

The Chinese Messaging Application WeChat as Used by German Speakers in China.

Usage Practices, Multilingual Environments, Emojis, and Beyond

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Abstract

The article presents findings on how German-speaking expatriates in China use the multi-functional messaging application WeChat. The paper is structured as follows: After the introduction (1.), in which the societal relevance of WeChat and its potential for sociolinguistic research is addressed, the current state of research is presented (2.). Subsequently, the main features of WeChat are explained (3.). After that, the method used to acquire the data on China-based German speakers' WeChat usage is described (4.): Between Nov. 2018 and April 2019, an online survey was conducted, and answered by 208 individuals. The answers provided form the basis of the results, which are presented in the fifth section. The last section (6.) contextualizes the findings and discusses perspectives for further research. After the bibliography, an appendix is given. It provides the link to the publicly available dataset on which the presented research is based.

1 Introduction

The messaging application WeChat (微信, *Wēixìn*, 'micro message') was introduced by the Tencent corporation (腾讯, *Téngxùn*) in 2011. (Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar 2017: 3). Designed as an "all-in-one mobile application" (Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar 2017: 3), it quickly evolved into the most far-reaching, dominating application on the Chinese internet. Used by more than one billion people, it combines the functionalities of WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and many more apps used separately in other (mainly Western) cultures. In practice, one could for the most part regard it as **the** Chinese internet, since most users won't ever need to leave the app, regardless of what their online business might be (cf. e. g. Garton Ash 2016: 64, 72). It is widely considered a very influential platform: "If future events take place that fundamentally change China, then there is still a fair chance they may occur on the super-sticky platform of WeChat." (Chen/Mao/Qiu 2018: 101)

The ever-growing number (literally hundreds of thousands) of so-called micro-apps (apps within the WeChat app, see below) makes WeChat the focal place for everyone based in China to go about one's online business. This makes it also useful also to those new to China, arriving and being unfamiliar with its (digital) culture and possibilities. WeChat's user interface is available in multiple languages, which makes it accessible as a tool for expatriates to support them

in all of their endeavors in China, regardless whether professional or private. Chen/Mao/Qiu note that WeChat's reach beyond its initial target group needs yet to be verified:

[T]he content and uses of WeChat stay decisively Chinese. By now, WeChat's overseas reach is largely confined to the Chinese diaspora. Although its WeChat Pay, in particular, has expanded to countries like Japan, the platform's overall attraction and usage to non-Chinese speakers awaits further evidence.

(Chen/Mao/Qiu 2018: 112)

This is the backdrop the focus of the present paper is molded on. The question is not so much whether foreigners in China use WeChat – they practically cannot live without it in their everyday lives. It is rather on **how** exactly expatriates, who come to China for a (for the most part) limited amount of time, use the application, and to learn more about communication practices in terms of possibly describable patterns. The specific context are the ca. 30,000 German speakers living and working in China, one of the larger groups of foreigners in the Middle Kingdom. The paper sets out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the habits of using WeChat by the German-speaking expatriate community in China?
- Which applications are used besides WeChat?
- Which communicative features of WeChat are used, and how often?
- In which languages other than German (especially Chinese and English, but also others) is WeChat used for communication in chats, voice messages, etc.?
- Are there code switching phenomena, and if so, how do they work?
- Are automated translations of texts used within WeChat?
- Is attention paid to language correctness?
- Are elements of Internet language, such as typical abbreviations, but also emojis, used, and which functions can be assigned to them?
- Is writing more oriented towards written or oral language?

To tackle these questions appropriately, the paper at hand is thus structured as follows: After this introduction, the current state of research on WeChat (2.) is presented, with a focus on linguistic studies. Subsequently, the main features of WeChat are explained (3.), drawing on Szurawitzki's (2019b) first linguistic account of the application's functionalities, which have since been expanded in some areas. After that, the method used to acquire the relevant data on China-based German speakers' WeChat usage is described (4.): the design of the online survey is explained. The survey was eventually answered by 208 individuals. The answers provided form the basis of the results of the present study, which are presented in the fifth section of this article. The last section (6.) contextualizes the findings and discusses perspectives for further research. After the bibliography, an appendix is given. It provides the link to the publicly available dataset.

2 State of Research on WeChat

Firstly, a survey on general WeChat research is provided (2.1), highlighting the application's relevance. In a second step, the focus is narrowed down to WeChat within a linguistic framework (2.2).

2.1 WeChat: General Research Overview

On the history of WeChat, cf. Wu (2016) and Chen/Mao/Qiu (2018: 19–45). On the more recent development of WeChat, cf. China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (2014, 2017); Tu (2016); Harwit (2017), and China Tech Insights (2017). For the general state of research with regard to WeChat, cf. Montag/Becker/Gan (2018), for comparisons of different applications Sun (2020), and for a current overview of the social relevance of mobile communication Ling et al. (2020), including the contribution by Cui/Li (2020), which specifically focuses on WeChat.

WeChat's omnipresence in Chinese (everyday) life means that it is the subject of very different disciplines, or is linked to other topics. The synopsis of the literature offered here is correspondingly heterogeneous in terms of subject matter. The order is primarily chronological, it is, however, the effort, to also stay thematically coherent.

Kuang (2018 [2014]) cites advantages that WeChat possesses over other communication media: "WeChat is changing the way of interpersonal communication quietly and has incomparable advantages over the other media. It is free of charge and, relative to short messaging, its voice and video dissemination functions make both information disseminators and receivers more direct and real, and highly reachable". Kuang (2018 [2014]: 190); Yao/Wu (2016: 393) write: "WeChat is the tool through which users could fulfill or accomplish their goals." Chen/Mao/Qiu (2018: 50) see WeChat as a reference to Lakoff/Johnson's (2003) "three metaphors – walkie-talkie, bazaar and wallet" – and more: "WeChat has become increasingly a communication tool for work."

Huo et al. (2015) write on the use of WeChat in public documentation of cultural heritage, Wang/Gu (2016) intertwine ideological and technical aspects of the application. Olschewski (2015) examines WeChat in Germany from an economic perspective. Li et al. (2016) examine the use of WeChat in disseminating malaria disease information among Chinese expatriates in Niger, Africa. Xu et al. (2016) study the impact of WeChat on students' sleep quality. Li (2016) points to WeChat as a channel for reaching Chinese sports fans by international sports organizations. Statista (2017) provides extensive figures. Zhou et al. (2018) examine voting on WeChat.

Yao/Wu (2016: 387) focus on WeChat's soaring popularity: "[W]hen it comes to WeChat, it took only 15 months to reach 100 million users". Yu/Qian (2016: 83) state: "The sheer size of mobile social media users of [...] WeChat in the hundreds of millions in China has attracted increasing attention among scholars who want to research Chinese public opinion". Chan et al. (2016: 199) confirm this assessment, as do Van Cayzeele (2017) and Qiu (2018). Pang et al. (2016) stress WeChat's mobile capabilities:

For instance, WeChat, Whatsapp, and Line are micro-messaging applications that have features of instant messaging, but are now more elaborate with social networking features such as the ability to build and connect to one's social networks, post and view newsfeeds from the social network, and make new connections via others.

(Pang et al. 2016: 146)

Zhang et al. (2017) conduct research on the use of WeChat in acquiring health information. Zhao/Wei (2017) present an analysis on the academic impact of WeChat, i. e. about the

dissemination of research results to which WeChat can contribute. Xue et al. (2017) investigate flirting behavior using location-based contact through WeChat. Ai et al. (2017) explore the possibility of disseminating public opinion via WeChat. Feng et al. (2017) study the use of WeChat as a feedback channel for postoperative communication after nose treatment.

Tang/Huang/Liu (2017) stress WeChat's creative dimension (cf. also Zhu 2018: 33):

WeChat characterized by convenience and rapidity enables individuals to fully unleash their energy and show their presence by such means as releasing original writings, forwarding messages and writing comments, which have strengthened emotional ties within their respective circles of friends. Nevertheless, the unleashing of individuals' energy in these ways, plus uncontrolled information dissemination, also has caused new problems. Some internet users preach historical nihilism, some spread rumors that may threaten social stability, and others take advantage of friends' trust to spread fraudulent information.

(Tang/Huang/Liu 2017: 9)

Yu/Zhao/Tong (2017: 68, Table 4.1.) provide an overview of the major technical upgrades and functional extensions. They cite a number of already 40924 official government accounts (Yu/Zhao/Tong 2017: 72). In addition to the possibilities for interaction, they highlight that "the opportunities for public discourse on WeChat would increase" (Yu/Zhao/Tong 2017: 78). Negro (2017: 193) justifies WeChat's popularity from a technical point of view: "Weixin's popularity is based on the fact that it can be used on most of the mobile platforms worldwide, such as Android, iPhone, Black Berry, Windows Phone and Sysmbian [sic; Symbian]".

Chen/Mao/Qiu (2018: 3) stress the similarities of WeChat and WhatsApp: "[S]imilar to WhatsApp, WeChat is mostly used for small groups and private communication among friends, family members and work-related contacts". WeChat also has surpassed email business communication: "In business communication, WeChat has a much higher penetration rate (90%) than email (less than 30%) in China" (Chen/Mao/Qiu 2018: 4). More so, "WeChat has grown into a mega-platform that has no equivalent elsewhere in the world" (Chen/Mao/Qiu 2018: 4): "To many Chinese today, for example, senior citizens, using mobile internet means little more than WeChat" (Chen/Mao/Qiu 2018: 5).

Ahlheim et al. (2018) examine WeChat's role in assessing tourist preferences for environmental improvements in China. Chen/Cheung (2018) research the perception and protection of privacy in social media in China and present a case study on WeChat. Guo et al. (2018) examine the Run4Love portal, a WeChat-based initiative to improve the mental health of HIV patients. Häring (2018; esp. Chapter 4) focuses on WeChat's payment function (cf. also Hartmann/Maennig/Stock 2018: 36). Jiang/Li (2018) investigate the use of WeChat in an Australian Chinese as a Foreign Language learning context. Li/Jung/Park (2018) explore the influence of WeChat in maintaining contact in alumni networks. Liu/Perry/Gadzinski (2018) present evidence on WeChat's role in the digital marketing of luxury fashion in China. Montag et al. (2018) offer preliminary findings on WeChat addiction. Zhou et al. (2018) examine voting processes on WeChat, while Zhu et al. (2018) explore WeChat and its influence in a campaign against edible oil products. Qin (2018) explores the central role of WeChat for Chinese immigrants in Belgium.

Liu (2019: 144–149) points out that WeChat is also used in contexts of Chinese protests. DeLisle/Goldstein/Yang (2016: 3) attribute a kind of control function to WeChat: “WeChat circles have become especially important means for citizens to weigh in on controversial legal cases, the regime’s handling of foreign policy, misbehavior by officials, and many other social and political questions.” One such political question is addressed by Zhang (2016) on the role of WeChat within cultural representations of North Korea. Zhang (2016: 202, 208, 221) emphasizes the important role assigned to WeChat by the Chinese government as a medium for disseminating politically relevant information.

