoniously in a way that (2) sees society's contradictions and problems as issues to be solved; thus (3) achieving a "single, defined future goal" (Creemers, 2017, pp. 263-265). This paradigm is rooted in a philosophy that establishes honesty and trustworthiness as cornerstones of social governance with "reliable social and economic relationships", which, in effect, maintains stability and has enabled new forms of surveillance (Ollier-Malaterre, 2024, pp. 41-42). This narrative has been adapted to the Internet and reconfigured governance, although with varying ends. In what has become **Cyber-Leninism** in China, the government has harnessed Internet technologies for various purposes. Some national policies driven by digitalization include the "Made in China 2025" industrial blueprint that aims to boost China's manufacturing innovation (Xinhua, 2017). Locally, government officials turn to platforms and other networked technologies to reach more populace, enhance

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[9] This frame of thinking has manifested in subtle ways, for instance, in architecture: the Forbidden City complex, which was the center of Chinese imperial politics for over 600 years, houses several main halls emphasizing harmony (Yan, 2021, p. 89).

the delivery of public services, and monitor "social thinking trends" (Creemers, 2017, pp. 268-269), but equally use these technologies to self-promote propaganda achievements, cover up scandals, or mask incompetence (Han, 2018a, p. 181).

The Cyber-Leninist sphere has also restructured the Chinese public: not only has it fragmented and pluralized people online, but it also sparked collective action and scrutiny towards the regime and against its critics (King et al., 2017, as cited in Han, 2018a, p. 179). Some studies have found that despite an authoritarian context, many Chinese with higher levels of political interest, life satisfaction, and media literacy are more likely to use social media frequently to engage in public discourse and civil engagement (Ye et al., 2017, pp. 712-713) and participate in crisis communications during public emergencies (Xie et al., 2017, pp. 749-750).

1.3 Theoretical arguments in China's digital surveillance and censorship

Given China's pluralized cyberspace with contending "civil and uncivil discourses and behaviors",[10] the regime's censorship activities are just but one dimension in the regime's push for cyber sovereignty,[11] a normative yet controversial argument that calls for states to respect other states' right to choose their own Internet development path, management model, public policies, and "equal participation in international cyberspace governance" (Segal, 2020, p. 87; Gao, 2022; Cary, 2023). This concept has reverberating effects on how discourse and expression play out in Chinese society.

Scholars have noted the Chinese government's "two strategies" in surveilling the population and censoring content to suppress internal threats such as uprisings before they jeopardize the regime's legitimacy: (1) avoid engaging on controversial issues, such as censoring content critical of the government or its leadership, and (2) stop discussions that can potentially cause collective action through active discussion and censorship. [12] This means that people can voice out concerns freely and individually but are constrained in doing so collectively. Such a kind of communication

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[10] Min, 2016, as cited in Qin et al., 2017, p. 137; Han, 2018a, p. 131.

[11] China's concept of cyber sovereignty was first announced by President Xi Jinping at the World Internet Conference in Wuzhen in 2015. This concept can be understood as China's proposal for "a new norm" for Internet governance, rooted in domestic agenda and connected to a "long-standing tradition of compound sovereignty" (Tai & Zhu, 2022, p. 473; 493).

[12] See King, Pan, & Roberts' works, including in 2013 (pp. 28-29); 2014 (p. 891); and 2017 (p. 496).

ecosystem has been seen to influence Chinese citizens' willingness to participate in political discussions and express public opinion.[13]

1.3.1 Resistance to digital surveillance

Some scholars have argued that surveillance strategies, not just in China but elsewhere, exist in a "continuum between care and control" (Ollier-Malaterre, 2024, p. 26), considering their pervasiveness in our daily lives. The bone of contention, however, is the power relations underlying surveillance apparatuses. For instance, the mobile devices and Internet-of-things technologies that track health data, monitor emergencies, combat crime, and the like are the same mechanisms that states and corporations leverage to control or direct citizens, as well as channel and shape political and commercial actions. In China, some studies have found Chinese citizens' high approval rates for state surveillance technologies, particularly for security purposes (Su et al., 2022, p. 3) and commercial credit systems (Kostka, 2019, as cited in Ollier-Malaterre, 2024, p. 31), despite the latter's controversial surveillance of personal data to be used as a "moral dossier" or a record of an individual's moral integrity by companies.[14] This situation in China, along with many similar ones globally, reinforces arguments about the perils of **surveillance capitalism**, where personal data become a lucrative gold mine of information that can be repurposed by corporations and governments for profit or political purposes (Zuboff, 2015; Clarke, 2019). Regrettably, such a situation has been normalized due to the push for data-driven digital welfare states or simply because of the notion that we already are in a surveillance society.[15]

As Lyon (2022) notes, the coronavirus pandemic expanded the influence of surveillance technologies (or what he called "pandemic surveillance", ibid. p. 3). It also accelerated "technological solutionism", or proposals from and or existing technocratic practices by many states and corporations to stimulate high-tech innovations to find "solutions", but end up disadvantaging the most vulnerable in society.[16] A controversial

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[13] Chao et al., 2017, p. 723; Xia, 2013, as cited in ibid., p. 717.

[14] Knight & Creemers, 2021 and Sithigh & Siems, 2019, as cited in Ollier-Malaterre, 2024, p. 31; Ahmed, 2019, Daum, 2018, and Hoffman, 2017, as cited in Feldstein, 2022, p. 360.

[15] van Zoonen, 2020 and Clement & Obar, 2015, as cited in Westerlund et al., 2021, p. 34.

[16] Morozov, 2013, as cited in Kitchin, 2020, p. 11; Ajana, 2022, pp. 459-460.

form of such tech-solutionism is predictive policing, which harnesses algorithms to analyze personal, anonymized data to detect potential crimes or calculate the eventuality of social phenomena (van Brakel, 2021, pp. 108-110). One important example of these conceptualizations in digital surveillance is the mobility regimes enforced across the world during the coronavirus pandemic.[17] In China, Health Kit (or *jiankang bao*), or a WeChat and Alipay mini-program that tracked citizens' COVID-19 testing and vaccination records and recent travel history, became a surveillance tool that upheld a controlled immobility regime due to patchworks of different implementations and accountability measures on the authorities' side (Xing & Zheng, 2023). Some users also hacked into Health Kit and retrieve or leak the profile images of other user accounts, including celebrities (Zhou V., 2020).

In such situations, to what extent can resistance to digital surveillance happen? In my second theoretical framework for this study, I refer to Martin, van Brakel, and Bernhard's work (2009) on the relevant actors and the processes underlying the relationships of resistance to surveillance. Martin et al. synthesized studies on resistance and surveillance to expand the previous dichotomous notion of resistance to surveillance, i.e., it is a tug-of-war between the surveyor (or the conductors of surveillance) and the surveilled (or the subjects and objects of surveillance) (ibid., pp. 216-217). Examining the introduction of the National Identity Scheme (NIS) in the United Kingdom, Martin et al. pointed out the following potential actors with agencies in the power play and relationships in surveillance schemes facilitated by digital technology (ibid., pp. 222-225):

- **Surveyors** (e.g., enforcers, front-line service employees, automated machines) may involve several levels of intermediaries, including those who are removed from the planning and creation of surveillance missions, and are susceptible to human or technical failure.
- **Surveillance authorities** (e.g., agencies or organizations tasked with creating or managing surveillance strategies) can oppose surveillance through bureaucratic or commercial actions, such as counter-implementation or downplaying the extent of public discontent.

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[17] See Kitchin (2020) for a discussion.

- **Surveillance artefacts** (e.g., fingerprint technologies, retina scanners, etc.) can undermine surveillance developments due to their potential to break down, fail, or even lack thereof.
- **Commercial actors** (e.g., corporations, lobbyists, and media) have motivations and incentives that can differ from those of the surveilling authorities, and thus may overturn power relations.
- **International actors** (e.g., supranational organizations and foreign states) are external bodies that can challenge the legitimacy or independence of surveillance authorities.

Some scholars like Clarke (2019) note that Martin et al.'s (2009) work studies the "abstract" conceptualization of resistance to surveillance (Clarke, 2019, p. 73), but van Brakel, the co-author of the said work, emphasizes the need to pay attention to the "agency and reflexivity of subjects of surveillance" to address the implications of surveillance capitalism for democracy (van Brakel, 2021, pp. 104-105). Other researchers have since revisited Martin et al.'s work (2009) to include "third actors" such as civil society, media, and non-government organizations that conduct everyday resistance (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020, p. 108), or to understand its implications in employment settings (McDonald & Thompson, 2016).

1.3.2 Censorship and expression of opinion

Although not unusual, recent demonstrations in China fizzle out quickly not only because of the regime's digital surveillance and censorship strategies, but because they rarely achieve critical mass. However, there were close exceptions, such as the "A4 protests" in late 2022, which made public dismay about coronavirus pandemic lockdowns and restrictions throughout China more visible to authorities. From people posting blank paper emojis on social walls and comment sections to social media users reposting protesters who brandished A4 sheets on the streets, Chinese censors scrambled to take down content that encouraged collective action. The impending and resulting censorship caused demonstrators to repurpose content, such as taking videos of a video showing A4 protests to confuse or circumvent monitoring software (Chan, 2023; Thornton, 2023). Not only did the ingenious protests slow human censors, but

they also challenged the sophistication of technology in detecting sarcasm and creativity (Murphy, 2022; Perrigo, 2022; Crisp & Pan, 2022). The physical and digital protests, borne of protesters' creative repurposing of dissenting content to avoid detection, were ultimately quashed, albeit rather slowly than usual. However, their timing became instrumental in the Chinese government's abrupt reversal of the so-called "zero-COVID" policy (BBC, 2022).

The dynamics of online expression during the A4 protests may be explained theoretically by Zhu and Fu's study (2021) on the influence of censorship on expressing opinions, which is the first theoretical framework I use for my investigation into the context of migrant Filipinos in China. Zhu and Fu (2021, p. 3645; 3647) evaluated 460,731 posts related to protests against the Hong Kong Anti-Extradition Law Amendment bill on Weibo between June and December 2019 and found that:

- **Chilling effect**   An individual's tendency to avoid speaking out could happen when their exposure to censorship happens mostly from a distance, and that it becomes a cue for punishment.
- **Backfire effect**   Their impulse to say something could occur when they or their immediate network become the subject of censorship, and thus they perceive it to be a threat to their freedom.

Additionally, Zhu and Fu hypothesized, although only by referencing the literature, that individuals who strongly disapprove of censorship are not influenced by it (or a **minimal effect**) and would find a way to evade censorship (2021, p. 3639). I opine that the backfire and minimal effects most likely happened in the A4 protests, considering demonstrators were subjected to direct censorship.

Aside from the chilling and backfire effects, Zhu and Fu found that peer support could alleviate individuals' fear of punishment and assuage their negative emotions toward direct censorship, thus reducing their tendency to resist (2021, p. 3649). Building on this phenomenon, Luo and Li (2022, p. 4239) conceptualized the practice of **participatory censorship** in which "censorship relies on the voluntary participation of actors simultaneously subject to being censored". A similar study by Yang (2023) reinforces previous observations that public participation in censorship

is a widespread phenomenon in China, and that the compliers are "mostly young, well-educated individuals with foreign connections" (ibid., p. 23-24). In another aspect of this phenomenon, Zhang, Tandoc & Han (2022) found that the increased frequency of censorship could trigger individuals' unfavorable emotions (such as anger), thus provoking them to resist by generating more content about sensitive topics (ibid., pp. 817; 819). The fear of punishment and the feeling of widespread uncertainty have become a potent tool to propagate myths of control and punishment to interpret the unpredictability of authoritarian regimes (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1241).

1.4 Digital surveillance and censorship beyond Chinese borders

China's political environment and fixation on social order seem to strengthen the country's Cyber-Leninist approach to information order in the online sphere. Some journalists, researchers, and analysts are concerned—and rightfully so—about how tactics of digital surveillance and censorship done by the Chinese government on social platforms can be exported.[18] Several countries have already emulated these strategies to silence opposition and attack independent media (for a non-exhaustive list, see Andrzejewski et al., 2023). Such is the case in Iran, where the regime combines Internet access policies with the policing of the Iranian Cyber Police and Cyber Army and the arrest and intimidation of social media users, leading to totalitarian surveillance that is undermined by deficient surveillance infrastructures (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019, pp. 224-225; Akbari, 2021, pp. 100-101). Elsewhere, social media companies have been gatekeeping and policing content on their sites, sparking a worrying trend of platform-based surveillance (Hintz, 2016, pp. 329-330; 331-333) and algorithmic censorship (Cobbe, 2021, p. 761) methods to target online trolls but have since been used to restrict protests. Also, some researchers have established how companies comply with authoritarian censorship through different operating practices.[19] These situations highlight the implications of unvetted power afforded by users to social media platforms, particularly in moderating information flows and pipelines. Amid these,

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[18] For example, King et al., 2013, p. 30; Scott & Solis, 2023; Limbourg, 2024.

[19] A recent example was a study from the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, which found how Microsoft's Bing translation service censors extensively compared to other platforms in China (Chiu, 2024).

there have also been efforts from individuals, groups, and other entities around the world to address digital surveillance and censorship.

1.4.1 Actions regarding digital surveillance and censorship worldwide

Following the controversial and political events of the mid-2010s, fact-checking operations from journalists, media literacy advocates, and civil society groups became crucial to counter the spread of fake news and disinformation on social platforms. Even so, some of these initiatives have been criticized for expanding digital surveillance and censorship in various ways. For example, X (or formerly Twitter) introduced "Community Notes" as a collaborative effort from contributors (or fact checkers) to "add context to potentially misleading posts" (X Help Center, n.d.). Yet, some researchers and commentators noted the difficulty of evaluating such a countermeasure due to fact checkers' "restrictive public disclosures" (Allen et al., 2024, p. 1670) or use of it as a gatekeeping process for left-wing political agendas (Palumbo, 2024). Meanwhile, Facebook's hate speech censorship rules received flak for being discriminatory, for instance, against activists and minority groups (Angwin & Grassegger, 2017) and even during COVID-19 vaccination (Broniatowski, Drezde, & Ayers, 2021, p. 1055). In Thailand, Cyber Scouts, or the term for members of the eponymous program that aims to "create ethical and moral online conduct" and report violators of the monarchy's *lese-majeste* rule, are also questioned for their personal leanings and potential to create a cloud of fear (Talamayan, 2020, p. 137).

While the literature has extensively covered how governments, institutions, and corporations have weaponized digital surveillance and censorship, the other side of research concerns how many users have tried to hit back and reclaim agency, leading to the concept of digital dissidence (Kperogi, 2023, p. 3). For example, some researchers established that Belarusian citizens form "affective connections" with Telegram in political participation (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, p. 140). In Indonesia, some queer influencers have used social platforms to slam a government bill that aims to censor and curb content from investigative journalists and LGBTQ+ creators (Renaldi, 2024). Meanwhile, Chadian citizens and international observers challenged and successfully pressured the government to lift its ban on social media, which was

instituted to curb collective action against constitutional amendments that would have allowed their president to remain in power until 2033 (Boateng, 2023, pp. 203-205).

These examples, and the many unmentioned ones, especially in the Global South, prove crucial in outlining the actions addressing digital surveillance and censorship globally. Yet, we also have to look at the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in these interplays. Its advantages, including cultivating and automating a low-cost and omnipresent "digital repression capability", can enforce widespread surveillance and censorship (Feldstein, 2019, p. 42). Also, AI tools such as machine learning software and mechanisms have transformed legal norms and regulation of online speech to various ends (Elkin-Koren, 2020). So far, multiple governments and supranational organizations around the world have been working on legislation[20] to deal with the impact of AI on free speech, privacy, and data protection, including the European Union's comprehensive Artificial Intelligence Act, the Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights in the United States, and the Chinese Personal Information Protection Law.[21] In Africa, establishing continent-wide AI regulations has become a challenge especially with how regimes have adopted and employed digital surveillance technologies (Asiegbu & Okolo, 2024). Meanwhile, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) published its business-friendly governance and ethics guidelines on AI, signaling a more business-friendly approach and a closer focus on upskilling workforces (Hutt, 2024).