2.2 WeChat Research: Focus on Relevant Linguistic Studies

Let us now look at the relevant linguistic research available on or in close connection to WeChat: Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar (2017) focus on emoji use in WeChat and state the following: “We find that WeChat is now an integral part of daily life in China and emojis/stickers are too” (Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar 2017: 1). Szurawitzki (2016) addresses cultural specifics of emojis using the example of official emojis issued by Finland for branding and image purposes (cf. Ljubešić/Fišer (2016) on the global usage of emojis); cf. also Danesi (2017) on semiotics of emoji use, Dürscheid/Frick (2016) on writing on the internet, Dürscheid/Siever (2017) on writing beyond the alphabet, and Pappert (2017) on emoji use in Whatsapp. Emojis and WeChat in the given research context of German speakers in China thus seem highly relevant to be included into my study (cf. Wu/Trautsch 2015) for a comparative study on emoticons in Germany and China, Albert (2015) on semiotics and syntax of emoticons, and Dresner/Herring (2010) and emoticons and illocutionary force). This is even more so since WeChat with verge shifts the frontiers of digitization, and inevitably has become a blueprint for Western societies’ strategies of digital transformations (Szurawitzki 2018: 139–140). Herring/Ge (2018) even go so far as to attribute the emoji sequences they analyze in Sina Weibo communication to embody the character of an own language:

Our study largely supports the idea that emoji are developing into an independent language: They can substitute for words, and emoji sequences can resemble complete utterances with subject, verb, and object. In addition, we have shown that emoji sequences can fulfill certain communicative functions that were previously associated only with verbal utterances [.]

(Herring/Ge 2018, online, no pagination)

This argumentation might be going a bit far. However, it still stresses the importance of further analyses of messenger communication as the one here, for there are vast areas of mobile communication that have not been under a linguistic magnifying lens to date, including our focus on WeChat usage by German language expatriates in China.

Liu (2018) focuses on social media marketing in China with WeChat. He provides us with the first German language research monograph on the app, which, however, does not have a linguistics rather than a business focus. Günthner (2018) compares practices of nominal self-reference in SMS, WhatsApp and WeChat interactions, but does not touch the issues raised and questions addressed in the present paper.

In summarizing the relevant previous research, we can state that there are no studies of the scope introduced here. While the studies available address certain specific communication practices, they do not focus on clear-cut peer groups and their respective patterns and habits of

communicating through WeChat. This makes the research proposed here stand out against the backdrop of the existing studies. In the following section (3.), we are going to look at WeChat's features to introduce the actual focal points of the analyses conducted.

3 WeChat's Main Features

The statement made in the introduction about WeChat as an integral part of daily life in China is remarkable, since WeChat was only launched in China in 2011 (Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar 2017: 3). In March 2016, the service already had 762 million users active at least once a month (Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar 2017: 3), and Ankenbrand (2018) mentions nearly one billion users. Initially, WeChat was conceived as a rather "simple" messenger service that could be used to send text and voice messages, and was very similar to competing products such as Feixin or QQ Mobile (Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar 2017: 3). However, WeChat was steadily expanded via a variety of features (see below) and into a kind of "all-in-one mobile application" (Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar 2017: 3), offering a large part of popular services directly or indirectly within the same app. "WeChat is more conducive to information diffusion than former social media because of its unique functions and information flow mechanism, it combines mobile phone, social media and Internet in one platform" (Yao/Wu 2016: 388; cf. also Wu/Jakubowicz/Cao 2013). This combination needs to be explored in more detail: "Its combination deserves deeper consideration and study" (Yao/Wu 2016: 389); the study at hand responds to this call.

Zand (2016) writes that WeChat had revolutionized the daily lives of 800 million people. Thousands of companies offer their services via WeChat and are paid via the app. Even government agencies use it – from garbage collectors to the Communist Party. Wurzel (2017) also comes to a similar assessment in stating that WeChat had developed into a *de facto* operating system for the iPhone.

What can WeChat do in concrete terms? Zhou/Hentschel/Kumar (2017) provide only a brief functional description, as do Che/Ip (2018: 47–49), which is why a more detailed description is provided here. This also serves to show what a comprehensive claim WeChat now pursues – and holds. However, my presentation is preceded by a practical overview of the functions contained in WeChat in 2016 (from Che/Ip (2018)):

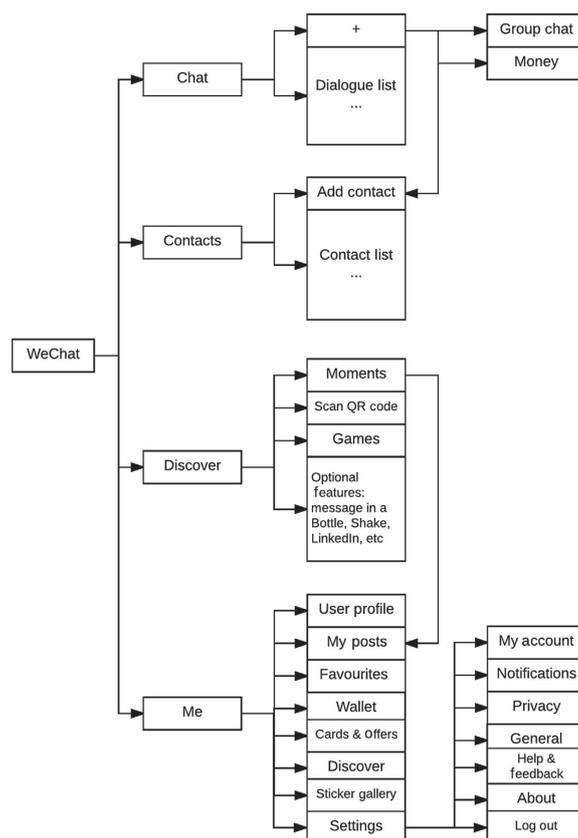


Figure 1: WeChat's main functions (Che/Ip 2018: 50, Figure 2.2.)

Within the field of Germanic Linguistics, Szurawitzki (2019b) has to date provided the most comprehensive account on WeChat's functionality. We will here draw on this research, while adding more recent features and insights as the application has evolved since. The Contacts section (see above) will not be discussed any further, since there is no option relevant to the research questions tackled in this paper. We will, moreover, refrain from discussing any gaming options that might be available through WeChat, since this leads away from the communicative features focused on. However, there is the need to subsequently point out interconnectivity to other persons, firms/entities and software solutions brought about by the so-called "mini programs" (see below).

If you look at the general interface that you see when you open the app, you cannot immediately see that there are multiple opportunities for interaction. There are four main elements, as represented in the second-from-left column in Figure 1 above. The communicative interaction mainly of interest here is handled via the "Chats" area. The "Contacts" section is used to manage individual contacts that can be searched for or connected to via individual QR codes (cf. Che/Ip 2018: 53–54). Negro (2017: 193–194) also mentions the possibility of linking to a Facebook account, despite the fact that Facebook is blocked in China, as well as subscriptions to newsfeeds set up specifically for WeChat, i. e. official accounts. Che/Ip (2018: 64–65) distinguish three types of official accounts, the subscription account for subscribing to information, the service account for services, and the enterprise account for intraorganizational communication, which can practically replace a company intranet. You can set up group chats, and mark contacts via so-called thematic "tags", which can be used to search for and manage the tagged persons. However, these are only remotely similar to the hashtags in Twitter, because they are

not used to mark contacts externally. The third main area is called “Discover” and has the following functional elements: In addition to the QR code interface, which is used to add contacts, the “Shake” function can be used to search for people who are shaking their smartphone at the same time, thus signaling their willingness to interact (cf. Che/Ip 2018: 55). Music and TV content can also be accessed via this area. Persons in the vicinity (indicating the approximate geographical distance) can be contacted (if consenting). As mentioned above, we do not discuss the area of games (cf. Che/Ip 2018: 105 and 107–108).

The most important part within the “Discover” section is made up of the so-called “Moments” (cf. Che/Ip 2018: 56–58), which are basically similar to status updates as known in the Western world from Facebook and/or Instagram. The structure of the upper part of the page with profile and title picture strongly resembles Facebook, as one also sees the latest posts of one’s own contacts below. You can only interact with your own contacts in the “Moments” area: “User privacy is an extremely important component in WeChat. All users must have mutual friend status in order for them to see each other’s contributions.” (Che/Ip 2018: 45) It should be noted here that, unlike Facebook, no exclusively text-based postings seem to be possible, but rather it appears that a multimodal message (most often picture-focused) be communicated through the interface. Photos, short videos and/or links can be included and the location can be mentioned. However, there is a well-hidden function to post only text-based messages: To do so, the camera icon in the upper right corner has to be clicked for a longer time, and a “text” window opens, passing the otherwise mandatory step of adding a picture. Obviously, many users do not know about this function, since hardly any text-only messages are posted in WeChat. In a way, this way of posting can be seen as merging the practices known from Facebook and Instagram, with the page’s macrostructure being like Facebook, whereas the individual postings potentially look like on Instagram. Most recently, a “Channels” function Szurawitzki (2019b) does not mention yet has been added to WeChat’s “Discover” section. These mainly video-based channel messages combine the following of official channels, as well as the possibility to see what are hot videos among your contacts. This is a built-in feature that feeds on the popularity of social media video apps like Tiktok and Bilibili. WeChat’s creators, however, see to it that users never leave their platform, thus including the “Channels” feature seems a logical step in the app’s evolution. Since this feature was included as recently as 2020, it is not part of the empirical study in this paper.

Mini programs are a highly relevant feature of WeChat, being included in the “Discover” area of the application. One can navigate to a sheer infinite number of applications helpful in all walks of life, from paying your water bills via coordinating delivery services to scheduling your next sports or doctor’s appointments. During the coronavirus pandemic, contact tracing has also become one relevant, if not central feature being used through WeChat, as we have shown in a study looking more specifically into this aspect (Szurawitzki 2021). Ankenbrand (2018) already mentions close to 600.000 of these applications, a more realistic current figure might be bigger than one million.