1.4.2 Philippines' experience with surveillance and censorship

There are several bills filed in the Philippine Congress to legislate AI technologies (Bañez, 2024) and their potential implications for digital surveillance and censorship. Also, Filipino lawmakers have sought congressional inquiries to discuss cybersecurity following foiled cyberattacks on government websites by hackers suspected to be based in China (Panti, 2024; Reganit, 2024). These developments highlight the

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[20] See the Global AI Law and Policy Tracker by the International Association of Privacy Professionals (2024) for a comprehensive list of global AI legislation.

[21] For the EU, see the European Parliament Press Room (2024); for the US, visit the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) website (n.d.). For the Chinese Personal Information Protection Law (2021), some researchers note how corporations now have the agency to implement it, and how state agencies may evoke state secrecy to obtain citizens' data without consent (Article 19). See Ollier-Malaterre (2024, p. 28) and Zhou et al. (2024) for a discussion.

importance of understanding these constructs for Filipinos, especially since many believe that digital surveillance and censorship only happen within local contexts.

Historical overview of surveillance and censorship in the Philippines

When asked about surveillance and censorship, most Filipinos would remember the country's Martial Law era, during which the government of President Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. ceased or took over the operations of major mass media networks, and that publications must seek clearance from the Department of Public Information to release content (Fernandez, 1988, p. 20; Rosario-Braid & Tuazon, 1999, p. 305). However, historical documents confirmed the existence of surveillance and censorship during the Philippines' colonial and war periods.

Spanish-era newspapers had heavily censored editorial content, and some reported news that catered only to the Spanish elite because literacy and education primarily aimed to proselytize and expand Christianity in the Philippine colony (Rosario-Braid & Tuazon, 1999, p. 294; Calata, 2002, p. 89). Newspapers that were deemed to be inciting rebellion were suppressed by the Spanish colonial government, while revolutionaries and thinkers[22] who wrote publications critical of the regime were arrested and executed (Rosario-Braid & Tuazon, 1999, p. 294; DeStephano, 2015, p. 120). Given this, the Philippine press at that time, and following the arrival of United States officials[23] who promised yet another independence, was seen as a "political organ" and a "political weapon" with an agency that denounced severe censorship from both Spaniards and Americans (Cano, 2011, p. 398; 408; 415). When the Japanese occupied the Philippines during World War II, publications were either disbanded or restored but with "mass censorship and close surveillance" (Bonilla, 2019, p. 11). But during this time, the Filipino communist guerilla movement Hukbalahap had an extensive network of members, informants, and supporters that backed operations of

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[22] For instance, national hero Jose Rizal was arrested without trial and deported following the publication of his novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, which criticized Spanish friars and the colonial government in the Philippines. See DeStephano (2015) for more.

[23] Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States following the Spanish-American War and the Treaty of Paris in 1898. See Cano (2011) for more.

covert communications and gathered military intelligence to counter Japanese propaganda and censorship.[24]

After the war, Philippine journalism's brief "golden age", ushered in by the rise of scholarly writers and editors who collectedly uplifted the industry to become the freest in Asia at the time, was stalled by the gradual ownership of press enterprises by political groups, wealthy families, and corporate establishments (Rosenberg, 1974, p. 472; Rosario-Braid & Tuazon, 1999, p. 300). This situation of the press eroded further in the Marcos era, particularly in the Martial Law period where journalists practiced self-censorship to avoid clashes with the regime, on top of blanket censorship, exaggeration, sensationalism that almost resulted in the degeneration of the industry. [25] In this period, underground and alternative publications called for resistance, instructing readers to *ipasa pagkabasa* (lit., "pass this publication onto the next reader"), or reproducing censored foreign publication often through photocopies or "xerox journalism" (Melencio, 2023, p. 11; Rosario-Braid & Tuazon, 1999, p. 310). The People Power Revolution of 1986 turned the course of Philippine media following the mass boycotts of pro-Marcos platforms and the use of radio and television to mobilize people against the regime (Rosario-Braid & Tuazon, 1999, p. 316).

Digital surveillance and censorship in contemporary Philippines

The rise of the Internet in the Philippines adjusted the production and consumption of media. Most notably, the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012,[26] which aims to curb online offenses such as child pornography and identity theft, has drawn criticism for its provision to criminalize libel, which has been used against journalists including Maria Ressa (Ratcliffe, 2020). During the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, the regime ramped up surveillance and other monitoring efforts to counter critical voices beyond security threats and sustain a "co-optation and manipulation strategy" (Freedom House, 2019, as cited in Feldstein, 2022, p. 359). Online trolls, hackers, and regime supporters launched cyberattacks, including DDoS offensives and violent name-calling

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[24] Hukbalahap was an acronym for *Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon*, lit, "People's Army against the Japanese". See Lent (2005, pp. 261-263), Bonilla (2019, pp. 11-13), and Candelaria (2020) for details.

[25] For details, see San Juan (1978, p. 39), Dresang (1985, p. 35), and Rosario-Braid & Tuazon (1999).

[26] Philippine Republic Act No. 10175 (Congress of the Philippines, 2012).

(or "Cyber *Tokhang*"[27]) to harass, force censorship, or stifle investigations of human rights organizations, civil society groups, and media outlets critical of the Duterte government (Iannone, 2022, pp. 92-93; Ayson & Reyes, 2021, p. 161). Meanwhile, pro-government people have unlawfully accused numerous Filipino activists, journalists, and other civilians of being communist rebels or New People's Army members in what has been called "red-tagging" (Paras, 2023, pp. 64-68). In response, several Filipino lawmakers filed bills to criminalize spreading false information, but none of these measures have been signed into law yet (Elloran, 2022). The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act of 2020[28] that tackled COVID-19 in the Philippines includes a provision to penalize "creating, perpetrating, or spreading false information" about the pandemic, which researchers, human rights advocacy groups, and foreign observers consider unconstitutional (Joaquin, 2021), "over-broad" (Robertson, as cited in Patag, 2020), and an "ad hoc fake news law" (Schuldt, 2020).

Recent academic research and journalistic investigations into digital surveillance and censorship in the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora have focused on Facebook.[29] However, except for TikTok, there has hardly been academic scrutiny towards how Chinese-made apps such as WeChat play a role in the phenomena. As I briefly discussed in the **Introduction** chapter, existing literature on Filipinos' use of WeChat has covered employment and social purposes (e.g., Talidong, 2020; Lim, 2018; Peñafuerte, 2018), although some researchers have already flagged the app's "disinformative potential" (Lanuza et al., 2021, p. 70; 73). For instance, I observed during my time in China how unverified information and fake news proliferated in WeChat groups of Filipino migrants in China during the pandemic and the 2022 Philippine general elections. This situation was complicated by how the Filipino community faced the same digital surveillance and censorship experienced by Chinese citizens not only on WeChat but within the Great Firewall in general. This gap in academic literature and journalistic investigations warrants further examination,

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[27] "Tokhang" is a Cebuano-Filipino abbreviation for the police campaign in which officers knock ("tuk**tok**") on the houses of those suspected of using illegal drugs or being involved in the illicit drug trade and plead ("**hang**yo") them to surrender for rehabilitation. However, the controversial campaign has resulted in a death toll between 6,229 (official count from the Philippine News Agency, as cited in Gita-Carlos, 2022), and over 12,000 (as claimed by Human Rights Watch, citing Murdoch, 2017).

[28] Philippine Republic Act no. 11469 (Congress of the Philippines, 2020).

[29] For instance, Stevenson, 2019, as cited in Ambay et al. (2019); Talamayan (2020); Umel (2022).

considering how digital surveillance and censorship mechanisms and strategies can be simultaneously discriminatory and wide-ranging as applied to situations beyond Chinese borders (Andrzejewski et al., 2023). Thus, I tap into my journalistic observations and understanding of Chinese information cyberculture order to investigate digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. However, understanding the phenomena from the Filipino diaspora standpoint requires not just my experiential knowledge but also that of other migrants in China who have been subject to digital surveillance and censorship. The next chapter outlines my strategy for conducting this research through phenomenology.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This research investigates the phenomena of surveillance and censorship on WeChat and how they impact the digital communication behaviors of Filipino migrants in China. Using phenomenology, this study seeks to answer:

RQ1. How do migrant Filipinos in China understand their experience of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?

RQ2. What issues do they face with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?

RQ3. How do the experiences of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat impact the digital communication behaviors of migrant Filipinos in China?

Among many qualitative research approaches and philosophical modes of inquiry, phenomenology has been used to study, describe, or interpret various aspects or particular meanings of any lived experience, which can be embedded in or based on concepts and values of a culture (Carel, 2011, pp. 34-35; Collins et al., 2022, p. 2). Its strength lies not just in being a human science of articulating the forms and content of human experience; rather, it helps us grasp the "essences" of the world as we live it (van Manen, 1990, p. 12). As a research approach founded in philosophy and psychology, phenomenology has reinforced studies of lived experiences in health sciences and nursing (Carel, 2011), gendered discrimination in conflict reporting (Stricker, 2022), and more. While phenomenology has also been used to explore issues of migrants, particularly on internal politics and belongingness (Lietaert et al., 2015), racism amid neoliberal and global spaces (Jaskulowski & Pawlak, 2020), and refugee trauma (Akef et al., 2024), the tensions arising from the experience of migrants of navigating regulated digital environments also warrant an investigation. This inquiry is inspired by my own experience of surveillance and censorship in China, where I worked as a migrant journalist. As my lived experience alone would hardly articulate or detail the general understanding of surveillance and censorship in China from the

Filipino migrant perspective, I deepened my probe by interviewing other Filipino migrants living or who have lived in the country. My lived experience and theirs are distinct, and so I combined descriptive and reflexive phenomenology methods for my investigation. The next subchapters parse the approaches I took to answer my inquiry.

2.1 Research design

2.1.1 Phenomenology and the human experience

At its core, phenomenology is concerned with individuals' lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. But what exactly is "lived experience"? As a term in phenomenology, lived experience is a "self-given awareness" that involves our "immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life" (Dilthey, 1985, as cited in van Manen, 1990, p. 35). The human experience of thought, feeling, event, relation, situation, object, and whatnot can be as ordinary, raw, and superficial (van Manen, 2017, p. 812); it can also be shared behaviors developed and expressed by a group (Bailey C., 2021, p. 91). Yet, these experiences become extraordinary as they become objects of a phenomenon and when their meanings are investigated from a phenomenological perspective (Creswell, 2007, p. 58; van Manen, 2017, p. 812). Lived experiences also form and inform a common knowledge base from which we can make sense of a phenomenon and its relationship to our everyday existence (Glover, 2007, p. 29).

An important example that expresses the weight of lived experiences is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) established after the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1996. Albie Sachs, a judge of the first Constitutional Court of South Africa, noted that TRC proceedings, instead of the commission reports, revealed experiential and dialogic truths[30] as elaborated by victims and perpetrators of human rights violations (1999, p. 1571). The media communicated the "lamentations, cries, [and] sorrows" of people who "[told] the truth in their own voices [and] ways" (Sachs, 2024), which made a huge impact on the country as it went on the path of reconciliation.

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[30] Judge Sachs formulated four kinds of truths: (1) microscopic, or the "truth of scientific experimentation … or a legal inquiry"; (2) logical, or the "truth that is implicit in a statement doesn't require further observation; (3) experiential, or "phenomenological" where one is "not an outsider looking in, rather, you are examining your relationship with others and your experience of being there"; and (4) dialogic, or one that "emerges from the interaction of all these other kinds of truth, but through multiple participation" (Sachs, 1999, pp. 1571-1573).

Paley notes that "the truth is less metaphysical, much more prosaic" (2016, p. 115). As lived experiences have found currency as a subject in numerous health-related studies, he cautions against superficially attaching meaning to experiences, either through practical inferences or causal attributions (Paley, 2016, p. 115; McIntosh & Wright, 2019, p. 454). So, how then, can a researcher understand the subjective but concrete nature of lived experience? Philosophers and researchers have introduced phenomenological methods, perspectives, and approaches that can be categorized into two traditions: (1) **transcendental** (or descriptive) and (2) **hermeneutic** (or interpretive).

2.1.2   Mapping the knowledge about studying lived experiences

The first tradition, **transcendental phenomenology**, borders epistemological idealism: its progenitor, philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl, advanced the concept of the *life-world* where humanity universally perceives and shares a "universal horizon" and "coherent universe of existing objects" (1970, pp. 108-109; 142). Husserl also posited that consciousness is "intentional"; in this light, the phenomenologist investigating objects and acts of consciousness must assume an attitude of *epochē* or "bracketing"—simply put, they must look at the objects and acts without judgment to fully understand their structural essences (Husserl, 1971, p. 80); (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 246). Its method of bracketing or reduction became the precursor to **descriptive** and **psychological** methods in transcendental phenomenology, which were respectively developed by Giorgi (2003) and Moustakas (1994). Giorgi et al. argue that not only consciousness is intentional; it is "essentially non-sensorial" and a "medium of access" to anything that can be experienced, including those existing intangibly, such as ideas or numbers (or what they called *irreal* phenomena) (2017, p. 178). On the other hand, Moustakas focuses on the *epochē*, which allows the researcher to revisit phenomena freshly and naively "from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (1994, p. 33).

Husserl's idea of transcendental reduction sparked deeper inquiry, particularly by fellow philosopher Martin Heidegger, who was his professorial assistant in the early 1920s. For Heidegger, the reductionist perspective veered away rather than aligned with the human experience of existing (Silverman, 1980, p. 705). His view of existing

in the world, or *Dasein* (German, lit. "existence"), was ontological and metaphysical; in a sense, *Dasein* verged on the existential, and existing—or *being-in-the-world*—and its meaning could be understood through phenomenological interpretation (Heidegger, 1962; Silverman, 1980, pp. 705-706). This concept has sparked epistemological arguments: Paley is convinced Heidegger's conception of *being-in-the-world* does not necessarily equal *experiencing* the world (2014, p. 1522)[31] while Malpas believes the philosopher's magnum opus failed to progress from analyzing *Dasein* to analyzing existence itself (2003, p. 155). Despite its shortcomings, Heidegger's work remained influential and engendered the tradition of **hermeneutic phenomenology**, in which interpretation allows for an understanding of existence by uncovering and analyzing the structure of intelligibility of its meaning, as well as recovering such structure from obscurity.[32] For van Manen, a proponent of this tradition, hermeneutics allows for the construction of full descriptions of some aspects in the lifeworld despite its futility because lived life is just as complex and variegated (1990, p. 18). He considers this tradition a **phenomenological human science** that is "discovery oriented" as much as it is "a philosophy or *theory of the unique*" (1990, p. 7; 29). For him, such an inquiry starts through or is oriented by the researcher's personal experiences (1990, pp. 54; 57-58). Meanwhile, Finlay (2003), who has been ambivalently drawn by Heidegger's views, revisited his existentialist phenomenology and reconsidered the role of the researcher in the investigation. Her iterations led to her construction of "hermeneutic reflection" or **reflexive phenomenology,** in which the researcher explicitly reflects on their position and perspectives to "unravel the multiple and shifting meanings" in participant responses (ibid., pp. 105-106; 114). To address subjectivity, Finlay encourages a "phenomenological attitude" where the researcher attempts to open to the "other" experience and aims to see the world freshly (2009, p. 12).

2.1.3 Phenomenology and non-Western viewpoints

Somewhere in the continuum of phenomenological traditions lies the **phenomenology of perception**, advanced by Merleau-Ponty (1962), who also built upon Husserl's work

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[31] However, Macquarrie and Robinson, who translated Heidegger's *Being and Time*, said the philosopher's exposition of experience ("*Erlebnisse*") is "lost in translation" (ibid., as cited in Heidegger, 1962, p. 47).

[32] See Heidegger (1962, pp. 13; 16; 61-62), Malpas (2003, p. 152), and van Manen (1990, p. 27).

but critiqued the latter's reduction method and focus on the life-world, believing that our "human situation and interests" inevitably get into the way (Mooney, 2022, p. 18). For Merleau-Ponty, the human experience is existentialist and based on perception, and thus it is impossible for a researcher to achieve a fully detached standpoint (i.e., *epoche*) without rejecting a faithful description of an account of consciousness (Mooney, 2022, p. 19). The Husserlian life-world has been interpreted (rightfully so) by later philosophers to be Eurocentric and oriented towards modern Western philosophy (Casement, 1988, p. 235)—but human consciousness is not static and various schools of thought have long tried to understand and make sense of our existence. For this, Merleau-Ponty asserted that in the life-world that Husserl conceived and elucidated to be "plural, relative, changeable … [and] historical", all philosophies are "anthropological specimens" and from which "Western philosophy can learn … to rediscover the relationship to being" (Casement, 1988, p. 235); (Merleau-Ponty, 1960, pp. 173; 176, as cited in Lau, 2016, pp. 8-9).

Many phenomenological studies are still concerned with situations in the Western world. Elsewhere, scholarly interest in this research method and philosophical approach remains scant, and available studies have focused on epistemological inquiries. For instance, some earlier writings in Africana scholarship introduced phenomenology to inform, expand, and de-center Africana philosophy (Henry, 2005), study the continent's indigenous knowledge systems (Mutema, 2003) and religions (Chitando, 2005), revisit social identity construction amid colonialism and migration (Adeyanju & Oriola, 2011), among many others. Meanwhile, scholars of Arabic studies have used phenomenology to explore language (Jamjoon, 2010) or cultural immersion programs (Abdulla, 2008). Phenomenology also generated interest in Chinese scholars in the 1980s and found a resurgence in the late 2010s (Jansen & Cai, 2018) with some comparative philosophical studies that explore the parallels between the Husserlian tradition, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Zhang Q., 2017). In the broader Asian context, researchers have used phenomenology to explore ethnicity (Yang P., 2014), lifestyle migration (Stones et al., 2018), and even the impact of COVID-19 on the teaching profession (Ramirez, 2022). These varied examples highlight the need to study contexts in their place in the world, not just from a Western standpoint.

As Chen (2010, p. 215) points out, Asia *can* be a method for inquiry, as Africa, Latin America, the Arab world, and many others can.

2.1.4   Reconciling phenomenological traditions

No matter how philosophically or ideologically contrasting phenomenological viewpoints and orientations, proponents of this research method generally agree that the focus of such inquiry is to "return to embodied, experiential meanings" and provide "fresh, complex, rich descriptions" of a phenomenon and how we concretely live it (Finlay L., 2009, p. 6). The methods of conducting phenomenology are as varied as its traditions, although Creswell (2007) has offered a straightforward procedure blending transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenological traditions. At its basic level, a phenomenological study begins with the researcher identifying a phenomenon and then collecting data from people who have experienced it. From this, the researcher develops a "composite description" of the essence of that experience and how those people experienced it (Creswell, 2007, p. 58, based on van Manen, 1990, p. 163, and Moustakas, 1994). This blending finds persuasiveness and compatibility as the systematic processes of phenomenological traditions are connected by their epistemological underpinnings (see **Table 1** for a comparative overview):

- Burch (1989) recommends two general tasks to phenomenologists: (1) to determine the "formal conditions" that make such inquiries intelligible and suitable for theorizing, and (2) show how these conditions "relate essentially to the lived experience itself", thus allowing the researcher to identify and understand the implications between that relationship (pp. 189-190). These seemingly simple tasks orient the procedures of the four distinct phenomenological approaches I referenced in this chapter.

- In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher assumes a bracketing attitude to investigate lived experience from its structural essences. From a descriptive method, Giorgi (2012, pp. 5-6) suggests the researcher (1) identify concrete descriptions in order to get "a sense of the whole" and then (2) return to the descriptions to determine "meaning units". From these, the researcher (3) transforms the meaning units into expressions whose psychological value are

made explicit. These expressions are (4) reviewed to form an essential structure of the experience, which is used to (5) interpret the raw data. Creswell's psychological method (2007, pp. 60-62), which is based on Moustakas (1994), broadly aligns with Giorgi's steps, but with a more detailed bracketing procedure, that is, (1) determining whether phenomenology is suitable to answer a research problem; (2) identifying the phenomenon; and (3) specifying broad philosophical assumptions. In Creswell's procedures, (4) specifying the data source and (5) asking broad questions on the phenomena also elucidate Giorgi's step of identifying concrete descriptions.

- Meanwhile, hermeneutical phenomenology is concerned with the interpretation of descriptions of lived experience. Van Manen's (1990) view of phenomenology as a human science and Finlay's (2003) construction of it as reflexive largely follow the same direction but slightly differ in orientation, i.e., the researcher's overall position and impact on the study. Van Manen suggests that the researcher should (1) turn to the nature of lived experience and commit to a "fullness of thinking" to question a certain aspect of human existence and (2) establish a "renewed contact" with the original experience. From these, the researcher has to (3) reflect on the themes that constitute the experience and (4) describe its structure through writing and re-writing. As the process is demanding, van Manen tells the researcher to (5) maintain an oriented relation to the fundamental question or phenomenon and (6) balance the overall structure against its constituting parts (1990, pp. 30-34). On the other hand, Finlay's task to the researcher is to (1) begin with reflection and appraise their experience and presuppositions of a phenomenon. By doing so, they can also (2) examine their relationships with participants to be able to (3) collect data vigorously and conscientiously. In (4) analyzing data reflexively, Finlay says the researcher's preoccupations and emotions can be problematic and drive the research in unintended directions, so they should maintain a balance between self-awareness and navel-gazing (2003, pp. 110-116).

2.1.5 Combining different phenomenological approaches

The mapping of literature on phenomenology as a philosophical tradition and qualitative research method provides an overview of my approach for this study. At first, I aimed to conduct purely reflexive phenomenology, given my experience and prior understanding of digital surveillance and censorship in China. However, as my research carried on, along with continuous reflection, I found that the procedural strengths of the transcendental and the general hermeneutic phenomenological traditions allowed for a much richer description of participants' lived experiences.

My study took on a multimethod phenomenological research approach that combined Creswell's psychological method (2007, pp. 60-62), van Manen's human-science-centric phenomenology (1990, pp. 30-34), and Finlay's reflective approach (2003, pp. 110-116). The complementarity of this design attempted to diminish the bias of my experience (e.g., the research's inspiration, theoretical framework, and reflexivity during data analysis), and instead turn that into a dimension that extends the descriptions of various experiences of Filipino migrants with the phenomena in question (i.e., digital surveillance and censorship).[33] This rationale obviates the need for too many assumptions, which is usually an issue in many mixed-methods or multimethod research (Brannen & Halcomb, 2009, p. 79). The operationalization of these viewpoints is as follows (see **Table 1**):

1. I identified the phenomena (surveillance and censorship in China) as a valid research inquiry due to my experience of working in China. Since this involved reflexivity, I employed the phenomenological attitude (Finlay L., 2009, p. 12) to my pre-understandings of the phenomena in question.

2. Continuing with reflexivity, I deductively paired those presuppositions with the frameworks on the effects of censorship exposure on opinion expression (Zhu & Fu, 2021) and resistance to digital surveillance (Martin et al., 2009) to investigate the phenomena closely. This ideation process was insightful but challenging because I thought my deduction would impose my notions or partiality onto the research. However, hermeneutic phenomenologists have

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[33] See Halcomb & Andrew (2009, p. 53), Bazeley (2009, p. 90), and Halcomb & Hickman (2015, p. 5).

argued that no researchers or participants have "privileged access" to the reality of lived experience (Finlay L., 2003, p. 110).

3. Van Manen speaks of how a "good phenomenological description" is collected by lived experience (from my initial understanding) and recollects lived experience (of study participants), as much as how it validates and is supported by lived experience (1990, p. 27). Framed by this viewpoint, I attempted to specify the people who have experienced the phenomena in question (more on this in the following subchapter).

4. Informed by Martin et al. (2009) and Zhu and Fu's (2021) frameworks, I devised my research tool—an in-depth, structured interview questionnaire that included a variant of the two broad questions suggested by Creswell: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon" and "What situations have influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon" (2007, p. 61) (see **Appendix 1** for the interview questionnaire). The final interview questionnaire was reviewed and approved by my research supervisor. In collecting data, I tried to bracket (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 246) as much as possible. I comment further on my bracketing experience in **Chapter 4**.

5. I analyzed the resulting interview transcripts through the combination of several methodological considerations: the logic of inductive coding analysis (ICA) method by Vears and Gillam (2022), the structure of which was aligned with the descriptive phenomenological research strategies by Jackson et al. (2018) and Collins et al. (2022) and Finlay's (2003) reflexive phenomenological analysis. I examined the resulting meaning units to compose textural descriptions that would form composite structural descriptions per participant. I critically and reflexively analyzed both levels of descriptions, from which I extrapolated themes and related them to existing literature. I explain this specific operationalization step thoroughly in the following subchapter.

Table 1: Operationalizing different phenomenological research traditions

	Transcendental phenomenology *Based on the Husserlian tradition*		Hermeneutic phenomenology *Inspired by the Heidegger tradition*		Operationalization
	Descriptive	Psychological	Human science	Reflective	
Tasks [A]	Steps [B]	Procedures [C]	Methodical structures [D]	Approaches [E]	
1. Determining formal conditions		1. Determining the research problem and if phenomenology is suitable to answer it	1. Turning to the nature of lived experience	1. Reflecting reflexively as a researcher	1. Conceptualizing the research problem
		2. Identifying the phenomena			
		3. Specifying the broad philosophical assumptions for the study			2. Reviewing literature; focusing on individual experiences and referring to theoretical frameworks
	1. Identifying concrete descriptions	4. Specifying data to be collected from whom	2. Investigating experience as we live it	2. Developing relationships with participants	3. Gathering data based on the experiences of migrant Filipinos in China
		5. Asking broad questions on the phenomena	3. Reflecting on essential themes characterizing the subject phenomenon	3. Collecting data	4. Crafting an interview questionnaire with Creswell's broad questions (2007, p. 61)

2. Showing how formal conditions and consequences are related to the lived experience itself	2. Getting a sense of the whole and identifying meaning units	6. Analyzing phenomenological data through horizontalization and clustering	4. Describing the phenomenon through writing and re-writing	4. Analyzing data reflexively	5A. Analyzing data using different phenomenological methods and the logical structure of inductive coding analysis
	3. Transforming data into expressions	7. Writing textual descriptions of participants' experience			
	4. Writing the essential structure of the experience	8. Writing structural descriptions based on clusters of meaning			5B. Extrapolating key themes from the textural and structural descriptions
	5. Using the structure to interpret the raw data	9. Constructing the essence	5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon		5C. Critically analyzing and relating themes to existing literature
			6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole		

Sources: Syntheses of conceptual and operational methods mentioned by [A] Burch (1989); [B] Giorgi (2012, pp. 5-6); [C] Moustakas, 1994 as cited in Creswell (2007, pp. 60-62); [D] van Manen (1990, pp. 30-34); and [E] Finlay (2003, pp. 110-116).

2.2   Data gathering and analysis

What makes phenomenological research more compelling is it is less interested in the factuality of experiences but in the description of the richness and depth of their meaning to the person involved, thus allowing concepts to arise from these instances (van Manen, 1990, pp. 10-11; Todres & Holloway, 2010, p. 183). As such, this form of inquiry looks at "narratives, stories, poetry, anecdotes, sayings" (van Manen, 2017, p. 184), with the goal of understanding their essence from participants' experiences (Seidman, 2019, p. 17). To do this, I drew data from my in-depth interviews with fifteen Filipino migrants in China (referred to as "participants"), with their insights and sharing examined methodically. The following subchapters elucidate my data gathering and analyzing techniques.

2.2.1   Data source and sampling technique

The fifteen participants were recruited through purposive sampling, particularly through criteria and snowball sampling techniques. As this study focused on examining participants' highly subjective lived experiences with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat, a small sample size allowed for a more targeted inquiry and reaching saturation without sacrificing the quality of data to achieve a degree of generalization (Morse, 2000, p. 3; Boddy, 2016, pp. 427-428). Moreover, this technique led me to find participants who have experienced the phenomena in question rather than selecting and including people with a wide variety of demographic characteristics randomly (Langdridge, 2008 and Holloway et al., 2010 as cited in Jackson et al., 2018, p. 3313). This decision was also practical, considering my geographical distance and time zone difference with the participants during the data-gathering period.

      I began fielding participants by inviting two contacts from a Filipino WeChat group, of which I remain a member, to participate in this research. I chose these *key informants[34]* because of their extensive network in the Filipino diaspora in China and their knowledge of surveillance and censorship on WeChat. They suggested several

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[34] Bernard defines key informants as people who "know a lot about their culture" and are "willing" to participate in the research (2017, p. 153).

people, which initiated a snowball sampling process. I assessed the eligibility of those recommendations for the study using the following sampling criteria.

- **Legal status**   While the word "migrant" expresses a person who moves or has moved to another country to work,[35] this research expands the term to include **migrant Filipinos who are in China for several reasons beyond employment, including business, education, marriage, and so on**. The expansion was based on my journalistic experience in China, which allowed me to interview several Filipino community members who were in different migrant situations in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities. Figures from the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA)[36] showed that there were more than 12, 200 Filipinos in China in 2015. Most of these migrant Filipinos hold a specific residence permit (e.g., work, study, or "spouse"/marriage), which allows them to stay legally in the country. However, this data is inconclusive as there are *undocumented* Filipino migrants, who remain in China with expired residence permits or revoked visas. These migrants, colloquially known as "OS" (or "overstaying")[37] among Filipinos in China, have overlapping social roles, especially since they juggle their main sources of employment with other personal activities, including being members of religious congregations, offline and online diaspora groups, and more.

- **Active WeChat account holders**   To be eligible for the study, participants must **have used an active WeChat account in the past four years**, particularly before and during the coronavirus pandemic. The WeChat accounts may have been used by eligible participants for personal, professional, or business purposes. This criterion give participants enough context of surveillance and censorship on the app.

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[35] Based on the legal definition of UN Migration (2019, p. 132).

[36] Figures from DFA (2015).

[37] "Undocumented" or "irregular" Filipino migrants include those who possess expired visas or permits to stay or those who have valid but inappropriate visas (Congress of the Philippines, 2010). These migrants are also known as *tago nang tago* (literally "in hiding" and abbreviated as "TNT") as they are called in northern America, the Middle East, and many European countries.

Knowing the risk of homogeneity (i.e., because of membership in a certain WeChat group) and the issue of data generalizability (Trotter, 2012, p. 399), I expanded the search outside of my WeChat network and those suggested by key informants. This effort led me to get five people unconnected to the ten previous participants. Several migrants eligible for the study turned down my invitation for different reasons, including safety risks and fear of surveillance. Also, I dropped the data from my interview with one undocumented migrant as we failed to finish the session due to their personal considerations.

Table 2: Demographic profiles of study participants

Codename	Age group	Gender	Career	Location	Legal status	Years in China	Years on WeChat
P1	50-60	M	Educator	CN	D (WP)[A]	6 years	7 years
P2	40-50	M	Business owner	CN	D (S)[B]	22 years	7 years
P3	30-40	F	Nanny	PH	U (OS)[C]	10 years	9 years
P4	30-40	F	Nanny	PH	U (OS)	5 years	3.5 years
P5	30-40	M	Professional	PH	D (WP)	5 years	5 years
P6	50-60	F	Diplomat	PH	D (D)[D]	3 years	3 years
P7	50-60	F	Business owner	PH	D (WP)	32 years	12 years
P8	40-50	F	Nanny	PH	U (OS)	8 years	10 years
P9	50-60	M	Diplomat	EU	D (D)	7 years	12 years
P10	20-30	M	Former student	EU	D (F)[E]	9 years	12 years
P11	20-30	M	Former student	PH	D (WP)	11 years	6 years
P12	40-50	M	Business owner	CN	D (WP)	18 years	12 years
P13	40-50	F	Professional	CN	D (WP)	5.5 years	6 years
P14	20-30	M	Former student	PH	D (WP)	24 years	12 years
P15	40-50	F	Educator	CN	D (WP)	10 years	10 years
Summary	Median 40 yrs	Total M = 8 F = 7	--	Total PH = 8 CN = 5 EU = 2	Total D = 12 U = 3	--	--

Sources: Participant pre-interviews and responses to Q1-Q3.
Legend for location: PH – Philippines; CN – China; EU – in Europe
Legend for legal status: D – documented; U – undocumented
[A] WP – Working permit; [B] S – Spouse of a Chinese national; [C] OS – "Overstaying" migrant (regardless of previous visa or residence permit type); [D] D – Held a diplomatic pass; [E] F – Family visa

As much as possible, I fielded eligible participants with varied ages and professions to account for intersectionality and breadth of experiences and knowledge (see **Table 2** for an overview of the participants' demographic profiles). Forty to fifty

years old is the median age group of participants, eight of whom are males and seven are females. Eight out of fifteen are in or have just returned to the Philippines, while six currently work or have families in China. One of the two participants based in Europe at the time of data gathering has relatives still living in China. Regarding professions, I fielded migrants from different industries. For instance, I managed to interview three undocumented migrants who worked as nannies; the similarity of their responses, which became more apparent in the third interview, confirmed data redundancy (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 174; 180). These redundancies, discussed further in **Chapter 4**, confirmed data saturation.