The fourth main section “Me” of WeChat’s interface is mainly a navigating hub to the various other popular areas and settings/preferences sections and thus does not need to be discussed here in further detail. We instead focus on the application’s linguistic potential: When now looking at WeChat’s chat features as accessible through the main interface, the overall chat

interface fairly strongly resembles WhatsApp. Many features are included in both apps, as the use of text-based chat, embedding pictures (in WhatsApp with added text), voice messages (maximum length in WeChat: 60 seconds, WhatsApp: substantially longer, information on maximum length differ from some minutes to some hours; this not really being an issue for our research), voice and video calls, sending contact information or files. WeChat had the feature of sending GPS-based location pins and enabling real time navigation to these pins earlier than WhatsApp, which has subsequently introduced similar services, including the live sharing of one's location, however lacking the navigation option. Distinctive features of WeChat that go beyond WhatsApp's capabilities are two monetary options, i. e. including the Chinese so-called 'Red Packets' (*hóngbāo* (红包)), popular gifts handed over at different occasions such as birthdays; cf. Park 2016; Ji 2017; Chen/Mao/Qiu 2018: 63–65 and Gatti/Richter 2019: 25–27 on Red Packets in WeChat) and the option of individual money transfers from phone to phone. Each WeChat account is registered to one individual user using identity verification:

[...] WeChat is the only notable platform that does not permit the use of multiple accounts. Each WeChat account must bind to a unique mobile number, and [...] one consequence of this is that WeChat is becoming a direct substitute for mobile phone services as well as negating the need for an explicit real-name user policy. This validity of this process [sic] is made possible since the majority of Chinese mobile SIM cards can only be purchased with proof of a Chinese citizen ID card. Thus, each WeChat user is, by default, already in possession of each user's identity.

(Che/Ip 2018: 120–121)

Before we proceed to the empirical part of the present paper, there is the need to focus on a semiotic issue related to the different chat options included in WeChat, WhatsApp and other messaging systems. In Szurawitzki (2021), I make a case for new relevant terminology to better describe the nature of e. g. a money transfer actually being part of a chat: Against the backdrop of relevant literature that cannot be discussed here at length, I argue for the introduction of the term "chat shape" to illustrate the complexity of the semiotic forms that can be integrated into chats, beyond the linguistic and pictorial ones, so that the technical possibilities offered by WeChat's chat interface can be discussed accordingly. "Chat shape" refers to the different types of possible chat elements. I would like to call the semiotically more complex entities that potentially arise in the context of chats in WeChat, compared to previous messenger chats, "polychats". By this choice of terms I think it can be clarified that within WeChat (and potentially also other messengers) chats do no longer merely comprise linguistic-pictorial communication, but potentially also other forms of distribution of information.

4 Method: Online Survey

Between November 16, 2018 and April 30, 2019, data on the WeChat usage practices were collected through an online survey especially designed for this purpose, addressing German language expatriates in China, as well as China alumni who had been using WeChat while still based in China. The platform SoSci Survey was used as a host. Subsequently, the survey's design is presented (cf. also Szurawitzki 2019a).

4.1 Metadata

In the online survey, the following metadata were collected: First, the sex of the person answering was determined. After that, the age group data was collected. The preset alternatives were being younger than 15 years, 15–19, 20–24, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50–54, 55–59, 60–64, and 65 years and above. The third question addressed language skills and inquired whether the informant spoke other languages apart from German on the native level. The alternatives given here are “No”, “Chinese” (as the alternative most likely to be given), and “Other. Please specify”.

After that, the length of the individual’s stay in China is determined. The answering options provided are pre-2015, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. Pre-2015 was chosen as the broadest category, modelled on my own first arrival in China in 2014. Given the nature of quick change in the job sector in China, this seemed appropriate. For analytical reasons, this setup will enable us to look at a data set of WeChat communication by the so-called “Old China Hands”, meaning people with a substantial amount of time spent in China, even though some four to five years do not seem very long (however, those staying in China for more than four years stay longer than most).

Then the focus is on where exactly in China the person was/is based. The survey was deliberately opened for China alumni who have left the Middle Kingdom and might have experience using WeChat. The alternative options provided are Beijing, Shanghai, and Hongkong, as the three major cities, and “Other. Please specify”. The further specification makes sense for a number of different reasons. Even though there is a focus on German/Austrian/Swiss activities in the major hubs in China, it is evident from the geographical distribution of well-known business firms that there are also other specifically “German” hubs, which one might not take into account at first glance, such as Changchun in northern China, being the home of a major Volkswagen plant. The final metadata question concerns the professional status, the options being “employee”, “self-employed”, “student of a German school in China”, “university student”, “accompanying person”, or “Other. Please specify”.

4.2 WeChat Communication

The first question asked directly related to WeChat is whether it was known to the person prior to coming to China. Subsequently, the background of the use of WeChat is explored. The following question addresses the way one first learnt about the app. The answering options are “internet”, “press/radio/TV”, “friends/acquaintances”, “colleagues”, or “Other source. Please specify”. In addition to WeChat, people frequently use also other messaging applications. If the answer is in the affirmative, respondents are then asked to specify which messengers are used, the options being “WhatsApp”, “Facebook Messenger”, “Telegram”, “Viber”, or “Other. Please specify”. After that, the survey is concerned with the frequency of WeChat usage. Informants are asked to provide their assessment on how often they use WeChat a) generally, b) in their jobs, and c) in private contexts on a five-point rating scale that entails the options “never”, “seldomly”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, and “very frequently”. This scale is subsequently applied also to communicative feature usages within WeChat.

Communicative features are next up in the survey. The usage frequency of the following features is asked of the informants:

1. Chats
2. Group chats
3. Moments (posting)
4. Moments (reading)
5. Moments (liking/commenting)
6. Voice messages
7. Taking photographs
8. Taking selfies
9. Sending photographs
10. Sending selfies
11. Taping videos
12. Sending videos
13. Voice calls
14. Video calls
15. Sending one's location
16. Real-time location
17. Sending red packets (Hongbao money presents)
18. Receiving red packets (Hongbao money presents)
19. Making money transfers
20. Receiving money transfers
21. WeChat Pay mobile payment
22. Sending/receiving contact cards/contact information
23. Looking up persons/users

After this, the preferred language within (group) chats is addressed. Here the options “German”, “Chinese (Mandarin)”, “English”, and “Other. Please specify” are given. Code-switching practices are mentioned next. The first part of the relevant question is a yes-no inquiry whether code-switching is used at all within (group) chats, and if so, one is to specify which languages are mixed (“German”, “Chinese (Mandarin)”, “English”, and “Other. Please specify”). Using the same scale, the following question is about whether languages are mixed within a single message. After that, the informants are asked to name the dominant language they use for voice messages (options: “German”, “Chinese (Mandarin)”, “English”, and “Other. Please specify”). The following question is about whether the informants care about using correct language when communicating via WeChat: Here the languages “German”, “Chinese”, “English”, and “Other. Please specify” are provided as options, with the rating scale being “never”, “seldomly”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, and “very frequently”.

The next set of questions is included in the survey because of the special German-Chinese intercultural communication setting. It is about whether the informants use German while communicating with Chinese people, or whether they use Chinese when communicating with Germans. In addition, it is asked whether the translation function that WeChat provides is used to understand chats and postings. The assessment is made using the familiar scale (see above).

Subsequently, the focus of the survey shifts towards specifics of internet language use. Survey-takers are asked to assess the frequency of their use of abbreviations such as *lol* ('laughing out loud') etc., and whether they use emojis. The assessment is once again made using the scale "never", "seldomly", "occasionally", "frequently", and "very frequently". If the informants never use emojis, they can leave out the following question, which addresses the functions of emojis used. The answering options provided are "Positive commentary", "Negative commentary", "Visual embroidery", "Irony", and "Other. Please specify". Concerning the language used while chatting, the next question is on whether the informants' style of writing is more like they are actually speaking (oral) or whether they are writing (literal). The answer is given on a five-point assessment scale, the extremes of which are marked "like I speak" and "like I write". The survey is concluded with three optional commentary boxes for the following questions: "Have you noticed any problems while communicating through WeChat, e. g. data security?"; "Which additional features within WeChat would you like to have?"; "Do you have any further comments on WeChat?"

5 Results

Given the limited space of an academic article, the following account of the empirical results strives for maximum brevity while being adequately elaborate. In case readers should deem the account as being too short, they have the possibility to access all relevant data in full via CERN (see appendix). In total, 208 persons answered the full survey. This data forms the basis of the following remarks.

5.1 Metadata

The online survey was answered by 208 persons, 121 male, 79 female. The age distribution indicates that the majority of the informants are middle-aged, 45–49 years of age being the most prominent group (38 informants, ca. 18%). In addition to L1 competence in German, 21 informants mention L1 competence in Chinese. 100 informants state that they do not speak another language on the L1 level, the rest of the survey-takers mention at least one other language on an L1 level, mainly English (80 persons). One has to take into account that this data are self-assessments, as subsequently all other answers. It is to be doubted that all these 80 informants actually are German-English bilinguals, but rather proficient speakers of English who are able to handle their work matters using English. Most informants (136 of 208, ca. 65%) have been based in China since 2015 or earlier, and thus potentially have gained vast experience in using WeChat in all walks of life. Geographically, the survey-takers mostly hail from Shanghai (142 persons, ca. 68%). This is possibly linked to my personal network of China contacts, which is Shanghai-focused, the city being my work hub for many years. Beijing German language expatriates form the second-largest group, i. e. 27 persons. Other relevant cities include the former German colony Qingdao (10 informants) and Changchun, home to a large Volkswagen plant (5 informants). 132 of the 208 informants are company employees (ca. 63%), while 18 persons are self-employed company owners. Thirteen individuals study at Chinese institutions of higher education, while five persons attend German Schools in China. 22 persons accompany their spouses/partners. Thus, a prototypical informant is male, middle aged, a native speaker of German, who does not speak another language on the L1 level, is Shanghai-based, has been in China since before 2015 and works as company employee.

5.2 Contact with WeChat and Other Messaging Tools

For most of the informants, WeChat was unknown prior to arriving in China. 172 of 208 persons (ca. 83%) did not know the application existed. They are mainly introduced to WeChat by friends and acquaintances. 176 of 208 informants confirm this (ca. 85%). Also colleagues in their work environment mention WeChat and introduce the informants (81 mentions, ca. 39%), who were allowed to mention multiple sources, if applicable. 180 of 208 informants (ca. 87%) use also other messaging apps, while for 28 persons (ca. 13%) WeChat is the sole platform. This might coincide with the group of 21 L1 Chinese speakers (see above), a large overlap is probable. One more reason could lie in WhatsApp having been blocked in China since late 2017, and the wish of channeling all communication via one app. WhatsApp, however, remains of great importance, as 172 persons (ca. 83%) indicate that it is still in parallel use to WeChat. The only other empirically significant software is Facebook Messenger (62 mentions, ca. 30%).