2.2.2   Research tool and data gathering strategy

To gather conclusive data from study participants, I used an in-depth and open-ended structured interview questionnaire whose certain sections were framed by the concepts of Martin, van Brakel, and Bernhard (2009) on the digital surveillance framework and Zhu and Fu (2021) on censorship exposure formulation. Additionally, the questionnaire structure was shaped by Seidman's "three-interview series" (2019, pp. 21-24), or the interviewer's tasks: to (1) focus on the life history and context of participants' profiles and how these were related to the phenomena in question; (2) detail lived experiences, however incomplete the reconstruction may be; and (3) ask participants to reflect on the meanings of their experiences (see **Appendix 1**). Likewise, the questionnaire was informed by Padilla-Diaz's point on conducting a "profound interview", which could bring out participants' detailed descriptions of their lived experiences that should be "representative of experienced reality as possible" (2015, p. 104). I designed the questions to be open-ended so participants could provide extensive recollections of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114, as cited in Collins et al., 2022, p. 13).

The interview questionnaire was written in English and sent to my supervisor for further review of its rationale, logic, and clarity. Following my supervisor's approval of the questionnaire, I created a guide table (see **Appendix 2**) that shows the questions' alignments to theory and research questions to further strengthen its face validity (Sudman and Bradburn, as cited in Rasinski, 2008, pp. 4-6).

The interviews occurrd between late February and early May 2024 and lasted between 36 and 70 minutes. Out of fifteen interviews, thirteen were done through Facebook Messenger, which was the preferred platform of participants due to their lack of Zoom or Microsoft Teams accounts. The six participants in mainland China specifically asked to use Facebook Messenger, with a virtual private network (VPN) app on; the remaining ones were geographically distant from me despite us being in the Philippines (e.g., three live in island provinces more than 300 kilometers away). As with the experience of many qualitative researchers conducting virtual interviews in the post-pandemic era, I faced challenges in booking participants' times and several last-minute cancellations. Despite this, the technological and temporal convenience of these virtual interviews allowed me to maintain focus and distance, given my incorporation of reflexivity in this study (Zadkowska et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the remaining two interviews were done face-to-face. The interview conversations mostly happened in Filipino and English, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences freely and avoid the risk of surveillance through mobile listening.

2.2.3 Data analysis strategy

To analyze the transcripts for my research, I combined the steps outlined by several scholars for descriptive phenomenology studies (Collins et al., 2022, pp. 20-24; Jackson et al., 2018) with several tasks in the reflexive approach (Finlay, 2003, pp. 110-116). The latter method allowed for a scientific appraisal of my experience not only as the researcher but also as a migrant exposed to the phenomena in question (i.e., digital surveillance and censorship).

The structure for my data analysis followed the procedural logic of inductive coding analysis (ICA), a method useful for understanding a phenomenon and for eliciting "descriptions of [a] situation, event, or experience" (Vears & Gillam, 2022, pp. 115-116; 117-125). In ICA, the data is prepared (Step 1) for two rounds of coding (Steps 2 and 3), after which the subsequent codes are refined, combined, or collapsed (Step 4) for the final synthesis and interpretation (Step 5). However, this study does not fully take on inductive coding, as "codifications, conceptual abstractions, or empirical generalizations" cannot produce phenomenological insights adequately because of the complexity of a lived experience (van Manen, 2014, pp. 319-320). Also,

Sohn mentions of the "coding trap" where researchers focus completely on coded phrases, thus becoming an unnecessary process detaching them from getting the sense of the whole of a phenomenon (Gilbert, 2002, p. 218, as cited in ibid. 2017, pp. 5-6).

While these phenomenological traditions and research methods differ in the rigor of data analysis, their epistemological orientations to fleshing out the essence of participant experience are still aligned. I reconciled their strengths in the following synthesized data analysis process for this study. Its breakdown is outlined in **Table 3**.

- **Step 1   Familiarizing with the data**   To facilitate easier access and referencing, all interview materials (voice recordings, scans of interview notes, transcripts, consent forms, and other available non-textual evidence) were put into specific folders with participants' codenames (i.e., P1 to P15). Before heading into the next step, I transcribed the interviews carefully and methodically (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 11). The transcript documents' file names followed the interviewee codenames. Jackson et al. comment that this step contains the "raw data" of the phenomena (2018, p. 3314). Most of the transcripts included the original language and non-verbal cues (such as repetitions or pauses) and followed several transcription representation decisions (e.g., readability and accuracy) to allow for meaningful interpretation of data (Bailey J., 2008; Hecker & Kalpokas, 2024; Jenks, 2018, p. 13). Additionally, I created a general coding spreadsheet to systematize analyses of transcripts. The columns contained the step names, while the rows showed the interview questions and quotes for analysis.

  Another key part of this step is reflexively analyzing my task as a researcher who was also exposed to the same phenomena experienced by my participants. This was Finlay's suggestion, as it allowed me to bracket my experience and attempt to understand those of my participants (2003, pp. 110-111).

- **Step 2   Identifying "big-picture meaning units" from the text**   I closely read participants' answers for the first time and highlighted words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs and inserted annotations (through the "Comments" function in Word) to indicate "big-picture meaning units" (which Moustakas

called "horizonalization" (as cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 61; Collins et al., 2022, p. 20). This approach marked the "wholistic reading" of transcripts (van Manen, 2014, p. 320). The big-picture meaning units, or what I refer to as "**quotes**", contained the unedited expressions of participants' general experiences and were transferred to the spreadsheet column B (marked as "Step 2: Quotes"), since these would be the bases of the succeeding analyses. Additionally, the annotations I left in the original transcript included signposts or further notes, such as "Important" or "Read article by (an author)". In this step, I committed to conducting phenomenological reduction (i.e., bracketing) to "get the sense of the whole", since it would influence the trajectory of the entire analysis (Jackson et al., p. 3315).

- **Step 3 Deconstructing and clustering big-picture meaning units** This step started my reflexive approach. I translated the quotes (column C, "Step 3A: Translation"), re-reading the original transcript with careful consideration of my reflexivity (or "insider status"), sensitivity towards the ways I have been part of the phenomena in question, and dual role as a researcher-translator to facilitate my examination of cultural meanings, interpretations, and nuances (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 168; Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 434). Additionally, I cross-checked the codes with my interview notes and reflexively assessed their relations to the research questions, in what Vears & Gillam call "breaking open" the data without removing them from the context of the participants' original words (2022, pp. 117-118; 121). The quotes were then edited and reduced into understandable or everyday language (in column D, "Step 3B: Everyday Language"). Following this, the edited quotes were reviewed to "cluster" similar meaning units (Collins et al., 2022, p. 20) and then intuiting shifts in meaning (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 3315). Van Manen refers to this as the "selective reading" of the transcript (van Manen, 2014, p. 320).

- **Step 4 Composing textural descriptions** I transformed the quotes in everyday language into formal textural descriptions to compose what I refer to as **narrative accounts** that "better reveal the characteristics of the experience" (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 3316). Collins et al. explain this as "writing textural descriptions" of the data, i.e., the "textures" or the "what" of the participants'

experiences (2022, p. 20). This step also involved reflexive reflection because of my relationship with some of the participants, including my key informants (Finlay L., 2003, pp. 112-113). I did so by reviewing my interview notes and adding them as comments to the textural descriptions written in column E ("Step 4: Textural Descriptions").

- **Step 5 Constructing structural descriptions and extrapolating themes** In the final step, I immersed myself yet again in the original transcripts, translations, and narrative accounts to construct structural descriptions that express the "essential structure" (Jackson et al., 2018, p. 3319) or the "how" of the participants' experience (Collins et al., 2022, p. 22). In ICA's procedural logic, this step comprises "internal interpretation" (Vears & Gillam, 2022, p. 122) that connects previous parts (i.e., transcripts, translations, and narrative accounts). For each participant, I constructed a composite structural description from which I extrapolated key themes for discussion. This step was further enlightened by Finlay's concept of "immersing" into the data in order to exploit my experience of the phenomena and reflecting on the "shared, emotional responses". However, she cautioned against "imposing my own experience" in the complete analysis (2003, pp. 116-117).

Table 3: Synthesizing various phenomenological research processes to analyze data for this study

Inductive coding analysis steps [A]	Descriptive phenomenology steps [B]	Reflexive phenomenology tasks [C]	Synthesis in this study
Step 1: Reading and familiarizing	Jackson et al. Step 1: Identifying concrete descriptions	Task 1: Reflexively analyzing my role as the researcher against the phenomena	Step 1: Familiarizing with the data from the interview transcripts.
Step 2: Identifying big-picture meaning units (or "first-round coding")	Jackson et al. Step 2: Getting the sense of the whole Collins et al. Step 1: Horizonalizing		Step 2: Identifying big-picture meaning units (or "quotes") in transcripts through phenomenological reduction and bracketing.
Step 3. Developing subcategories (or "second-round coding")	Jackson et al. Step 3: Intuiting meaning shifts Collins et al. Step 2: Clustering meaning units	Task 2: Clarifying the researcher's relationship with the participants	Step 3: Deconstructing and clustering big-picture meaning units by translating and transforming quotes into everyday language (or "edited quotes") and reflecting on my role as a researcher-translator.
Step 4. Refining the fine-grained subcategories	Jackson et al. Step 4: Transforming descriptions Collins et al. Step 3: Writing textural descriptions		Step 4: Composing textural descriptions (or "narrative accounts") from the edited quotes while reflecting on my relationship with participants.
Step 5. Synthesizing and interpreting	Jackson et al. Step 5: Structuring Collins et al. Step 4: Constructing the essence	Task 4: Immersing into the data reflexively	Step 5: Constructing the structural description (or "essential structure") from narrative accounts, from which key themes are extrapolated for discussion. .

Sources: Syntheses of the methods outlined in [A] Vears & Gillam (2022, pp. 117-125); [B] Jackson, Vaughan, & Brown (2018, pp. 3313-3319) and Collins, Ramos, & Marinas (2022, pp. 20-22); and [C] Finlay (2003, pp. 116-117).

2.2.4 Ethics and limitations

Using my migrant experience in China   My experience with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat as a former Filipino migrant in China was a precursor for integrating reflexive phenomenology into this study. The method limited me in conducting complete bracketing but still allowed me to flesh out and reinforce responses without detaching them from participants' experiential standpoints. I expounded on this aspect in the preceding subchapters.

Connections with participants   At least three participants (including the key informant) and I are members of a Filipino community group in China. Our mutual connection barely influenced their responses, except for one who mentioned the group's previous events to emphasize his experience with surveillance and censorship on WeChat. Despite this, I strictly avoided mentioning the group or our connections to adhere to bracketing. Also, I reminded the participants at the beginning and certain points of the interview that they could opt to stop the conversation if that would trigger negative emotional recollections, induce psychological stress, or cause legal harm.

Consent and data privacy   During and after the interviews, I asked and reminded participants to sign a consent form (see **Appendix 3**) to permit me to process their interview data for research purposes. It also stated their names would be withheld and their data would be anonymized to minimize their risk of surveillance; their participation was voluntary and unpaid; and that they would be able to rectify, erase, or restrict the processing of their data based on the provisions of the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).[38] To maintain participants' anonymity and ensure confidentiality of their data, interview transcripts were excluded from the thesis' appendices.

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[38] "Personal data" is defined in the GDPR Article 6 (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2015). I referred to the toolkits of several websites (LDA Research, 2019; Swedish National Data Service, 2024; Quallie, n.d.) to craft a data consent and privacy form for this research, given the absence of a faculty-wide template.

Interview language   In some regional phenomenological studies, researchers have employed interpreters during interviews or approached their studies through a mix of autoethnography and semiotics (e.g., Pax, 2013). Qualitative researchers consider the dilemma of translation and interpretation a threat to validity, e.g., a risk of simplification or the weakening of analysis due to a lack of familiarity with the 'cultural arena' (Kapborg & Berterö, 2002, p. 55). For some conventional phenomenologists, this dilemma can be addressed by referring readers constantly to the phenomena and using ordinary language that becomes a "common ground" for the researchers and their audience (Küng, 1969, p. 334). For this study, I conducted the interviews mainly in English and translated interview questions into Filipino when necessary. I minimized the impact of this intervention on the questionnaire's face validity by consistently referring to the guide table (see **Appendix 2**). Still, some questions contained untranslatable terms, which may have inadvertently affected participant responses, especially those who used mainly Filipino in the conversation.

Chapter 3: Findings

This chapter presents the themes that have emerged from quotes, narrative accounts, and composite structural descriptions of participants' experiences with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat (or referred to as "phenomena"). As part of this phenomenological research, my reflexivity as a researcher-translator manifested through translating quotes and clarifying cultural nuances in participant experiences. As such, I attempted to continue bracketing during this process.

The presentation of findings takes inspiration from the phenomenological works of Swinton (2001) and Stricker (2022) and the methodologies of Jackson et al. (2018) and Collins et al. (2022). I show participants' narrative accounts to provide a nuanced overview of the theme(s) and emphasize a discussion point through translated quotes or structural descriptions.

3.1 Filipino migrants' understanding of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat

I established the research focus by laying out the various understandings of Filipino migrants with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. For this inquiry, four general themes unfold: (1) what do participants know about the phenomena, (2) why they happen, especially on the app, (3) what their roles are, and (4) how the distinctions in their migrant status influence this understanding.

3.1.1 General understanding of digital surveillance and censorship

In the first part of the interviews, I asked participants to describe their ideas or understanding of surveillance and censorship. Most responded that censorship is controlling or reducing exposure to words, narratives, or topics. Meanwhile, nearly all expressed that surveillance is monitoring a person's actions. There are arguments about the orientations of surveillance and censorship:

P5 Censorship is not necessarily about deleting specific information in a conversation or a statement. It is about ensuring the narrative stays favorable to the controlling party or group. One may still have freedom, but they should make sure their opinions or the information they express do not go against the narrative.[39]

P12 Anywhere in the world, there's always surveillance. It just so happens that it is all about geopolitics. Once you understand that it is between the East and the West, you won't care about it anymore. Because once you go to the West, you will know you're also being surveilled. For instance, once you go past immigration, that's already surveillance. So, once you travel, you will understand that it is not always about data privacy, surveillance, or monitoring. That's why we could say, "China is monitoring this one or that one." But in China, they are also saying, "The US is also monitoring this one and that one."[40]

Beyond the political overtones of surveillance and censorship, several participants, like P8, emphasize the need for a better understanding of the freedom of expression, particularly for personal and interpersonal reasons. In his account, P2 believes social media users outside China use apps without any regard for rules, thus risking their profession and reputation. Meanwhile, among the participants who are also parents, P7 raised the relevance of information exposure to young people.

P8 I saw why the Chinese government needed to regulate communication. Their population is huge. Meanwhile, we Filipinos tend to abuse our freedom of expression to the point that it has become normal to curse our government. Sometimes, we overuse it to the point that we become rude and discourteous. It must be controlled. In China, you cannot do that.[41]

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[39] Translated quote, P5, 2024. P5 worked as a marketing professional in China for three years.
[40] Translated quote, P12, 2024. P12 is a businessperson and a community leader based in China.
[41] Part of a narrative account, P8, 2024. P8 worked as a nanny in China for eight years.

P2 If you do some nasty things that get recorded and posted on social media, your life might be ruined. Even so, Filipinos don't feel government surveillance, unlike in China where everyone uses WeChat and knows they are being monitored, so they cannot hide everything.[42]

P7 I do not agree with exposing the youth, especially the younger ones, to content that is not suitable for their age. For this reason, I strongly agree that censorship is needed not for myself but for the younger generation. I believe surveillance is done to make sure a person is safe. But nowadays, it is being misused in so many aspects of life, which already erodes our privacy. If it is for safety purposes and identifying something wrong, then it's fine. But if it is used to make someone feel they are not free anymore, that I do not agree with.[43]

All participants confirmed they have directly or indirectly experienced or observed digital and physical surveillance and censorship in China. However, most of them believe these phenomena manifest differently in the Philippines, either as nearly non-existent (P5, 2024; P10, 2024) or the government's tool in the contentious drug war and monitoring of social media trolls during the previous general elections (P1, 2024). Some participants also think that Philippines' surveillance and censorship capabilities are not as good as China's (P8, 2024; P11, 2024), and are used only for high-value targets and very important people (P6, 2024). P13 pointed out that beyond the Philippine government, platforms have a say in the digital surveillance and censorship in the country. The following quote includes annotations in my high-context discussion with P13, a medical professional.

P13 About Catwoman [code for "censorship"] and Superman [code for "surveillance"], it was freer in our *Inang Bayan* [lit., "motherland"; code for "Philippines"][44] before. Lately, however, they [the platform owners] have been

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[42] Part of a narrative account, P2, 2024. P2 is a businessperson married to a Chinese national.
[43] Translated quote, P7, 2024. P7 is a businessperson who has lived in China for nearly 30 years.
[44] During my interviews with participants living in China, we agreed to use codenames for "censorship" and "surveillance" to minimize potential detection through mobile listening.

regulating and reviewing a lot of content. But some other content isn't regulated not because of our *Inang Bayan*'s Catwoman and Superman, but because of the platform owners. For example, you cannot just use original songs when uploading a video. Even your own original song won't meet the platforms' regulations. They are already controlling copyright. And sometimes, the app shows "Content cannot be displayed."

The truth is *Inang Bayan* does not have control over the content on and regulations done by *Mukhang Libro* [lit., "face book"; code for "Facebook"]. We all know that platforms have released their rules for posting for users. If you post something related to *Inang Bayan*'s Catwoman and Superman, the government can engage with trolls using the platform, but not react against the platform owners. The government can say something, for instance, if there are rumors or misleading content about *Inang Bayan*'s current leader [President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.] going against the former leader [former President Rodrigo Duterte]. Both camps' supporters, which we know are trolls, will argue against each other. This platform owner can control this discussion if it wants to. But sometimes, it cannot.[45]

Meanwhile, P15 lived during Martial Law-era Philippines, where she recalled observing government surveillance and censorship.

P13   I've been away from the Philippines for so long. Are surveillance and censorship still being done there? During the first Marcos era, I'd say the situation was similar to China's now; it's just that Chinese methods are more advanced. In the first Marcos era, you could only read one newspaper. There's no Internet, just the newspaper and the TV. It was hard for broadcasters to deliver news, but there were rare moments when they would inject critical commentary through facial expressions. I remember the news presenter Tina Monzon-Palma would smirk when reading news pieces that she disagree with. If you're observant, you'd know that was not real news. We didn't have Google

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[45] Part of a composite structural description, P13, 2024. P13 is a medical professional who has lived in China for six years.

or Yahoo, so we never had a way to find news. News stories before deemed critical would never see the daylight. And that's the main difference. In China, I used to open Yahoo News without my VPN on. But now, even it is also banned here.[46]

3.1.2 Operations behind digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat

Unsurprisingly, most participants say the Chinese government conducts digital censorship or surveillance on WeChat and other social media platforms. As to why, some see digital surveillance and censorship as beneficial in protecting local merchants from invasive foreign business strategies (P10, 2024), streamlining digital governance, and monitoring tax evasion (P7, 2024). On the security side, participants believe these actions inform the Chinese government's methods to safeguard the population against crimes (P1, 2024; P4, 2024), although with the cost of jeopardizing one's privacy (P14, 2024). Others view that digital surveillance and censorship technologies help the Chinese government control narratives to maintain the Communist Party's ideology (P11, 2024; P13, 2024), block extremism (P8, 2024), or identify potential traitors (P9, 2024). P5 elaborates on those three factors: (1) commerce and big data, (2) national security, and (3) culture:

> **P5** When you are not paying for the product, that means the product is you. What free apps sell is your data, but not necessarily your personal information. They collect patterns from us to identify big data and sell it to advertisers, brands, and the market. The Chinese government censors that to control the market. As they harness this information, they can digest and learn from it or sell or use it for themselves. Regarding national security, the Communist Party knows the power of youth and discourse because it originated from the Marxist youth. They control it because they started from it. The third reason is cultural: they don't want foreign influence. In the Philippines, information is nearly unmoderated, and that's why our own culture has almost died out because we the United States has culturally dominated us. In China, they control information so foreign cultures won't overpower their own.

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[46] Part of a composite narrative description, P15, 2024. P15 is a teacher based in China.

So, censorship or surveillance are not always about subversive activities or keeping power but an attempt to make sure a country remains intact and maintains its nationalistic ideals.[47]

P12 and P15, who are both WeChat group moderators, emphasized the role of platforms in the phenomena:

P12   We cannot just say it's WeChat or any other platform doing all these restrictions. They always comply with whatever guidelines that the government has given them. For example, if there are things that need to be investigated, they go to cyber forensics, which makes it easier to trace. It also helps the relevant law agencies to help monitor threats.[48]

P15   WeChat is owned by Tencent. The government regulates the entry of foreign competitors so local businesses will succeed. Local businesses bow to the government and will follow whatever it says; otherwise, their assets will be frozen. If they don't play the game, their business will suffer.

While Tencent gives the government all the information it wants, it is still the company that does what we see as built-in censorship in the form of programs or algorithms to appease the government. This is why my kids and I don't have TikTok.[49] I have told them, "Do you want the Chinese government to know what you are doing? You don't have privacy anymore. All you do will be seen." I just use WeChat out of necessity.[50]

3.1.3   Roles in digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat

Aside from the preceding information, which augments the existing knowledge base about digital surveillance and censorship in the Chinese Internet ecosystem (e.g., Mozur, 2018; Kuo, 2020), several participants also pointed out other interpersonal dimensions. When asked about their role in the phenomena on WeChat, some said they

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[47] Part of a composite narrative account, P5, 2024.
[48] Translated quote, P12, 2024.
[49] Translated quote, P12, 2024.
[50] TikTok is the international version of Douyin. Tencent own and operate both short-form video apps.

are just regular users without any impact at all (P1, 2024; P14, 2024) because they use the app only for communication (P4, 2024; P10, 2024; P13, 2024). Others see themselves as rule-followers for their own safety (P3, 2024; P8, 2024) or business interests (P12, 2024) (see **Table 4** for more). Some participants have observed more interesting roles, such as regulating content themselves. For example, in P2's experience as a WeChat group moderator:

> **P2** What the [WeChat] admins do is monitor everything that goes on [in the group chat]. Admins base their response on the actions of WeChat account holders, whether they are doing activities against the law.[51]

Table 4: **User roles in digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat**

Role	Function
Regular users	Using the app only for communication and other daily transactions
Rule-followers	Following app regulations for safety or business interests
Regulators	Conducting gatekeeping, censorship, or surveillance on the app
Informants	Educating people about the risks of surveillance and censorship on the app
Subjects	Becoming sources of information for big data harvesting and surveillance, either through personal actions or adding contacts to app networks

Source: Analysis of participant experiences in Chapter 3, subchapter 3.1.3

Some participants understand their role in informing not just other migrants but also the digital surveillance and censorship mechanisms. For instance, P6 and P11 were motivated by their intention to educate migrants, while P9 and P5 knew their actions comprised big data information that could further inform the system.

> **P6** As far as my career and country are concerned, my role was to not get caught or be used by China. I know I succeeded in doing that. I warned our compatriots, especially the undocumented, and informed them of surveillance and censorship mechanisms so they wouldn't unintentionally do something that

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[51] Part of a composite narrative account, P2, 2024.

would lead them to harm. In my role, if it was subtle, directly, or indirectly, I was able to warn people and avoid being used.[52]

P11   Because I'm currently outside of China, I can access and send censored videos to my relatives and friends still living there. I want them to become aware, especially of the issues in the West Philippine Sea. The videos we see in the Philippines are so different from those shown by Chinese media.[53]

P9   What role do I play? Maybe, it's meant to refine their system further and check who the foreigners are. They only have the software to gather general information from people, especially foreigners. Once they notice a trend or patterns, they may wish to finetune or develop their system to go deeper into whatever they want to find.[54]

P5   The truth is the Chinese government does not care about our privacy and personal issues. What they are after is the big picture: the data they can harvest from us, which can impact culture and national security.[55]

Beyond these roles, P15 also pointed out how users can inadvertently add people in their personal network (e.g., family members and friends) to the "field of surveillance".

P15   When I tell others to create a WeChat account and add them so we can communicate, it seems that I am also including them in the field of surveillance. In that case, they will also be surveilled and monitored by the Chinese government. But I don't really think I have a big effect on surveillance and censorship because they are already established here. That's why I said I'm

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[52] Part of a narrative account, P6, 2024. P6 is a diplomat previously based in China.
[53] Translated quote, P11, 2024. P11 studied high school in China.
[54] Part of a narrative account, P9, 2024. P9 is a diplomat previously based in China.
[55] Part of a narrative account, P5, 2024.

using WeChat out of necessity and for work. I'm not active anymore on the app because I have already gotten too much of it.[56]

3.1.4 Distinctions in migrant status

Another theme relates to the differences in participants' migrant status, i.e., their professions and the legality of their residence in China. This distinction informs the extent of their understanding of the phenomena and the kinds of topics they discuss on WeChat. For instance, the participants who were undocumented migrants shared they gossiped (P3, 2024) but avoided discussing serious topics (P4, 2024) or posting personal matters on WeChat out of fear of detection and potential arrest (P8, 2024). Student participants have seen how Filipino migrants used WeChat groups to organize social gatherings (P10, 2024), find internships or employment (P11, 2024), or share blogs and social updates (P14, 2024). P15, who has managed several international group chats, believes there are "two main groups of Filipinos" on WeChat:

> **P15** The "professional Filipinos" are mostly teachers who use a more professional language in WeChat groups. These Filipinos are mindful, accountable, open, and respectful. These Filipinos would correct each other, saying, "Don't say that word. Maybe Big Brother is listening." In these groups, no one would troll or agitate other Filipinos. Yet, the religious devotion of some professional Filipinos has become an issue in international group chats. Some foreigners who are atheists and antagonistic to Christians argue with Filipinos who send Bible quotes in those group chats. As a result, I refrain from posting such content.
>
> The second group of Filipinos includes domestic helpers or those married to Chinese. In WeChat groups, some of these Filipinos are indifferent and scandalmongers, while others sow panic and incite arguments. I already left many Filipino group chats that were a waste of time because of the unnecessary chatter and gossiping, especially about relationships.[57]

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[56] Part of a narrative account, P15, 2024.
[57] Part of a composite structural description, P15, 2024.

The other participants who have moderated WeChat groups highlighted their diligence in reminding Filipino migrants, regardless of residence status, of "house rules", particularly using "respectful [and] mindful language" [58] to avoid misunderstanding (P7, 2024) and eschewing posting illicit content that might put their group at risk of being blocked (P2, 2024).

> **P12** As long as Filipinos are in China, communicating in WeChat groups is necessary. But some members do not follow the rules, so the group owner can decide whether to remove or give whatever punishment, or else they will face the consequences. It is fine to have rules because miscommunication can lead to problems, especially the spread of fake news.[59]

3.1.5 Importance of understanding the phenomena

Several participants also underscored the importance of understanding Filipino migrants' experience with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. In his professional experience, P5 (2024) observed that surveillance and censorship tools in China are "not that complex". P7 (2024) and P9 (2024) believe countries like the Philippines can still learn from these technologies for digital governance and security matters.

> **P5** My friends who have worked for the Chinese government told me authorities' surveillance and censorship methods are similar to what is being done on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. For example, they use a word cloud-like system that shows trends. A big term means many people talk about that at any given time. If censors see a trend that looks suspicious or does not align with the Chinese government narrative, they will investigate who talks about it and where the discussions happen. But it's too resource-intensive for them to investigate everyone. I haven't seen this happen firsthand, but it will really be a big thing, especially if the trending words are sinister, for example, if a topic

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[58] This means avoiding sensitive terms such as "VPN", providing more context, and using clear language and tone.
[59] Part of a narrative account, P12, 2024.

becomes a national threat. But I doubt it happens a lot because people know the implications. And I guess there's a big myth being spread by the government that when you get caught [posting threatening content], there'll be no trial. It's something that frightens people.

The Chinese government won't confirm or deny if their technology is advanced. I work in advertising and have seen demonstrations of AI, robotics, and other cutting-edge technologies. In truth, they're still substandard. It may be an Asian characteristic to pick up existing technology and troubleshoot or fix any problems in it. Sorry for the word, but the Chinese are not trying to innovate. What they do is to assemble components they got from different things.[60]

P7 Actually, we should already have a one-stop app like WeChat in the Philippines. WeChat has a lot of mini-programs with different functions, especially those managed by government offices. In the Philippines, it takes a long time because of bureaucracy. People need to go to government offices and queue for a long time just to receive a simple piece of advice that could have been sent through an app. For instance, how does a government office here track down people who don't pay taxes? They still need to use a computer and get paper documents from boxes. Good luck! If we have a one-stop app, it will be easier for the government. However, in terms of surveillance, there should be a reason for it.[61]

P9 The difference between the digital surveillance capabilities of the Philippines and China is worlds apart. This might be sensitive, but I think our government may also be learning from them. It's good that we get to learn more advanced technology. And if we use it for purposes done to uphold our national interests, then why not? An example could be monitoring trolls. Another example could be monitoring a lot of sympathizers in the Philippines who, in one way or another, try to divide society. It's sad on the part of our compatriots because they know that it's against our national interest, but they're still doing

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[60] Part of a composite narrative account, P5, 2024.
[61] Part of a narrative account, P7, 2024.

so for reasons that I don't know. Our borders are very porous. And it's not factual, but some news reports say it's easy to become a Filipino national nowadays. I think we need that kind of technology to monitor because the geopolitical situation is becoming very tense. So, we should know the people who are our people and those working against our national interests.[62]

3.2 Issues faced by Filipino migrants with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat

The intersections between the points discussed in the previous subchapter bring complications to participants as they engage on WeChat. The issues that emerged from participants' narrative accounts and essential experiences in the second part of the interviews are (1) how WeChat has become a digital dragnet, which results in self-regulation in the form of (2) self-censorship and (3) group gatekeeping. These predicaments all fall under the broader issue regarding freedom of speech in China.

3.2.1 WeChat as a digital dragnet

Among the participants, the three nannies who were undocumented migrants elaborated on their direct and indirect experiences of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat, particularly about how the app led to their arrest. Their experiences were corroborated by other participants who were WeChat group administrators or community leaders.

> **P4**   I was arrested a week after my friend got caught. I asked [the police] how they were able to track me. During the pandemic, we used a mini-program called Health Kit.[63] They could see my cellphone number there. Through the SIM card, they were able to find my location! They could track me no matter what, even in CCTV cameras, especially when I leave the gate [of our residence].
>
> For a long time, I had tried to be safe. But it turned out that they would catch me from the thing that I always hold [cellphone]. When I learned about

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[62] Part of a composite narrative account, P9, 2024.

[63] Discussion about Health Kit in Chapter 1, subchapter 1.3.1.

this, I told my friends to never give their SIM card number to anyone because their locations can be tracked.[64]

P8 When the situation for undocumented Filipino migrants got tense, we were all so afraid of posting on WeChat Moments. We had to hide our posts because authorities could distinguish faces from photos using high-tech [detection methods] if one of us got arrested. It had happened to us already. My friends and I were in a building. One of us got caught and authorities checked her WeChat account. It's good that I didn't chat with her a lot. Authorities looked at every single chat she had with everyone, including her landlord. Because of that, we immediately sought a new place to live and hide. [65]

Several participants also shared examples of people from WeChat networks reporting users to authorities for different reasons.