5.3 Frequency of WeChat Use

5.3.1 General Use

The informants provide the following quantitative information on their general WeChat usage:

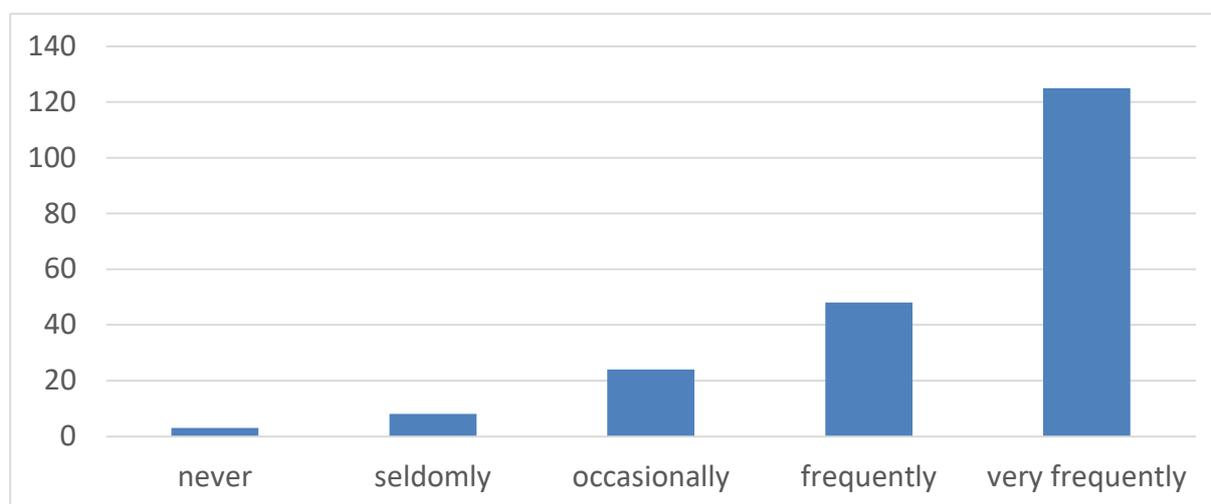


Figure 2: General WeChat Usage

From Figure 2 it can be deduced that generally, a frequent use of WeChat by the respondents can be assumed. 125 of them state that they use the application very frequently, 48 respondents state frequent use. Thus, a good 83% of the respondents use the application at least frequently. For 173 respondents, WeChat is thus part of their everyday expat life in China, and frequent use is common. 24 respondents (ca. 12%) use WeChat occasionally, only eight people (just under 4%) use it rarely, and three respondents (ca. 1.5%) say they never use WeChat.

5.3.2 Professional Use

Looking at the professional use of WeChat, the following results emerge:

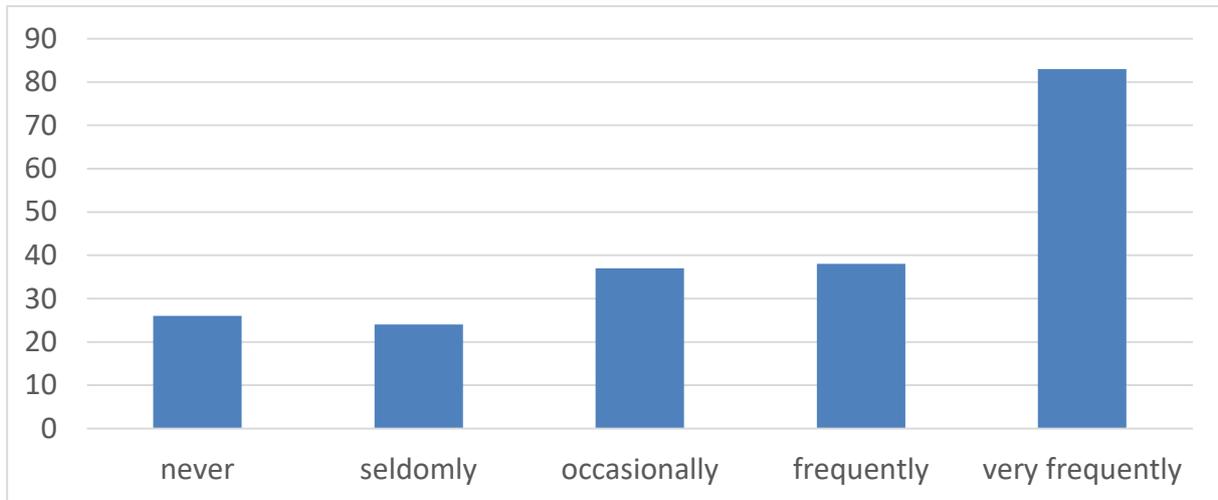


Figure 3: Professional WeChat Usage

83 respondents out of 208 (ca. 40%) say they use WeChat professionally very often, 38 people (ca. 18%) use the application frequently. 37 respondents (ca. 18%) use WeChat occasionally, 24 (ca. 12%) rarely and 26 (12.5%) never in work-related contexts. Overall, the trend is towards very frequent or frequent use, with significant proportions of respondents (more than ten percent of the 208 informants in each case) answering “occasionally”, “seldomly” or “never”. This may have to do with the fact that some of the respondents are not employed (e. g., because they accompany their spouses, or because they still go to school, study or pursue other activities) and therefore answer with “never”. More than 20 respondents state that they accompanied their spouses to China.

5.3.3 Private Use

To conclude the evaluation of the frequency of WeChat use, the private dimension is looked into:

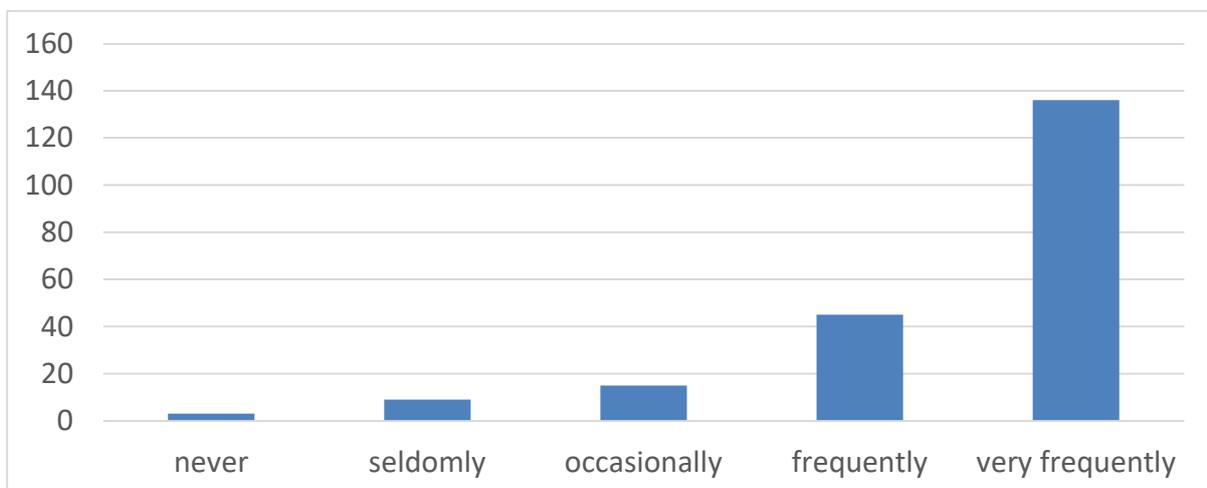


Figure 4: Private WeChat Usage

It can be seen here that the vast majority of expatriates state that they use WeChat privately very often (136 mentions; ca. 65%) or often (45 mentions; ca. 22%). In total, this accounts for 181 of the respondents (87%). Occasional private use is reported by 15 respondents, and infrequent private use by nine respondents. Three respondents indicate that they never use WeChat privately. This shows the relevance of WeChat also for the organization of private communicative everyday life. At this point, the German-speaking expatriates would actually have the choice to switch to other apps, unlike perhaps in their professional lives, where WeChat is used by their Chinese colleagues, and German-speaking employees are expected to use it as well (i. e. use of the app is virtually mandatory). However, they still stick with WeChat, even though numerous alternatives are available for private communication. The results suggest that WeChat is the central virtual private place where the German-speaking community in China meets and exchanges. The app works without technical restrictions, and many features (see below) make expat life potentially easier. All contacts in the host country China can also be found on WeChat. The advantages in private use outweigh the disadvantages, according to our results.

5.4 Usage of WeChat's Features

Note

Subsequently, as stated in section 4., the informants' self-assessments of their usage of WeChat's features are presented. Due to limitations of length, a condensed form of presentation, focusing on the most relevant findings, is chosen.

5.4.1 Chats

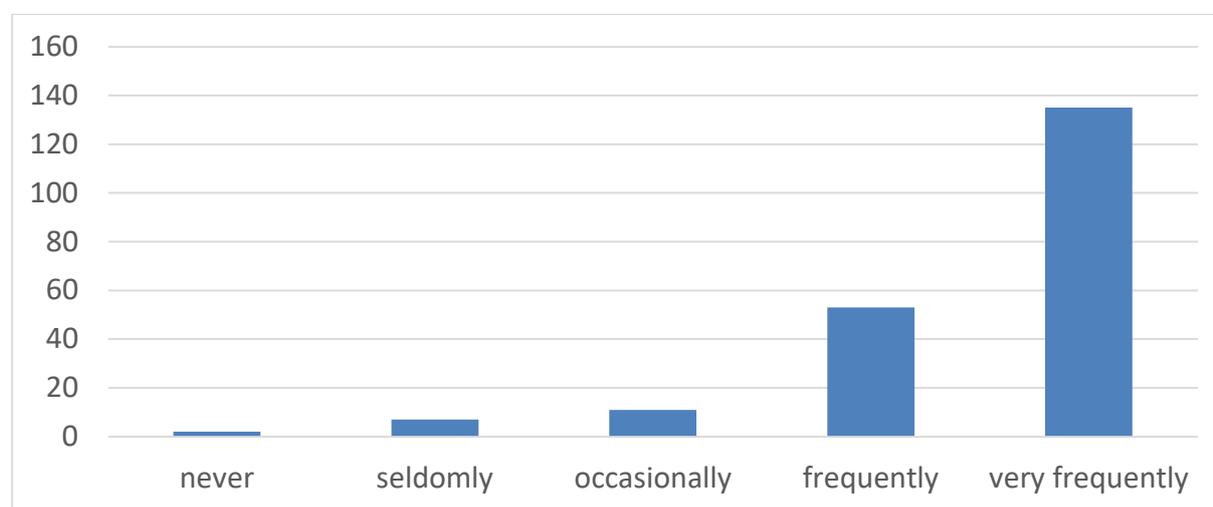


Figure 5: Chat Usage

It can be seen that chats are a central feature within the use of WeChat by the German-speaking expatriates. 135 of them (ca. 65%) state that they use chats very frequently, and 53 respondents (ca. 25%) use the chat feature frequently. Approximately 90% of the respondents thus use chats at least frequently. Only comparatively few users use chats only occasionally (11), seldomly (7) or never (2). The results confirm the general popularity of chat-based or chat-focused messaging applications. WeChat is no exception. The similarity of the results obtained here (see Figure 4 above) to the private use of WeChat are striking (almost 90% of the users use it

frequently to very frequently privately). In this respect, the interpretational parallel of chat use equals quasi-private use or, vice versa, private use of WeChat equals use of the chat feature can be seen here. The exchange via chats is vital for the German-speaking expatriates within their community.