P4 I know a friend who posted nude content. It wasn't immediately blocked; however, several people on her WeChat network informed the authorities. Eventually, her account was restricted. The people who reported her said they did so out of fear that their WeChat connection would lead them to arrest. Our situation as undocumented is complicated. We go on hiding anywhere.[66]

P7 As one of the Filipino community leaders in China, I have encountered and been informed by several TNT[67] who said they were arrested by police through WeChat. They didn't know exactly how they were tracked or how extensive the surveillance was. But I think it was not just government surveillance; rather, it was done by other WeChat users. What I meant was someone in their network squealed on those TNTs. When a person reports an undocumented migrant to

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[64] Translated quote, P4, 2024. P4 was a victim of human trafficking, which forced her to work as an illegal nanny in China for 3.5 years.
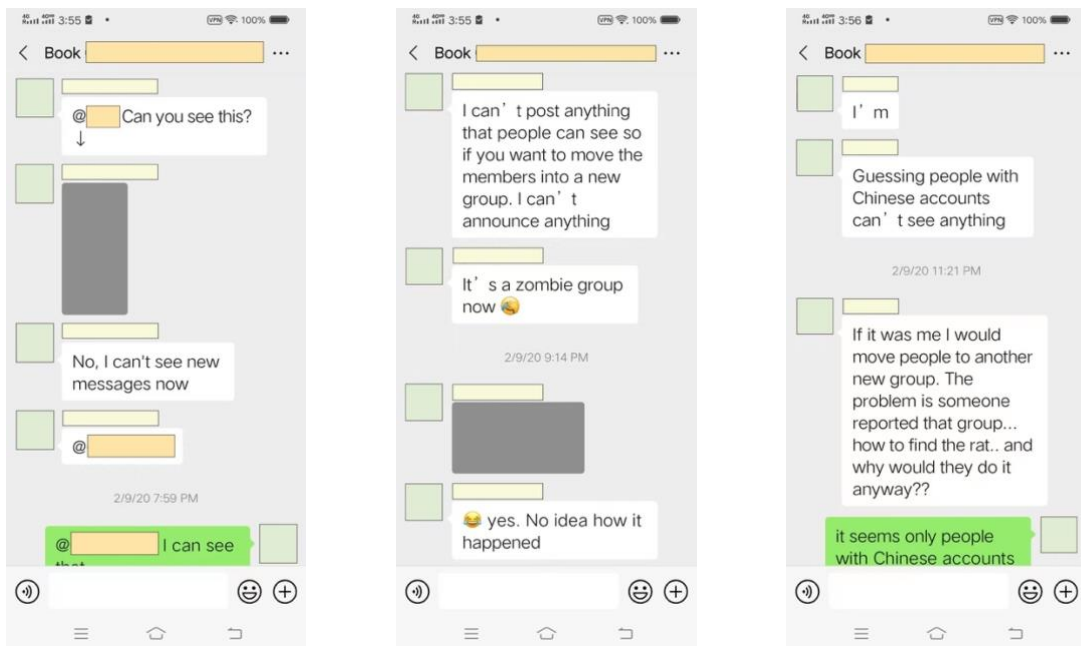[65] Part of a narrative account, P8, 2024.
[66] Part of a narrative account, P4, 2024.
[67] Abbreviation for *tago nang tago* or Filipino for "always hiding". TNT is a colloquial term for undocumented Filipino migrants, especially in the United States and some Middle Eastern countries.

the police, they get something in return, usually a monetary reward. That's how police usually apprehend undocumented migrants.[68]

In another instance, P15 shared a situation in a WeChat group for book enthusiasts where she and her co-administrators probed why members couldn't see new content. P15 surmised the issue affected only members whose WeChat accounts were linked to Chinese mobile numbers. Later, P15's co-administrator discovered an erring member posted digital copies of *The Economist* and *TIME* magazines with content about China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic in February 2020.

Figure 1: Censorship in a WeChat group (Part 1)

The WeChat group's name and members' display images and handles have been redacted. Screenshots courtesy of and published with the permission of P15.

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[68] Part of a narrative account, P7, 2024.

Figure 2: Censorship in a WeChat group (Part 2)

The WeChat group's name and members' display images and handles have been redacted. Screenshots courtesy of and published with the permission of P15.
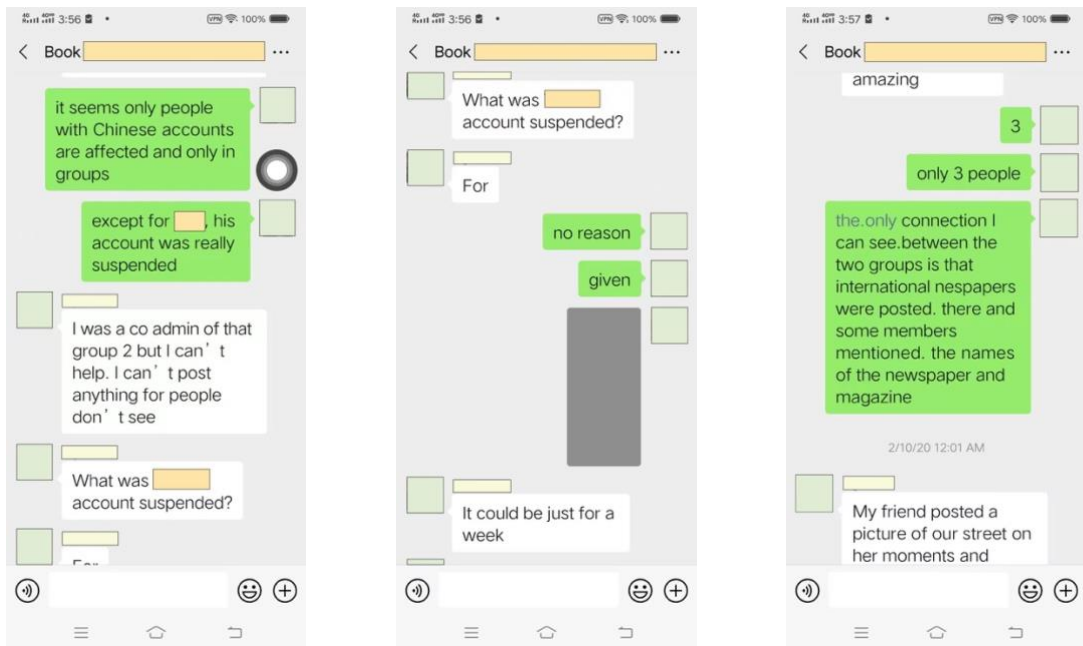
Figure 3: Censorship in a WeChat group (Part 3)

The WeChat group's name and members' display images and handles have been redacted. Screenshots courtesy of and published with the permission of P15.
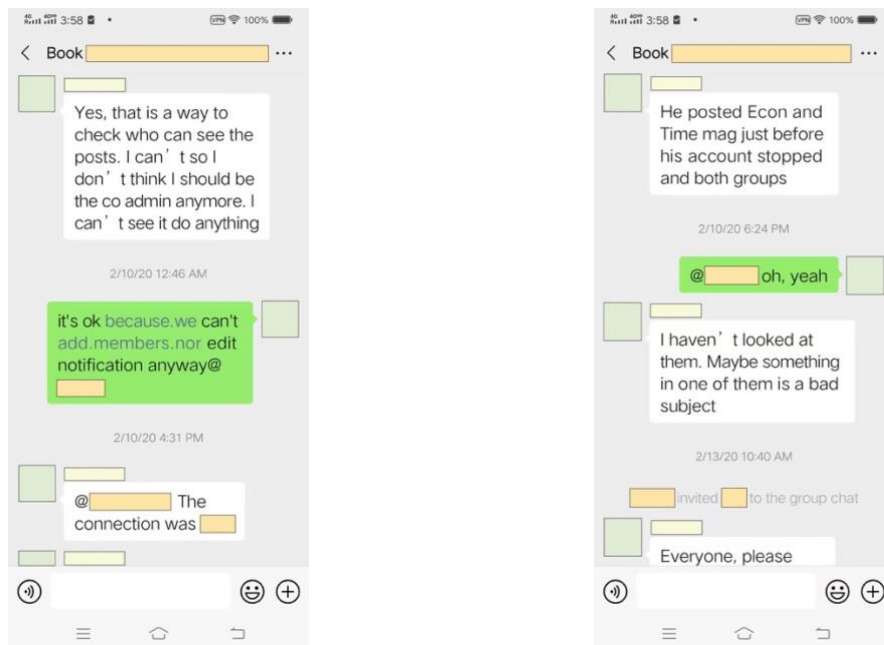
P12   Sometimes, WeChat would say users violated rules. Of course, in this case, it is not the government that does censorship but the platform itself. It's the same with Facebook: try sharing gruesome videos and another user or a fact checker will review and report your account. Every application, not only WeChat, has this kind of feature. But then, when a user gets reported, it's not actually the application that detects this alone, but someone reports them.[69]

3.2.2   Self-censorship

As a result of the dragnet effect on WeChat, several participants said they exercised some forms of self-regulation to protect themselves. For instance, one of the nannies practiced self-censorship during pandemic lockdowns in China, especially when people feared getting infected. Another participant was told by their parents to avoid talking about the pandemic on WeChat.

P8   My Chinese friend, who helped buy our food, informed us of how serious situations went unreported. He showed us self-taken footage at a hospital where dead bodies lay. Similar videos were never shown in the news. He implored us to never share the video out of fear that police could catch them. My friends and I really avoided talking about the footage and other similar content in our group chat because we might be caught.[70]

P10   I wasn't in China during the pandemic, but I still communicated with my parents through WeChat. When we talked about it in the beginning, I said, "Yeah, it started in Wuhan." My mom was like, "Wait, wait, wait. Be careful with the things you say! We cannot just chat about everything here because I'm still working here. Our reputation could go bad." Our family has always tried to play it safely in China. We don't want to provoke the government because we are aware that they are surveilling everything.[71]

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[69] Translated quote, P12, 2024.
[70] Part of a narrative account, P8, 2024.
[71] Part of a narrative account, P10, 2024. P10 studied high school in China, but now lives abroad.

Aside from COVID-19-related information, some participants said geopolitical topics can also warrant self-censorship. P10 recalled a classroom incident where their Chinese classmates claimed the Tiananmen Square incident did not happen, following their teacher's notice that their school could not procure a foreign book about contemporary Chinese history and economy.

> **P10**   The problem was mostly about the freedom to talk about these issues on WeChat. For me, outside China, we know these issues exist. Looking back at this classroom incident, it is now funny because our Australian teacher told us, "Yeah, okay, let's just move on. Don't ever mention about Tiananmen." He realized that there were certain things that he could not bring up even to the Chinese students in this international school. That made us scared to talk about it on WeChat. But we tried typing it on WeChat just to make fun, like, "Will they actually catch us? Will they screw us up or something?" But nothing really happened, to be honest. Nothing happened because we weren't really talking to other Chinese people. We were just talking to other foreigners.[72]

3.2.3   Group gatekeeping

Another form of self-regulation for several participants is the gatekeeping of information. As a member of several Filipino WeChat groups, P5 saw moderators removing advertisements that did not follow group rules. Meanwhile, P15, who moderates several group chats, has experienced scrutiny from members for gatekeeping content.

> **P5**   Surveillance and censorship happen all the time. I encountered them, although I wasn't the subject. For example, in a WeChat group related to Filipino food, the moderator removes the advertisements of sellers who flood the chat and usually announces post limit rules. That's a form of censorship. In a way, monitoring is surveillance. However, "surveillance" is just another word that, for me, feels invasive. Again, monitoring is just a role of the moderator.[73]

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[72] Part of a narrative account, P10, 2024.
[73] Part of a narrative account, P5, 2024.

P15   You cannot control members in group chats and there will always be people who challenge authority and push you to the limit. In that case, I will just leave the group or avoid commenting. When I am the group admin, I kick out violators because the group notice mentions that offenders will be removed right away. No questions asked, no second chances; they will just argue with you.

Here in China, there is a regulation that group owners and managers are held responsible for group members who violate rules.[74] I've been called a traitor, coward, *puta* [lit. "prostitute"] because I forbid sensitive discussions in my group chats and would kick out people. But my point is I'm in China. Those offenders are mostly in Australia or the United States and are brave to troll because they aren't even here anymore! Of course, their friends have accused me of being a Chinese prostitute and sycophant. I would kick them out too.

At first, this name-calling made me furious. Before, I tried to explain myself. But it's useless. I learned that you cannot argue with stupid people who don't want to listen. Most of them live their white privileged life and have never really experienced discrimination or being told, "You don't look like a foreigner." Here in China, people worship white people.[75]

3.3   Impact of experiences with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat on digital communication behavior

During the interviews, I asked the participants whether their varied experiences with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat affected their digital communication behavior. Based on narrative accounts and structural descriptions, most participants expressed an ambivalence about behavioral change. Those who have working knowledge or directly experienced digital surveillance and censorship on the app have (1) attempted self-regulation, (2) used coded language, or (3) resorted to different tactics. Others who have a deep awareness of but have indirect experiences with the phenomena (4) continued adopting or promoting a digital communication attitude.

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[74] P15 refers to the Cyberspace Administration of China statement that group chat owners and managers will be responsible for managing groups (Shen, 2017; Cyberspace Administration of China, 2017).
[75] Part of a composite narrative account, P15, 2024.

Many participants expressed that any change hardly transferred to different apps that they believe are much freer.

3.3.1 Self-regulation

As established previously, WeChat facilitates daily transactions and communication. Thus, some participants regulate their use of the app by shunning sensitive or political topics that might further link them to trends (P5, 2024; P10, 2024; P15, 2024) or trying to avoid any action that might compromise their accounts (P2, 2024; P14, 2024). P2 said there was a lesson learned in the experience of his son, whose WeChat account was blocked temporarily.

> **P2** Blocking can happen when one sends a large amount of money on WeChat or when people talk about sensitive information or issues about the government. But rules are rules, and people are not freely allowed to give opinions on WeChat when it comes to government matters. However, if they want to talk about these matters, they should leave them be or use apps other than WeChat.[76]

For P3, the impact of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat was "too much" and traumatic, almost prompting her to leave the app. People in P3's network have also concealed their identities on different social platforms.

> **P3** When you hear that someone has been arrested, you will want to forgo WeChat. You wouldn't even know if something was really true. You would think everything could be tracked and feel, "Oh, I won't open WeChat anymore!" because of that fear of getting caught, even if you just want to say hi to your friend. And the worst thing is when a friend is arrested. Someone from our contacts will remind me personally, "Hey! Do not message me because [the police] can track you!"
>
> In my seven years of living in China, I learned to live under anxiety. There were days I felt worried. But there were times when the situation would go

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[76] Part of a narrative account, P2, 2024.

better. I got so used to that world. But it is just impossible to go without WeChat completely. Chinese friends and colleagues are on it. You just need to lie low.

When someone has been arrested, many undocumented Filipinos will replace their social media avatars with different images. Like now, the situation in China is strict due to political meetings, so most social avatars of undocumented Filipinos show flowers, cartoon characters, or anything else. I also know friends who use different display names on Facebook out of trauma. They never show their real names or remove anything that can identify them because they are so anxious about being found by Chinese police, even on Facebook and other social apps. They have never displayed their real names on WeChat anyway.[77]

P8 My advice? Practice self-censorship, just as I did in China. Whether you are there legally or illegally, your primary goal is to earn money. If you're residing illegally, you must be especially cautious as the authorities are already aware of your presence. It's crucial to refrain from expressing political opinions, particularly those that are against the Chinese government, even to your friends. Save these discussions for when you are already in the Philippines. Otherwise, someone will just arrest you.[78]

3.3.2 Using coded language

Another impact that several participants mentioned is using different languages when communicating on WeChat to circumvent digital surveillance and censorship. Many WeChat groups of Filipino migrants use the vernacular when discussing topics, although some study participants understand that Tagalog and other Philippine languages can still be translated by artificial intelligence technologies (P7, 2024; P13, 2024). In this case, some participants turn to clever speech and creative jargon.

P6 Before coming to China, we attended a PDOS [pre-departure orientation seminar] where we were informed that certain words like "massacre",

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[77] Part of a composite narrative account, P3, 2024.
[78] Part of a narrative account, P2, 2024.

"Tiananmen Square", "freedom", "democracy", and others connected to outside information could not be mentioned on WeChat. Otherwise, we would be subjected to surveillance by the Intelligence Bureau. I was advised that this agency is extensive, and every corner of the country has a representative who can present themselves as merchants, dealers, store owners, and whatnot. So, if you use Bisaya or Tagalog, someone can interpret it.

I need to be conscious whenever I am on WeChat or any social media account. It's crucial because I might say something accidentally. For example, I needed to be aware of the information that I must never mention on WeChat, but there were times I forgot about that because I thought I was on Messenger. There was even a time when I accidentally mentioned certain words. After that, I resorted to using Filipino gay lingo. They are unaware of that. I feel safe using it, especially in situations I really need to communicate something.[79]

Another example of using coded language happened in my interview with P13, who used a high-context argot to discuss their use of a virtual private network (VPN):

P13   When using another social network, I need "very pretty nails".

AP: I'm sorry, but what?
P13: Very pretty nails.

AP: Okay.
P13: Very pretty nails protect me. That's one advantage of very pretty nails—your account cannot just be accessed. For example, my sibling's company in the Philippines uses very pretty nails not because of using blocked software but to protect data. So, there is purpose for using it.

AP: If you call it "very pretty nails", I refer to it as "wall jumper".
P13: Ah, that's very obvious.

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[79] Part of a composite narrative account, P6, 2024.

AP: But I like how you call it. It's my first time hearing it.

P13: At least my nails are very pretty.[80]

3.3.3 Resorting to different tactics

Some participants have also resorted to different tactics, such as turning a VPN on (as mentioned previously by P13, 2024) or using another app (like Viber or WhatsApp) when sending a very important or confidential piece of information to a contact (P2, 2024). Other participants communicate jargon and other context-heavy language during gatherings.

> **P8**   When I arrived in China, I met undocumented Filipinos who taught me certain vernaculars and advised me, "Never say that word, especially on WeChat!" I also learned it from word of mouth, especially when you're beside them. In our gatherings, we shared experiences and informed others of those who got arrested recently. Some reminded us, "Hey, never do this," or "Avoid going to this place," or "Never use these on WeChat."
>
> We refrain from using words such as "police" and say *Kuya* [lit. "Big Brother"] or ask, "*Sino na'ng pumasok sa Bahay ni Kuya?*" ["Who has already entered Big Brother's house?"][81] instead. Also, we never mention any sensitive words in English, especially those harmful to the undocumented. Police cannot just translate Tagalog sentences without an app. For instance, I got arrested. I called some friends on Messenger and gave them pointers, especially on what they should do to avoid arrest. I told them, "Never say this…," or "If possible, delete photos on your phones and save those memorable ones in USB drives instead." That is important, especially if an undocumented friend is in the photo. As much as possible, never save anything on the phone, because that's how we got tracked.[82]

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[80] Translated quote, P13, 2024.

[81] "Big Brother's House" or *Bahay ni Kuya* in Filipino is a cultural reference to the residence of participants in the Filipino reality television program, *Pinoy Big Brother.*

[82] Part of a composite structural description, P8, 2024. Key details in this description are redacted.

P3   Before I left China, I exhausted all my efforts to learn how police tracked people and knew how much money we might have on WeChat. As an undocumented migrant, I had to learn these things to craft strategies to fend for myself. If you are lax, you won't go anywhere.

Actually, it wasn't too difficult to understand [digital surveillance and censorship strategies] because, in the first place, one must already be critical of many things due to the kind of life there. If a migrant becomes undocumented in China, they will know so many things compared to the documented workers who focus only on their careers. They don't need to avoid people, unlike the undocumented who will virtually shun anyone and anything to prevent risks.[83]

3.3.4   Adopting a digital communication attitude

Regardless of exposure to digital surveillance and censorship, several participants believe that it is prudent to check words, photos, and other content before posting them on WeChat (P5, 2024; P9, 2024) because conversations can be documented (P4, 2024; P7, 2024). Others advise against opening banned social platforms in public.

P4   When you discuss a topic on social media like WeChat, your messages can be screenshot. When it is forwarded, you'll be in trouble. Meanwhile, let's say you crack a joke to someone you're talking to face to face. That joke will remain with that person only. There's no evidence unless they would voice record. For me, face-to-face conversations are much safer than social media chats because a simple mistake can lead to restriction. The undocumented cannot just create a new WeChat account because it is hard to buy a SIM card.[84] I have always tried my best to keep my WeChat activated. By the grace of God, my WeChat is still working. I use it to communicate with my former boss and to pay other bills. But for my other friends who have already gone home to the Philippines, their WeChat accounts have already been blocked or restricted. For others whose accounts still work, they cannot use WeChat Pay.[85]

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[83] Part of a composite structural description, P3, 2024.
[84] In China, SIM cards are registered with the personal profile of a buyer.
[85] Part of a composite narrative account, P4, 2024.

P7 You have to adjust or change some words when talking to people, especially undocumented migrants. You and I know that somehow other people will be able to read this message. You cannot see or encounter them personally. But if you are conscious, you have that awareness in you. "What if this message gets screenshot?" Suddenly, that image is sent to others, and then you realize you have said something wrong. Don't say this is just surveillance because taking screenshots sparks feud for many people.[86]

P1 Even if it is illegal to use that three-letter app[87], I still open that because I need to research information outside China. When I came to China, or even now, it has been my practice to avoid opening Google, Facebook, and other social media platforms in public. To access those, you need to use the three-letter word. Technically, it means you are using them illegally. So, what's the point of telling the world that you're doing so?[88]

When it comes to discussions, some participants urge migrants to put themselves at the receiving end of communication (P7, 2024) or avoid participating in conversations that might cause them to be perceived as threats (P5, 2024; P10, 2024). Other participants also emphasized following and respecting the rules in the host country (P2, 2024; P7, 2024; P9, 2024; P12, 2024).

P7 I don't really communicate everything on social media. It is already my way of being me. I choose my words because I always put myself on the receiving end of the communication. But again, we have the right to express ourselves. But we also have the choice to communicate our emotions, feelings, ideas, and everything but in an appropriate way. It's not always about arguing to make your point heard. I apply the same attitude when talking to someone on

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[86] Part of a composite narrative account, P7, 2024.
[87] Referring to VPN.
[88] Part of a composite narrative account, P1, 2024.

Messenger, WeChat, and real life. There's only one me, so why should I talk differently on social media apps?[89]

P10   A lot of Filipinos come to China for work. It's totally understandable since they can earn a lot there. But if they have a long-term plan to live in China, I would tell them to be careful about discussing politics and any heated topics on WeChat because it is unnecessary. It's going to be censored anyway because everything is propaganda for Chinese culture and media. Just enjoy whatever they're showing. But when you notice something is wrong, you don't have to comment on it. It's a lost cause. You're not going to be able to change anything. Chinese people can, though.[90]

P12   "When in Rome, do what Romans do." You have to respect the rules and guidelines in your host country, but it doesn't mean that you must follow them all. Respect begets respect.[91]

P9   As migrants, you are there to seek greener pastures to have a better life for you and your family. In this sense, you have to comply and do your best to contribute to that country. So, if you post something that's obviously offensive, ask yourself, "Why do I need to do this?". Remember you are a migrant worker in China. Your objectives are very different. You must order your priorities properly because you are there for economic purposes.[92]

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[89] Part of a composite narrative account, P7, 2024.
[90] Part of a composite narrative account, P10, 2024.
[91] Part of a narrative account, P12, 2024.
[92] Part of a narrative account, P9, 2024.

Chapter 4: Discussion

The experiences of migrant Filipino participants in this study expand and deepen the knowledge about digital surveillance and censorship in China, specifically in an authoritarian context. The phenomenological approach fleshed out details of participants' experiences to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do migrant Filipinos in China understand their experience of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?

RQ2. What issues do they face with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?

RQ3. How do the experiences of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat impact the digital communication behaviors of migrant Filipinos in China?

4.1 Analysis of findings

The general understanding of most participants with digital surveillance and censorship correlates with the prevailing notions about the phenomena in China.[93] Interestingly, findings in RQ1 suggest that Filipino migrants' status and professions inform their knowledge of the operations and roles in digital surveillance and censorship. P15 (2024) points out a distinction between the "professional" and the "undocumented",[94] which regrettably categorizes Filipino migrants based on their economic status, level of knowledge, and interpersonal realities. While such differentiation may inconclusively play a role in how Filipino migrants uphold or ignore digital surveillance and censorship mechanisms, and even other social phenomena, I contend that this deleterious way of thinking should be addressed by

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[93] Expounded on in Chapter 2, subchapter 1.2.
[94] Findings in Chapter 3, subchapter 3.1.4.

migrant Filipino leaders and civic society groups to avoid prejudice and discrimination within the diaspora and from foreign communities.

Despite the documented or reported issues and controversies about digital surveillance and censorship, some participants express their support for China's surveillance methods, mainly for personal (P7's [2024] argument on children's exposure to sensitive content), commercial (P2 [2024] and P12's [2024] concerns for the repercussions to their businesses) and security reasons (e.g., P1 [2024] and P8's [2024] experiences regarding mass communication). This finding coincides with previous surveys that positively associated Chinese citizens' high approval rates for such mechanisms with safety concerns and trust in the government (Su et al., 2022, p. 3; Ollier-Malaterre, 2024, p. 31).

The experiences of participants also suggest roles[95] carried out by the surveilled (or the objects of surveillance), further expanding the complexities of the actors mentioned by Martin et al. (2009) in their resistance to surveillance framework. Aside from being regular users and rule-followers, the surveilled can become regulators, informants, or subjects (see **Table 4**, p. 52), with each role having different participations in digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. I argue, then, that the surveilled also takes on a "pseudo-surveyor" role, addressing Martin et al.'s suggestion to investigate the *why* or the motivations in resistance to surveillance (2009, p. 229). Although this expanded role sheds light on the boundaries of agency in resistance to surveillance (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1245), it still has ramifications for participants who practice different forms of self-regulation to address digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat, as revealed by RQ2 findings.

Based on the participants' experiences, WeChat can become a digital dragnet not only because of authorities' surveillance methods, but also because of other users' actions.[96] This situation results in self-censorship and group gatekeeping, which are examples of the chilling effect mentioned by Zhu and Fu (2021, p. 3645; 3647).

- The direct experiences of participants who worked as nannies and the indirect experiences of several other interviewees show how avoiding WeChat for social

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[95] Findings in Chapter 3, subchapter 3.1.3.
[96] Findings in Chapter 3, subchapter 3.2.

communication, even for trivial matters, still engenders self-censorship. It is also a manifestation of the chilling effect, considering these participants see potential censorship as a risk not just to their safety but to the existence of their WeChat accounts. The backfire effect has manifested only to the nannies (P3, P4, P8), who warned their network about the consequences of digital surveillance and their experiences of arrest following their release and subsequent return to the Philippines.

- The chilling effect also happens in group gatekeeping conducted by WeChat group administrators like P7 and P15 to regulate otherwise sensitive, political, and other damaging information in their groups.[97] Moreover, this action confirms participatory censorship (Luo & Li, 2022), where an authoritarian narrative (e.g., following rules otherwise face repercussions) infiltrates grassroots discussions of foreigners in China and turns migrants into voluntary censors. Despite having agency over this situation, group administrators and even members who adhere to rules exhibit what Han calls discontented compliance: "Although they are pervasively unhappy with state censorship, they comply with the regime because overt resistance is too costly" (Han, 2018b, p. 55). If these group leaders remain lax, potentially damaging media could spread and compromise their WeChat accounts and groups; if they keep tabs on, they would be accused of being the regime's spies.

- These self-regulation practices expand the notion of predictive policing, which was originally conceptualized by van Brakel (2021) as a data-driven and algorithmic policing strategy used by authorities (ibid., pp. 109-110). My argument of the pseudo-surveyor role demonstrates that other actors resisting to surveillance conduct predictive policing as well.

Findings in RQ3 suggest that many participants are ambivalent toward change in digital communication behavior because of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. Some participants mention practicing a digital communication attitude (e.g., thinking twice before posting on WeChat, being aware of sensitive words and issues, realizing conversations may be screenshot, etc.) as a reason for supposedly stronger

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[97] Findings in Chapter 3, subchapter 3.2.3.

resistance to digital surveillance. However, participants who experienced the phenomena directly (on their WeChat account) and indirectly (by observation of their networks) have several diversionary tactics. Most notably, many participants use the vernacular, coded language, or code-switching to discuss private or sensitive information. This strategy is not unique to Filipino migrants given that Chinese citizens have used code-switching and combinations of emojis or characters to express dissent or dissatisfaction towards censors and surveillants (Zhou & Yang, 2024, p. 7). However, what makes this distinct is the use of highly contextual argot, including Filipino netspeak or "digitalk" and gay lingo (Monderin & Go, 2021; Gustilo & Dino, 2017; Espeño-Rosales & Careterro, 2019). At least for now, artificial intelligence language models cannot translate such jargon due to a relatively small number of Filipino web pages indexed by crawlers (Peñafuerte, 2023). The other tactic of concealing identities on Facebook (e.g., P3's narrative account)[98] or simply using VPNs to avoid potential surveillance also provides evidence that a sense of compromised data safety on a regulated platform (Westerlund et al., 2021, p. 39) may affect usage of other social platforms as well. However, this needs to be examined further in future research through another qualitative or quantitative investigation.

Revealing observations from participants' essential experiences

Beyond these findings that address the research questions, participants also shared experiences revealing situations to be explored in future studies. Most notably, the separate arrests of undocumented nannies by Chinese authorities through digital surveillance on WeChat are an example of mass surveillance (Gohdes, 2024, p. 37). In their narrative accounts, they mention the scraping of WeChat data, often through rudimentary means such as manual downloading of photos and connecting to computer systems.[99] Existing literature suggests WeChat data scraping is possible (e.g., (Zhang & Quan-Hasse, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021), although some Chinese friends I asked say it is impossible. However, this situation needs to be investigated further: to what extent can WeChat data be scraped? How can Chinese authorities and companies do that? For what other purposes do they use scraped WeChat data?

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[98] Findings in Chapter 3, subchapter 3.3.1.

[99] Expressed in redacted interview conversations with P4 (subchapter 3.2.1), P3 (subchapter 3.3.1), and P8 (subchapter 3.3.3).

In another interesting experiential information, several participants spoke about algorithm-driven online controls[100] reviewed by human censors and what he considered a "myth" that frightens people from posting threatening content. Such a situation, i.e., fear of arrest or punishment, has been observed by several participants, including the businesspeople and WeChat administrators. This information is supported by the study of Stern & Hassid (2012, p. 1241; 1245) on how such fear and uncertainty can engender what seems to be imagined censorship, a situation that may also explain the motivations behind the actions done by different actors resisting surveillance. It may seem that this phenomenon falls under what Bunn redefines as "New Censorship Theory", although the latter is concerned about rethinking and recasting censorship as "a productive force that creates new forms of discourse [and] communication, and new genres of speech" (Bunn, 2015, p. 26). However, participants lived experiences suggest that imagined censorship is still linked to the invisible, imbalanced, and repressive power relations between the surveillant and the surveilled, and not just NCT's view of a "specialized language [or] genre conventions" (Bunn, 2015, p. 39). It will be crucial to examine the extent and potency of imagined censorship not just in diaspora communities in China but also in local and professional networks of Chinese citizens through qualitative means such as interviews, ethnography, or netnography.

Nearly all participants expressed the weakness or lack of digital surveillance and censorship strategies in the Philippines in comparison to China's mechanisms, with some noting how technologies between the two countries are "worlds apart" (P9, 2024) and how existing surveillance and censorship capabilities are being used for the "red-tagging" phenomenon[101] or censoring digital trolls (e.g., P5, 2024; P6, 2024). The latter experiential observation correlates with the recent literature on digital media in the Philippines, which I elaborated on in Chapter 2. Meanwhile, although scholars have already found evidence or confirmed that digital surveillance and censorship strategies have been exported to other countries, and most often for dire reasons (Andrzejewski et al., 2023), some participants still hope that these mechanisms can be used strategically in the Philippines "for purposes done to uphold our national interests" (P9,

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[100] Findings in Chapter 3, subchapter 3.1.5.

[101] Discussion in Chapter 2, section 1.4.2.

2024). Such a point is relevant, considering the issue of acquiring Filipino citizenship illegally for foreigners has become a national issue.[102]

4.2 Limitations and recommendations

This research combines different phenomenological research traditions, thus producing an exhaustive methodology to flesh out the essences of participants' experience with digital surveillance and censorship (through the rigors of bracketing as prescribed by descriptive phenomenology) and provide clarity and perspective from my own migrant experience (through introspection as suggested by reflexive phenomenology). As there are hardly any phenomenological studies that detail such procedural strategy, this thesis may become a guide for future researchers who aim to explore the experiences of migrant communities in China and elsewhere.

As I expressed in **Chapter 2**, phenomenological research aims to understand the essence of individuals' experiences with a phenomenon (van Manen, 1990, pp. 10-11, 184; Seidman, 2019, p. 17). The small sample size of this research was meant to help me immerse deeply in participants' experiences. Additionally, a repetition in participants' professions, i.e., having two to three with similar careers or activities, led to data saturation. For instance, three former high school students gave similar responses about their direct experiences with the phenomena (i.e., mostly observations or reminders from parents, teachers, and other adults within their social circles) during very short interviews that lasted an average of 40 minutes. Meanwhile, three other participants who worked as undocumented nannies gave extensive yet similar accounts of their arrest because of WeChat.