5.4.2 Group Chats

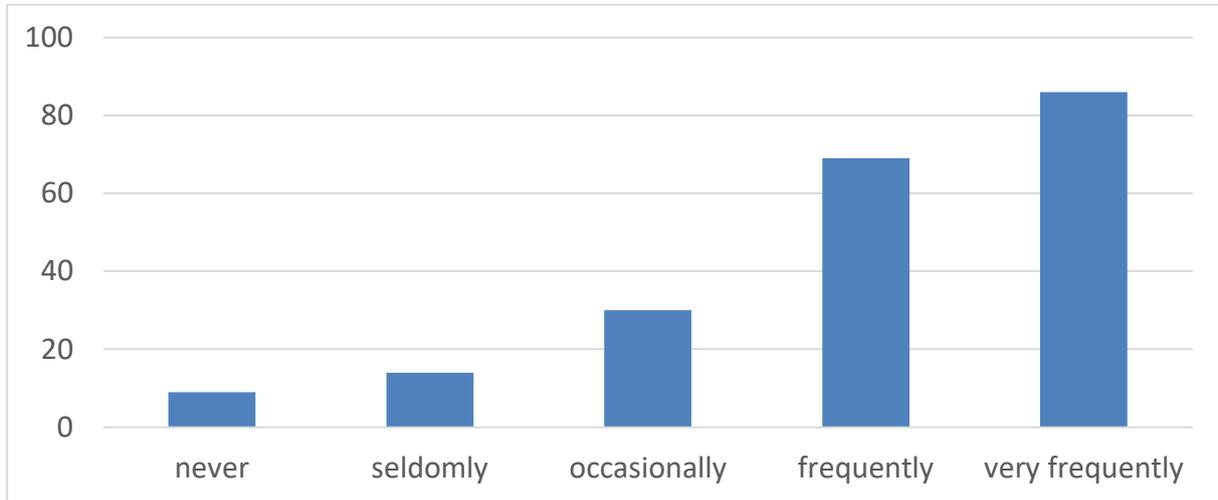


Figure 6: Group Chat Usage

Mostly very frequent (86; ca. 42%) or frequent (69; ca. 33%) uses of group chats are mentioned (155 respondents; ca. 75%). Thus, there are significantly fewer very frequent users of this feature, compared to chats. However, the tendency to use group chats at least frequently is similar. 30 respondents (ca. 14%) state that they use group chats occasionally, while there are 14 mentions of infrequent use (ca. 7%). Only nine respondents (ca. 4%) state that they never use group chats within WeChat. Overall, it can nevertheless be stated that group chats are among the popular WeChat features among German-speaking expatriates. Through group chats, social groups get together on a wide variety of topics, easily organized via the app. No one has to remain alone or even isolated in China, the new home country. Social group contacts are just a click away.

5.4.3 Moments

There are three dimensions to the Moments feature within WeChat, namely writing actively, reading, and liking/commenting. In comparison to chats and group chats, the Moments feature, according to our data, is less significant. 29 informants out of 208 (ca. 14%) write own Moments at least frequently. Thus, one can conclude that there are other platforms more relevant to the peer groups used for own posting activities; most likely, even if not surveyed, this is Facebook. WeChat creates visibility to the individual contacts only, not beyond. This would omit many friends/connections from outside WeChat, and it might be perceived a big effort to add material to multiple platforms. Reading others' Moments proves somewhat more popular; ca. 31% (65 informants) indicate that they read Moments occasionally. Thus, there seems to be an intra-community interest in what the other WeChat contacts are doing. However, the visibility beyond the China peer group is not there, this is why we cannot attribute higher significance to this practice. A similar tendency can be seen in liking other contacts' postings. 51 users (ca.

25%) never like or comment on other people's moments in WeChat. A slightly larger group, namely 57 respondents (ca. 27%), say they rarely do so. 54 respondents (ca. 26%) occasionally like or comment on WeChat moments. Again, there is an active group of users (together they make up 46 people, not quite a quarter of respondents): 32 respondents say they often like or comment, 14 respondents even do so very often.

5.4.4 Voice Messages

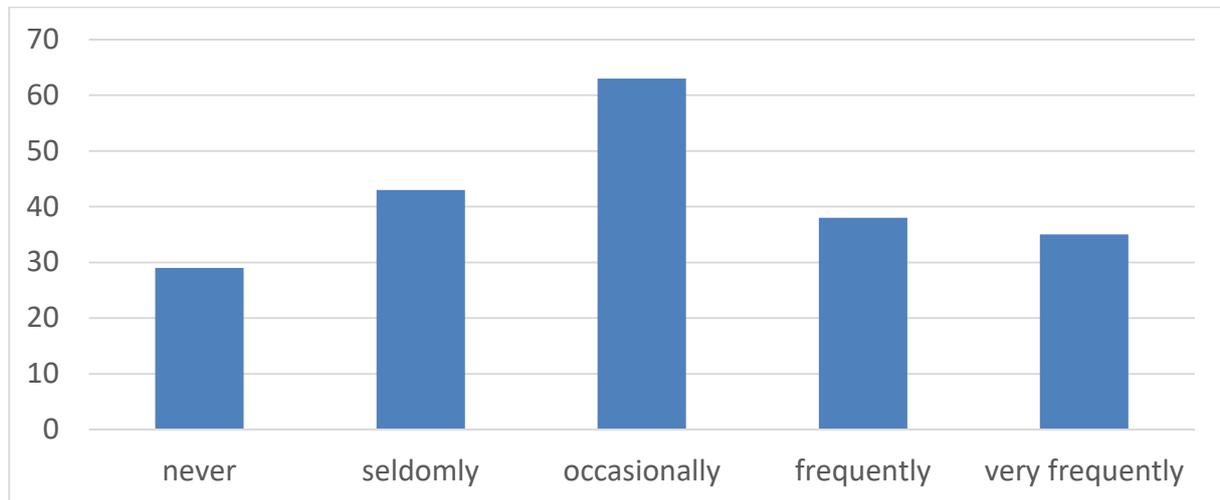


Figure 7: Voice Message Usage

As can be seen from Figure 7, the respondents most frequently indicate that they send voice messages via WeChat occasionally. A total of 63 users stated this (approx. 30%). This is followed by infrequent use of voice messages with the second most mentions (43; ca. 20%). A total of 73 users (about 35%) state to use voice messages frequently (38) or very frequently (35) in WeChat – thus this is only about one third compared to chats –, while 29 respondents (ca. 14%) state to never make use of this feature. Even though the use of voice messages is thus significantly less frequent compared to, for example, chats (over 90% of respondents use them at least frequently), it can be stated that voice messages, which are very popular among Chinese, are also accepted and used in the German-speaking community in China. The medium of voice messaging also potentially supports the bond among expatriates through the possible use of spoken German.

5.4.5 Photos, Selfies, and Videos

The analyses in the area of photos/selfies/videos within the survey on the use of WeChat by German-speaking expatriates in China can be summarized as follows: Taking photos and selfies varies. A rather large group of respondents in each case never uses these options (59 people (28%) for photos, 114 (55%) for selfies; here the numbers already diverge significantly), for the most part rare or occasional photo/selfie taking is the rule. At the forefront, there are a number of heavy users in each case who use WeChat extensively: Photos are taken frequently to very frequently with WeChat by about 25% of respondents, while just under 8% use the application to take selfies. When it comes to sending photos, the perspective changes: here, WeChat tends to be used frequently to very frequently, and very few users say they rarely or never use this feature. When it comes to sending selfies, the outcome is comparable to that of

taking photos or selfies within WeChat: the tendency is to send pictures of oneself mostly rarely to occasionally; according to their own statements, a large proportion of respondents do not do this at all. Parallels emerge on the frequency of recording videos in WeChat; here there is a large group among the respondents who do not make videos at all, while this feature is mostly used rarely to occasionally. In the area of videos sent, the group of respondents who never use the feature is smaller compared to the “never” responses for photos or selfies, but there is also a tendency to rarely or occasionally send videos. In all areas studied and summarized here, there are a number of very active users who could potentially make up the spearhead of social media activists among German-speaking expatriates living in China – via WeChat for sure, but potentially also via other social platforms (however, my study cannot make any empirical statements on this).

5.4.6 Voice Calls

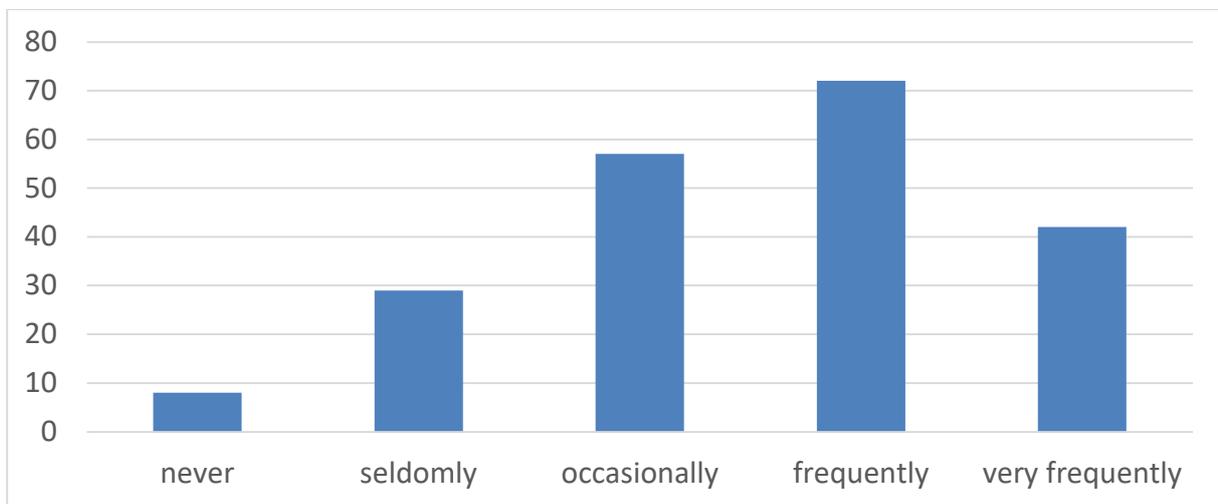


Figure 8: Voice Call Usage

The results show that only eight of the 208 informants (under 4%) never make use of the voice call feature. 29 respondents (ca. 14%) say they rarely use WeChat’s to make voice calls, while 57 people (ca. 27%) do so occasionally. 72 German-speaking expatriates (ca. 35%) are frequent users of telephony in WeChat, while 42 count themselves among the very frequent users (about 20%) of this feature. Thus, telephony is used far more frequently than voice messaging. Compared to chats (used at least frequently by about 90% of respondents), telephony falls behind. The free Wi-Fi, which is often available in public places in China despite throttled Internet speeds, presumably contributes to frequent use of the telephony feature. Nevertheless, the assumption of a dominance of the telephony feature of WeChat as in Kuang (2018 [2014]) cannot, however, be confirmed according to our analyses. Compared to chats and group chats, telephony via WeChat is moderately popular.

5.4.7 Video Calls

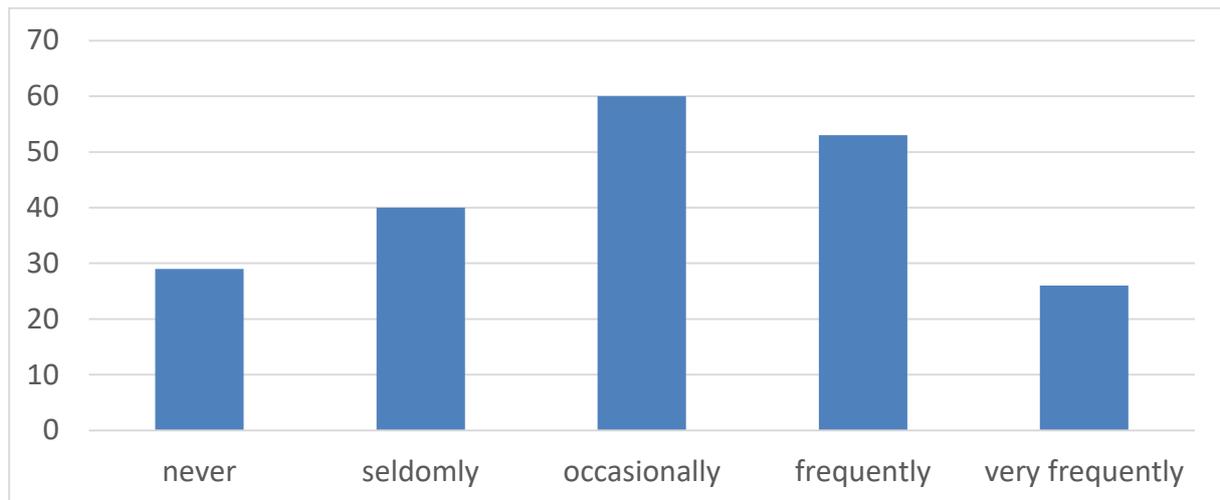


Figure 9: Video Call Usage

Basically, the relative frequency of use for video telephony is similar to that for the audio telephony function. The only clear difference here lies in the users who state that they never make video calls within WeChat; in our survey, these are 29 of the 208 respondents (ca. 14%, vs. ca. 4% for voice telephony; see previous section). 40 people (ca. 19%) report infrequent use of video telephony, and occasional users total 60 (ca. 29%). 53 expatriates (ca. 25%) use video calling frequently, and 26 respondents (12.5%) belong to the group of very frequent users of this WeChat feature. Thus, 79 respondents (ca. 38%) use video calling at least frequently, and the heavy user group is, relatively speaking, much larger than for most other features of WeChat. Compared to traditional voice calls, however, usage is much lower in both absolute and relative terms.

5.4.8 Location Functions

55 respondents (ca. 26%) state that they never use the WeChat function “Send location”. A total of 50 people rarely use this function. Occasional use dominates among a total of 64 users (ca. 30%); this is the largest group in this context. Frequent use of “Send location” is indicated by 26 expatriates, 13 respondents use this feature very frequently. Overall, the comparison with the other features analyzed shows that the location feature is used rather infrequently among the respondents, even if the group of at least frequent users with 39 of the 208 respondents (ca. 19%) is large in relation to most of the features analyzed so far.

With 68 people never using the real-time location feature of WeChat, the largest group of respondents (ca. 33%) stays away from this function. 66 users rarely use it (ca. 32%). The occasional use is indicated by 44 users, so here there is a difference to “Send location”, where the occasional use made up the largest share. Twenty-one respondents (ca. 10%) indicate frequent use, while nine respondents (ca. 4%) use real-time location in WeChat very frequently. It can be stated that the real-time location is to be counted among the less frequently used features overall, even though a total of 30 people (ca. 14%) use this feature at least frequently.

5.4.9 Red Packets

This feature is among the least relevant according to our data: A large number of respondents, a total of 96 (ca. 46%), never send Red Packets via WeChat and thus do not adopt this habit, which is in itself typical of China, in their digital daily lives. 55 people (ca. 26%) state that they rarely actively send Red Packets. An occasional sending of Red Packets is mentioned by 36 German-speaking users of WeChat (ca. 17%). 15 people (ca. 7%) use the Send Red Packets feature frequently, and six (ca. 3%) very frequently. Although it is clear that Red Packets tend to be sent infrequently and, according to our results, are not one of the features of WeChat widely accepted by respondents, it is yet remarkable to find here a group of a good ten percent (21) of respondents who adopt this digital custom by using it at least frequently. The latter figure coincides exactly with the number of Chinese speakers at the L1 level surveyed as part of the metadata. Looking at the receiving of small money gifts by means of the Red Packets function within WeChat, a parallel to sending them among the German-speaking informants can be observed: 84 users never use this function (ca. 40%), 69 persons (ca. 33%) rarely resort to it (total 153 of the 208 respondents; approx. 74%). Occasionally, 35 users make use of it (ca. 17%) to receive Red Packets in WeChat. 14 people (ca. 7%) state that they use this feature frequently, and six people (ca. 3%) use it very frequently. There is only partial acceptance of this feature; a small group of respondents nevertheless uses it very actively.

5.4.10 Financial Functions

In this section, the practices of sending and receiving money from one WeChat account to another will be looked into (5.4.10.1), as well as the application's WeChat Pay function (5.4.10.2).

5.4.10.1 Money Transfer

Firstly, the money transfer activity to other WeChat accounts is analyzed. The following results emerge:

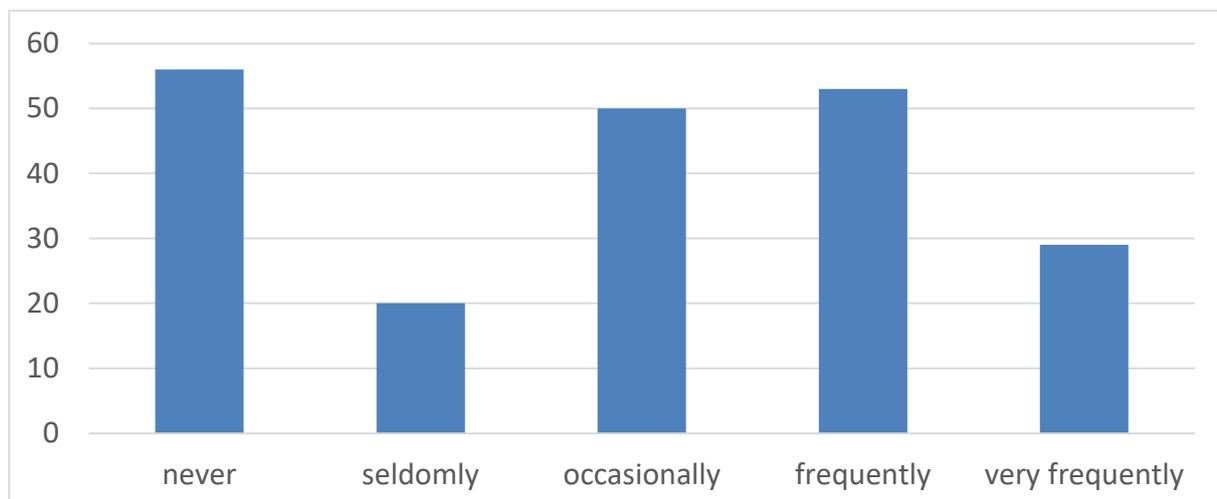


Figure 10: Money Transfers (Sending)

Overall, it can be seen that WeChat is used relatively frequently for sending money. 29 people (ca. 14%) say they use this feature very frequently, and 53 (ca. 25%) rate their activity as frequent. 82 users (ca. 39%) thus use the remittance feature at least frequently, while 50

respondents (ca. 24%) use it occasionally. This means that 132 of the 208 respondents (ca. 63%) make remittances using WeChat at least occasionally, but tend to do so more frequently. 20 people (ca. 10%) rarely resort to this feature, and 56 people never use WeChat remittances (ca. 27%). Potentially, the analysis results can be read as tending toward acceptance of peer-to-peer money transfers, even though about a quarter of respondents does not use this feature. The particular advantages of this feature of WeChat lie in the bypassing of banks, where in face-to-face interactions, transactions are processed very laboriously and the completion of a transfer sometimes takes an hour or more.

The next step is to examine user behavior in WeChat with a focus on receiving money transfers. The results are shown as follows:

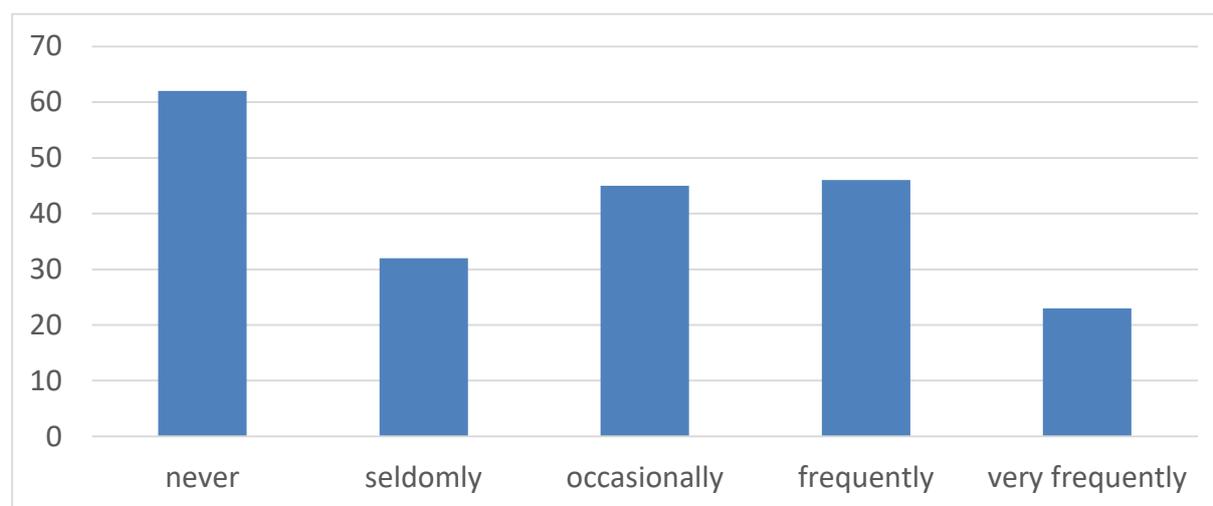


Figure 11: Money Transfers (Receiving)

The analysis on receiving money transfers in WeChat offers a similar picture as the one on active money transfers, but with the nuanced difference that overall money transfers are received somewhat less frequently: 23 people (ca. 11%) say they receive money transfers very frequently, while 26 respondents (12.5%) frequently receive them; a total of 49 respondents (ca. 24%) accordingly receive money transfers at least frequently. 45 users (ca. 22%) say they occasionally receive money transfers in WeChat. Thus, 94 respondents (ca. 45%) use the option to receive transfers via WeChat at least occasionally. Even though fewer people thus receive than make them (132 people, ca. 63% of the respondents, remit money at least occasionally), the figures are similar in their magnitudes to those in sending money. The difference manifests itself via the infrequent use, indicated here by 32 users (ca. 15%), as well as via the correspondingly higher number of those users who never receive remittances in WeChat – a total of 62 people (about 30%). The somewhat lower values than for sending money transfers could potentially also be explained by skepticism regarding data protection.