The themes I fleshed out from participants' narrative accounts and essential experiences may be tested or examined further through quantitative methods, particularly by surveying diaspora communities with different demographic profiles, such as migrant workers, businesspeople, or expatriate families from countries in Europe, Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa. Also, several layers of communication nuances manifested in this research:

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[102] At the time of writing, the Philippine Congress is investigating Alice Guo, the town mayor of Bamban, Pampanga, following allegations that she is a Chinese national who illegally acquired Filipino citizenship. Philippine authorities also question the mayor over her supposed links to the illegal operations of a gambling business in her town. For context, see Guinto (2024) and Dizon (2024).

- **Interview channel**   The fact that participants suggested using Facebook Messenger as our interview channel showed a tacit understanding of the risks of digital surveillance and censorship. This resulted in very high-context conversations for all China-based participants who used codes and shorthand to articulate risky information in their experiences. Aside from this, they used VPNs to access Messenger, which caused connection lags or network dropping. There were communication interferences at certain points, but the participants clarified these were connectivity issues on their side (e.g., mobile notification alarms, personal phone calls, etc.). Future researchers who conduct online interviews with China-based participants must consider connectivity issues to ensure the quality of data and the safety of interviewees.

- **Interview language**   The interviews combined English and Tagalog so participants could elaborate on their experiences freely. Some researchers have noted how translations, when executed poorly or not taken into account in methodological planning, can reinforce or subvert cultural assumptions (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 175) or miss the emotional tone and vibrancy of experiential details (Kokaliari et al., 2013, pp. 98-99). I conducted translations as accurately and conscientiously as possible, considering they were a primary consideration in my data analysis strategy[103] and a part of my reflexive role as the researcher-translator (Finlay L., 2003). The online interviews also hardly accounted for body language other than facial expressions, which could have complemented participants' expressions and informed my reflexive observations (Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 434). However, future researchers may opt to conduct English-only face-to-face interviews to aid in transcription and data analysis, although they must be aware of the unequal power relations (Zhang & Guttormsen, 2016, p. 3; Hanna & Mwale, 2017, p. 260) that might arise from using a language different from the mother tongue of participants.

In the **Introduction** chapter, I expressed my hope to analyze textual evidence of digital surveillance and censorship from participants. However, I needed to drop this

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[103] Discussion in Chapter 2, subchapter 2.2.3.

methodological consideration due to the lack of evidence, as nearly all participants, save for one, had no access to censored content on WeChat anymore. Some participants mentioned their phones were confiscated by authorities upon arrest, while others left WeChat groups with censored content for security reasons. Still, as I have expressed previously, my research focuses on the essence of participant experiences. The lack of evidence of surveillance and censorship from other participants barely had any implications for the validity of the data. However, examples of such would have reinforced their arguments and provided much more vibrancy to their experiences.

This research involved data from Filipino migrants in China, and so I hope its findings can inform government strategies and mechanisms related to safeguarding migrant workers. My recommendations can become part of pre-departure orientation seminar (PDOS) toolkits for outgoing migrants or be used as a resource material for digital information and media literacy campaigns by Philippine embassies. Likewise, Filipino community leaders from different diaspora networks can draw information from this research to inform their respective communities of the perils of being pseudo-surveyors in the broader phenomena of digital surveillance and censorship to avoid discrimination against our compatriots in diaspora networks on social platforms.

Conclusion

Filipino migrants in China tread a fine line between tacit subservience and surreptitious circumvention as they experience digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat. Through descriptive and reflexive phenomenology, this master's thesis delved into the lived experiences of fifteen Filipino migrants who have worked or stayed in China to find out how they understand the phenomena, scrutinize the issues they have faced with them, and determine whether these experiences impact their digital communication behaviors.

Guided by how phenomenology looks at the essence and not the factuality of lived experience, as well as my reflexive role as the researcher-translator, this study fleshed out participants' accounts, which revealed a potential "pseudo-surveyor" role, shedding light on the boundaries of agency in resistance to surveillance (Martin et al., 2009, p. 229; Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1245). This is crucial, especially with how Filipino migrants on WeChat self-censor and regulate group communication dynamics (Zhu & Fu, 2021, p. 3645; 3647) to address the app's tendency to become an online dragnet for digital surveillance and censorship. Beyond these, participants' lived experiences suggest an ambivalence toward a change in digital communication behavior since performing digital communication attitudes (e.g., thinking twice before posting, having an awareness of sensitive words) and diversionary tactics (e.g., using the vernacular or code-switching) on WeChat may contribute to stronger resistance to the phenomena. Also, there is experiential information from participants about a supposed myth that spreads the fear of punishment, potentially causing what seems to be imagined censorship, and Chinese authorities' scraping of WeChat data. Future research can use this experiential knowledge to investigate these situations, which have gone largely unexplored in the journalism and academic fields.

Applying descriptive and reflexive phenomenological approaches fleshed out participants' lived experiences and addressed my researcher's bias, considering my experience as a migrant worker in China. Despite this, the study findings are based on Filipino migrants' lived experiences with the phenomena on WeChat only, which may

manifest differently in other non-Chinese social platforms used inside the country. Moreover, connectivity issues in the interview channel (i.e., conducting online interviews using Facebook Messenger with a VPN app on) and the translation of participant experiences may have affected the reliability of research data. However, I addressed the latter by conscientiously referring to my role as a researcher-translator and sensitivity over the ways I could impact responses due to my experience with the phenomena (Temple & Young, 2004, p. 168; Welch & Piekkari, 2006, p. 434). Future researchers can tackle these considerations by employing a quantitative study targeting a population of different foreign communities, or a different qualitative form such as ethnography (or netnography) of diaspora networks or content analysis of extant evidence of digital censorship or surveillance.

This study expands the discussion about digital authoritarianism, considering the mounting concerns of journalists and academics about how China's digital surveillance and censorship technologies and strategies have been imported or are already being used by other states for discriminatory, commercial, or political purposes (Limbourg, 2024; Andrzejewski et al., 2023). I hope this study's findings can be used to inform regulations and future research into digital surveillance and censorship in China, particularly in other diaspora communities and global contexts where digital surveillance and censorship strategies intersect with digital governance and social media lifestyles.

Summary

Filipínští migranti v Číně se pohybují na tenké hranici mezi tichou podřízeností a skrytým obcházením prostřednictvím digitální cenzury a dohledu na WeChatu. Tato magisterská práce se prostřednictvím deskriptivní a reflexivní fenomenologie zabývá životními zkušenostmi patnácti filipínských migrantů, kteří pracovali nebo pobývali v Číně, aby zjistila, jak těmto jevům rozumějí, podrobně prozkoumala problémy, kterým v souvislosti s nimi čelili, a zjistila, zda tyto zkušenosti ovlivňují jejich chování v digitální komunikaci. Jejich žité zkušenosti, doplněné mou reflexivní rolí výzkumníka-překladatele, odhalují potenciální roli „pseudoprůzkumníka" a vrhají světlo na hranice schopnosti odporu vůči dohledu. To je zásadní, zejména s ohledem na to, jak filipínští migranti na WeChatu autocenzurují a regulují dynamiku skupinové komunikace, aby se vypořádali s tendencí aplikace stát se online drahou pro digitální cenzuru a dohled. Zkušenosti také naznačují ambivalenci vůči změně chování v digitální komunikaci, protože postoje k digitální komunikaci a taktiky odvádění pozornosti na WeChatu mohou přispívat k silnějšímu odporu.

Tato studie rozšiřuje diskusi o digitálním autoritářství a zohledňuje rostoucí obavy novinářů a akademiků z toho, jak čínské technologie a strategie digitální cenzury a dohledu byly importovány nebo jsou již využívány jinými státy k diskriminačním, obchodním nebo politickým účelům. Zjištění této studie mohou být využita pro mechanismy, předpisy nebo výzkum v místních komunitách a globálních kontextech, kde se strategie digitální cenzury a dohledu protínají s digitální správou a životním stylem na sociálních médiích.

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List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview questionnaire

Appendix 2: Guide for operationalizing RQs and the theory through the questionnaire [**Table 5**]

Appendix 3: Data privacy and research interview consent form

Appendix 1: Interview questionnaire

General questions

Q1: How long have you been living in China?

Q2: What do you do in China?

Q3: How long have you been using WeChat?

Q4: Please describe how you use WeChat for digital communication while in China. In what aspects of personal and professional life do you use it for?

Q5: Have you connected your WeChat to your non-Chinese social media accounts? Why or why not?

Q6: Do you use other apps to communicate personally or professionally while in China? How are they different from WeChat?

Q7: In general, what observations do you have about other Filipinos communicating in WeChat groups or to you personally?

Q8: Please describe your idea or understanding of the following:

8A: Censorship

8B: Surveillance

On your experiences of surveillance and censorship

Q9: Have you directly or indirectly experienced surveillance and censorship on your WeChat account?

9A: If yes, please specify those instances.

9B: Please give specific issues or challenges that you have faced because of those instances.

9C: Did you ever tell anyone of this experience? What was their reaction like?

9D: If no, who?

Q10: How have these phenomena influenced your choice of words, language, or topics when communicating on WeChat? Can you specify or discuss such changes?

Q11: Have these changes affected the way you use apps other than WeChat to communicate with your network within and outside of China?

Q12: When you are outside of China, please describe your experience of communication using WeChat and other platforms. Are there any significant differences? What are your feelings or experiences like?

On the experiences of contacts/networks

Q13: Do you know any contact who has received notifications on WeChat restricting their messages or posts? What did they do or how did they react from that?

Q14: Were you still able to infer the intended meaning of censored WeChat posts?

Q15: Did you ever think of or try reposting (their) censored content on other platforms?

    15A: If yes, what happened?

    15B: If no, what was your reason?

General reflections

Q16: Who do you think are responsible or behind surveillance and censorship on WeChat?

    16A: What do you think their roles or motivations are in censoring or surveilling WeChat?

Q17: As a WeChat user, what role do you think you play in the phenomena of surveillance and censorship on the app?

    17A: How long do you think this role will remain?

Q18: How has your personal understanding of surveillance and censorship changed over the time you have used WeChat while living in China?

Q19: What new things about surveillance and censorship did you learn from using WeChat?

Q20: How different are surveillance and censorship in China compared to the Philippines?

Q21: What advice would you give to Filipino migrants in China so they can address the impact of these phenomena on their digital communication especially on WeChat?

Q22: Do you have anything else to share about your experience of these phenomena that we haven't covered?

Appendix 2: Operationalizing RQs, theory, and interview questions

Table 5: Guide for operationalizing research questions and theory through interview questionnaire

Theory component(s) T1: Martin et al. **(2009)** T2: Zhu & Fu **(2021)**	Addressing which RQ?	Operationalization *Based on the approved research tool*

T1: Resistance relationships go beyond the surveilled and the surveyor, i.e., there are other resistors including:
- International actors
- Surveillance authorities
- Surveillance artefact
- Commercial actors
	RQ1: How do migrant Filipinos in China understand their experience of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?	*Under the "General questions" interview section*
		Q4: Please describe how you use WeChat for digital communication while in China. In what aspects of personal and professional life do you use it for?
		Q5: Have you connected your WeChat to your non-Chinese social media accounts? Why or why not?
		Q6: Do you use other apps to communicate personally or professionally while in China? How are they different from WeChat?
		Q7: In general, what observations do you have about other Filipinos communicating in WeChat groups or to you personally?
		Q8: Please describe your idea or understanding of the following:
		    Q8A: Censorship
		    Q8B: Surveillance
		
		Under the "General reflections" interview section
		Q16: Who do you think are responsible or behind surveillance and censorship on WeChat?
		    Q16A: What do you think their roles or motivations are in censoring or surveilling WeChat?
		Q17: As a WeChat user, what role do you think you play in the phenomena of surveillance and censorship on the app?
		    Q17A: How long do you think this role will remain?

T2: Experiences of censorship: - Primary (direct censorship) - Secondary (seen through networks)	RQ1 RQ2: What issues do they face with digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat?	*For the primary form* Q19: What new things about surveillance and censorship did you learn from using WeChat? Q21: What advice would you give to Filipino migrants in China so they can address the impact of these phenomena on their digital communication especially on WeChat? *For the secondary form* *Under the "On the experiences of contacts/networks" interview section*

		Q13: Do you know any contact who has received notifications on WeChat restricting their messages or posts? What did they do or how did they react from that? Q14: Were you still able to infer the intended meaning of censored WeChat posts? Q15: Did you ever think of or try reposting (their) censored content on other platforms? 　15A: If yes, what happened? 　15B: If no, what was your reason?
T2: Exposure to censorship prompts users to either: - Remain silent (chilling effect) - Be inspired to know concealed issues (backfire effect) - Circumvent or evade censorship (minimal effect)	RQ3: How do the experiences of digital surveillance and censorship on WeChat impact the digital communication behaviors of migrant Filipinos in China? RQ2	*Under the "On your experiences of surveillance and censorship" interview section* Q9: Have you directly or indirectly experienced surveillance and censorship on your WeChat account? 　9A: If yes, please specify those instances. 　9B: Please give specific issues or challenges that you have faced because of those instances. 　9C: Did you ever tell anyone of this experience? What was their reaction like? 　9D: If no, who? *Under the "General questions" interview section* Q4-Q7 Q10: How have these phenomena influenced your choice of words, language, or topics when communicating on WeChat? Can you specify or discuss such changes? Q11: Have these changes affected the way you use apps other than WeChat to communicate with your network within and outside of China? Q12: When you are outside of China, please describe your experience of communication using WeChat and other platforms. Are there any significant differences? What are your feelings or experiences like?

Appendix 3: Data privacy and research interview consent form

DATA PRIVACY AND RESEARCH INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

I am **Andy Peñafuerte III**, a freelance journalist and master's in journalism student under the Erasmus Mundus Journalism Programme at Aarhus University (Denmark) and Charles University (Czechia). Before this, I was a journalist and communications specialist based in China. I have freelanced for Al Jazeera Network, covering the Chinese economy during COVID-19, and most recently, for GMA News Online, reporting about the Filipino diaspora in Central Europe.

For my master's research, I am exploring the experience of Filipino migrants of surveillance and censorship on WeChat and how these phenomena affect their digital communication behavior. While I know this topic is quite contentious and risky, especially for Filipinos in China, I hope to uncover communication patterns that will help our compatriots living there (and those who will arrive soon) mitigate the impact of surveillance and censorship on their daily lives. I also hope to expand the academic discussion about these phenomena, considering the prevailing Western perspective on this topic.

What is your role?

As a qualitative phenomenological research, this master's thesis will focus on the experiences of Filipinos in China of surveillance and censorship (i.e., the subject phenomena). Participants will answer questions related to their direct experiences of these phenomena. An interview guide will be used to ensure a relaxed flow of conversation.

To ensure safety, I will voice-record and do the interviews via Messenger or Zoom with a virtual proxy network (VPN) turned on. Our interview language will mostly be Filipino or Taglish, and I will use keywords in place of surveillance and censorship to minimize detection. The interview will last between 40 minutes and 50 minutes. As the topic may be quite risky or touch upon sensitive and, at times, triggering recollections, I encourage the participants to inform me right away so we can keep the interview comfortable and relaxed while respecting your privacy and personal experiences.

This academic interview is voluntary, and the participants will not be compensated. You can opt out of the interview by sending an email.

Consent and privacy

As I stated, the interviews will be recorded to allow me to transcribe and counter-check my notes. The recordings will be destroyed entirely after completing the data analysis.

I will take several pieces of private data (e.g., name, years in China, profession, etc.) accessible only to me and my research supervisor Mgr. Jan Miessler from the Department of Media Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University. As soon as it is finalized, the research will be published in the Charles University research repository from 2025. This means translated interview quotes will be public, although data will be anonymized. Under the European Union General Data Protection Regulation, you have the right to access the recordings and rectify, erase, or restrict the processing of your personal data.

Please let me know if you have questions. I hope to address them as soon as possible.

Consent form

I hereby consent that I have read the information above and allow Andy Peñafuerte III to use my anonymized quotes for his master thesis. (Please sign electronically or download the form, sign it, and scan. Please send via email.)

Signature over printed name	Date