5.4.10.2 WeChat Pay

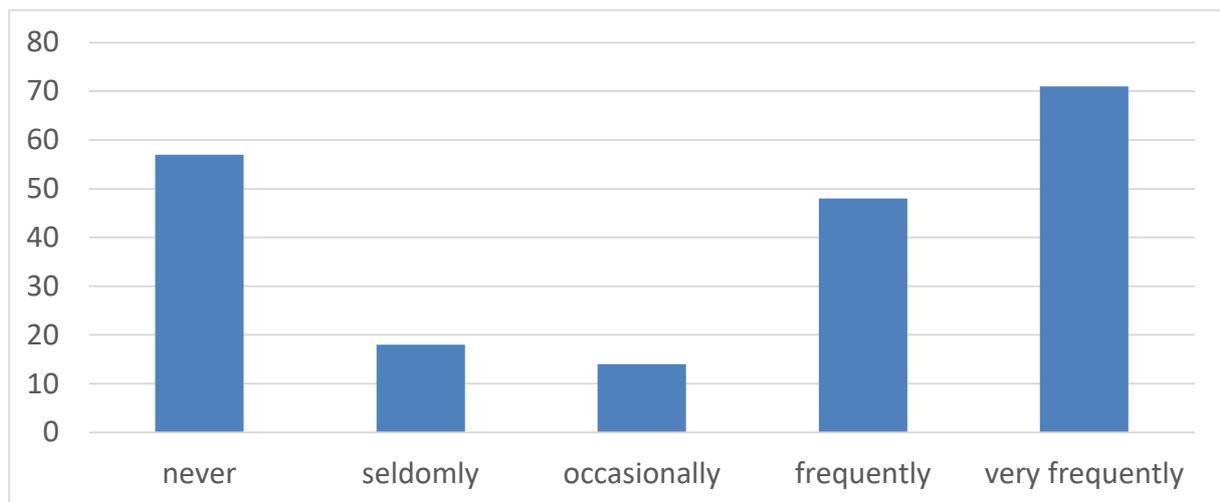


Figure 12: Usage of WeChat Pay

Figure 12 clearly shows the great popularity of WeChat Pay. A total of 71 respondents (ca. 34%) indicate very frequent use of this function. WeChat Pay makes everyday shopping easier, so high usage figures are expected. 48 users (approx. 23%) state that they use WeChat Pay frequently. Thus, 119 of the 208 respondents (ca. 57%) use the payment feature of WeChat at least often. If you look at everyday life, especially in large cities such as Shanghai or Beijing, you will hardly ever see the use of cash in interactions at cash registers, as most customers pay with their smartphones. In the case of smaller retailers (e. g. vegetable sellers), the QR code must be scanned, then the amount to be paid must be typed in by the customer and confirmed by means of a payment password. In the case of online deliveries, prepayment is the standard. For the expatriates surveyed here, WeChat Pay offers full participation in the digitalized society in China at this point. Compared to Alipay, a widely used payment service, WeChat Pay is easier to set up and already integrated into WeChat, which expats usually start using quickly after arriving in China. 14 respondents (ca. 7%) say they use WeChat Pay occasionally, 18 respondents (ca. 9%) use it rarely, and 57 people never (ca. 27%).

5.4.11 Person Search

The WeChat people search feature is not popular among German speakers in China. 84 respondents (ca. 40%) never use it, 74 (ca. 35%) only rarely, and 43 (ca. 20%) occasionally. Only a small proportion (ca. 3%) of users say they use this function frequently (4) or very frequently (3). Potentially, primarily Chinese search results are obtained, so this function – if one does not explicitly search for Chinese persons – does not have much potential in the often homogeneous circles/peer groups of expatriates in China. Networking takes place mostly in other ways and through more direct contact.

5.4.12 Summary of WeChat feature usage by German-speaking expatriates in China

Summarizing the feature usage within WeChat by German-speaking expatriates in China, the following observations emerge: In general, it can be stated that chats are used very frequently (at least frequently by about 90% of the users), and group chats are usually used frequently. Making phone calls and sending voice messages play a less pronounced role than chatting for

the respondents in WeChat, but the own L1 German can often be used orally. Overall, the popularity of these features suggests that more emphasis is placed on communicating with selected people (individuals or clearly defined groups) rather than writing to a vague set of contacts via the social media features. Posting one's own "Moments" – similar to posting on Facebook – is less popular, but reading and liking other contacts' "Moments" is comparatively more common than posting one's own material. About a third of the respondents use voice messaging at least frequently.

The photo feature (or taking selfies) with WeChat is used less by respondents; when sending pictures, photographs are favored over selfies. Videos are rarely taken or sent directly within the app. Looking at the various telephony functions offered, voice telephony is more frequently used compared to video. The use of the location functions offers a slightly more complex picture: Here we see that over 60 respondents (ca. 30%) occasionally send their location, and just under 40 people do so at least frequently. Approximately 30 people use the real-time location function frequently or very frequently.

The culturally Chinese function of sending and receiving Red Packets is not very popular among respondents overall (presumably those users who know Chinese at L1 level and are culturally closer to this practice remain mostly among themselves). The money transfer function, on the other hand, enjoys great popularity, with a good 80 of the 208 respondents using this feature of WeChat frequently or very frequently (ca. 40%). In this regard, it can be said that expatriates tend to be more proactive: Money is more likely to be actively sent than received. The most frequently used relevant feature is WeChat Pay. Nearly 120 respondents (ca. 60%) state they frequently or very frequently use the payment function. Sending contact cards is used at least frequently by around 65 respondents, while the "People Search" feature has hardly any users.

5.5 Languages Used and Code-Switching

This section analyzes information provided by the interviewed German-speaking expatriates on the languages used in WeChat application, and on code switching. First, the main chat languages are analyzed (5.5.1.), after which code switching in chats and group chats is discussed (5.5.2.). In this context, code switching within chats is studied (5.5.2.1.), and which languages are mixed in this context (5.5.2.2.). Another question focuses on code switching within the same chat message (5.5.2.3.), also including the languages used (5.5.2.4.). Finally, an analysis of the languages used for voice messages (5.5.3.).

5.5.1 Main Chat Languages

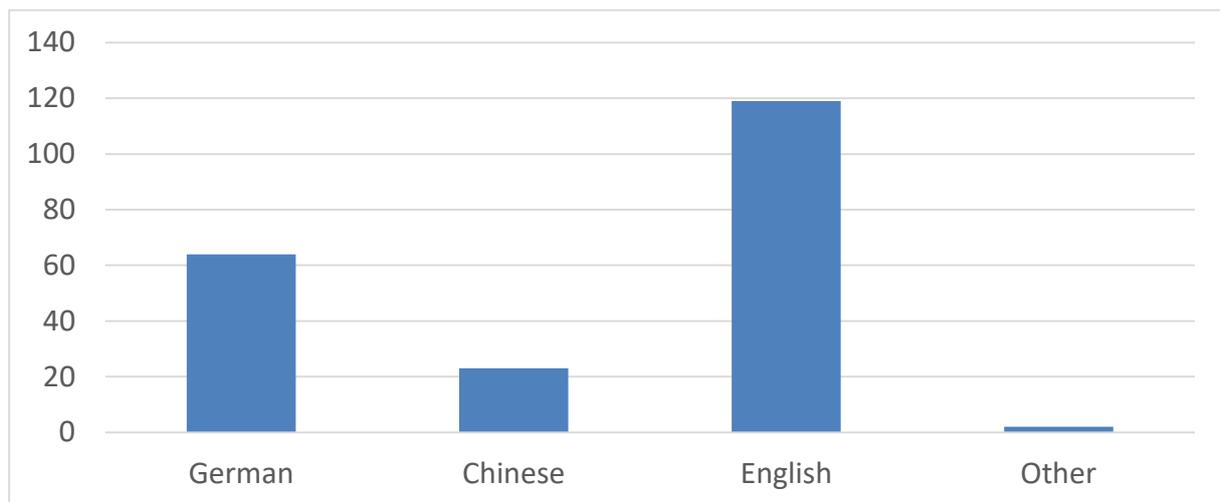


Figure 13: Main Chat Languages

English is the dominant chat language with 119 mentions (ca. 57%). 64 users chat mainly in German (just under 30%), 23 people (ca. 11%) use mainly Mandarin Chinese. Two persons have chosen the answer alternative “Other”, but here no further languages are added to the constellation, but rather a pragmatic selection depending on the communicative requirements: In one case, it is stated that there is no main language; accordingly, German, English and Chinese are in principle on an equal footing. In the other case, no indication is given of a main language; it rather depends on the respective chat. Overall, a kind of globalized coexistence of languages can be observed here. Although English is the most frequently used language within WeChat in the context of German-speaking expatriates in China, the results also indicate that German, as well as Chinese, play significant roles in chat communication. To explain the figures, it can be stated that many of the surveyed expatriates communicate with WeChat in English in a professional context, English of course being the lingua franca of globally active corporations, even if they come from German-speaking countries.

5.5.2 Code Switching in Chats and Group Chats

5.5.2.1 Code Switching Practice

In the survey, German-speaking WeChat users in China were asked whether they mix different languages within their chats/group chats. 142 of the 208 respondents, a good 68% in total, answered “yes”, while 57 respondents indicated “no”. Nine people made no statement. Based on these figures, it can be seen that code switching, without being specified in more detail up to this point, is a linguistic practice that takes up space within the respondents’ WeChat communication. Successively, this practice is analyzed in more detail.

5.5.2.2 Languages Used for Code Switching

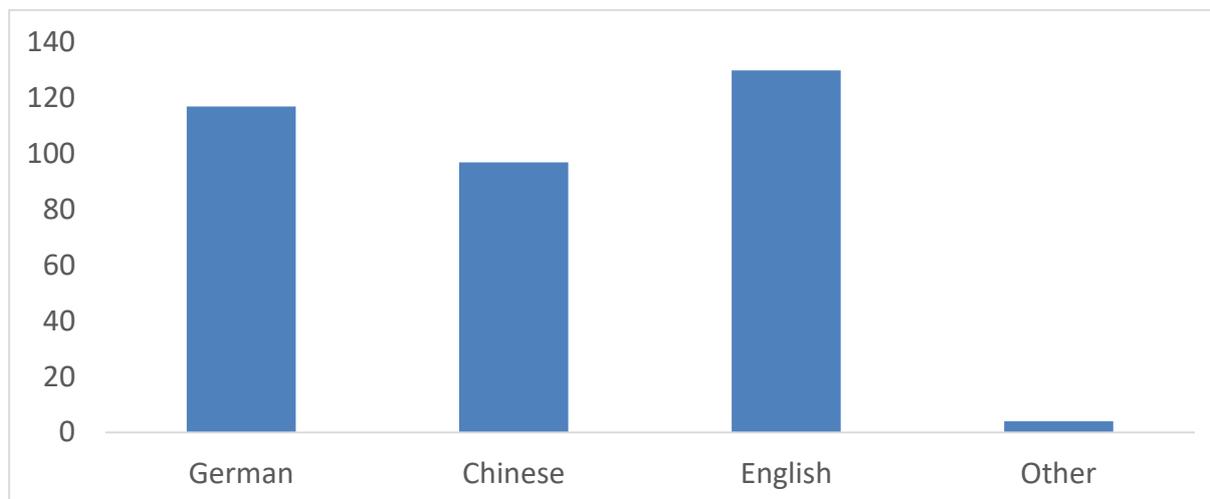


Figure 14: Languages Used for Code Switching in Chats/Group Chats

We see that English is the most popular language, as already noted in chapter 5.5.1 – but now extended to the context of chats and group chats with code switching. 130 respondents (62.5%) state that they use English. German follows with 117 mentions (ca. 56%), here the difference to English is comparatively small. Chinese has 97 mentions (ca. 46%). All in all, there is a multilingual coexistence of the three dominant languages English, German and Chinese, which are mixed in chats – probably partly deliberately. In addition to the competencies in the respective languages, this indicates that certain content, especially in a professional context, can or should perhaps be expressed preferentially in certain languages over others. It can be assumed that corresponding intercultural expression and competence issues explicitly influence language choices.

5.5.2.3 Code Switching Within the Same Message

While 122 of the respondents (ca. 59%) do not use code switching within the same message, 85 people (ca. 41%) state that they practice it (one person did not provide any information). Therefore, it can be assumed that language mixing phenomena **within the same message** are relevant linguistic practices on WeChat in our context.

5.5.2.4 Languages Used for Code Switching Within the Same Message

Those expatriates who answered “yes” to the previous question about whether they mix languages within the same message were asked which languages they use accordingly. The results are as follows (multiple answers were possible):

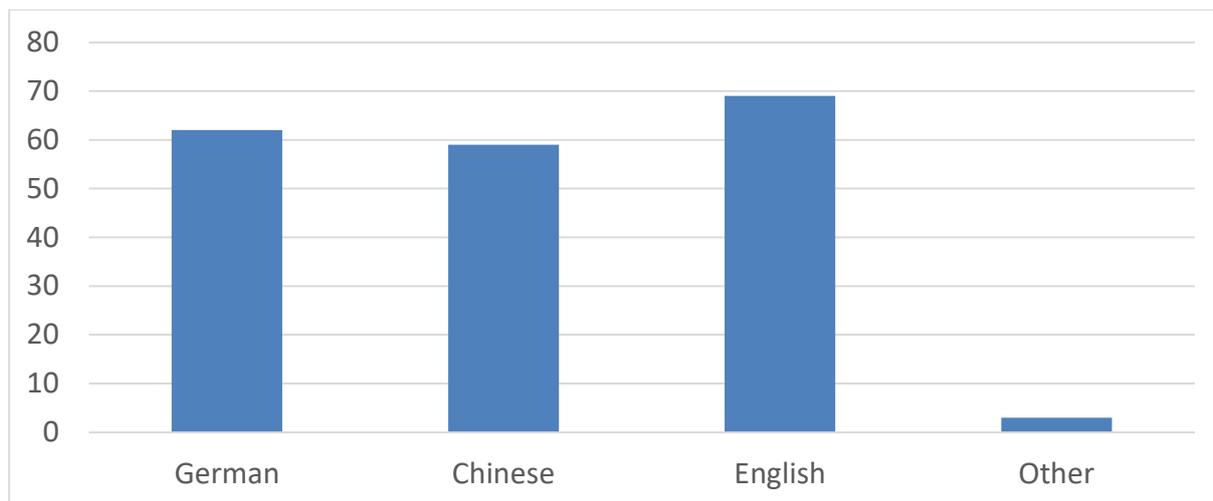


Figure 15: Languages Used for Code Switching in Single Messages

We see a numerically almost equivalent coexistence of English (69 mentions; 33%), German (62; ca. 30%) and Chinese (59; ca. 28%). We can conclude that in principle all combinations of these three languages are used roughly equally often, and that there is not one preferred code switching constellation that occurs more accentuated than others. It can be assumed for those who actively mix languages in WeChat communication that they are mostly likely to have comparatively high linguistic competence in each of the three languages discussed here, English, German, and Mandarin, and accordingly can confidently switch back and forth between the languages as the respective communicative situation requires it. With regard to the specifically Chinese context, certain terms such as *laowai* ('foreigner'), *ayi* ('housekeeper', actually 'aunt') etc. could be used, which are common and familiar in the community and do not require translation. The language of business managers is often dominated by English; numerous technical terms are mixed into German, which go far beyond the common use of Anglicisms.

5.5.3 The Languages of Voice Messages

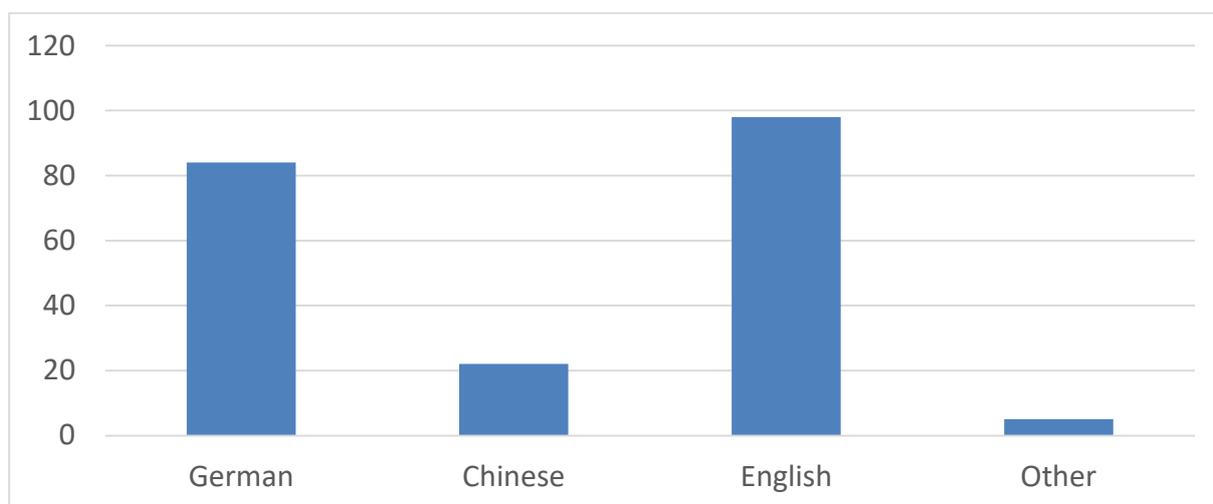


Figure 16: Languages Used for Voice Messages

As can be seen from Figure 16, English is used most frequently, mentioned 98 times, i. e. by almost half of the informants (ca. 47%). This leads to the assumption that voice messages are accentuated in the professional context, since the private environment of the expatriates is often

(also) mostly German-speaking (but it should be mentioned that there are also many expat marriages in which English is the common language). Exceptions could be contacts with expatriates from third countries. German follows with 84 mentions (ca. 40%), thus spoken German continues to be important in the given context. At least it is used much more frequently than Chinese, which 22 people (ca. 11%) name as the main language of their voice messages. It thus appears that English fulfills a lingua franca function in voice messages, especially in the professional sphere of expatriates, but at the same time German still remains important. Compared with chats, about 30% of which are used in German, the tendency here is more toward spoken use. Presumably, German is reserved more for private contexts, but it may also play a relevant role within professional communication for voice messages within WeChat. Should this be so, accordingly, if not with L1 speakers, communication would have to be with persons very competent in German, which means that they would have to be located at a more or less equal hierarchical level in their professions (with the exception of completely German-language entities such as authorities, i. e., diplomatic missions, or schools), who are German-speaking or have acquired excellent German skills. In the case of greater hierarchical disparities, such as those found within manufacturing and production facilities (many German speakers in China work in GM positions in factories), it is potentially less likely that German will be used in voice messages. There is correspondingly less room for (also intercultural) misunderstandings in such constellations than in private ones.

5.6 Using Correct Language

This section examines the assessments of the participants of the survey on the WeChat use of German-speaking expatriates in China regarding language correctness. They were asked whether they pay attention to the linguistic correctness of their communications within the application. This was analyzed for German (5.6.1.), Chinese (5.6.2.), and English (5.6.3.).

5.6.1 German

The majority of users take great care to communicate in German in accordance with common norms. 110 of the 208 participants (ca. 53%) state that they very often pay attention to language correctness. Frequently, 65 of the respondents (ca. 31%) do so. Thus, ca. 84% of the respondents pay attention to the language correctness of their German WeChat communications at least frequently. 23 users (ca. 11%) occasionally focus on language correctness in German in their WeChat communication. Rarely, seven respondents (ca. 3%) do so, and only three users (ca. 1%) say they never pay attention to it. As L1 speakers, expatriates are appropriately competent, language-aware, and mostly formally educated (most expatriates working professionally in China are likely to be university graduates) to potentially always focus on communicating correctly in a medium like WeChat. In the professional context, WeChat is used at least frequently by about 60% of the respondents; here, people tend to express themselves correctly with extra effort. In the intercultural area of German and Chinese, it can happen (this assessment is based on subjective experience) that Chinese communication partners place particularly high value on formal expressions and stylistics in German (salutation, politeness, etc.). Tendencies towards a loosening of certain norms can be observed, like in WhatsApp (towards a conceptual orality with medial writtenness in extending Koch/Oesterreicher (1986), as discussed by Dürscheid (2016) in Feilke/Hennig (2016)). This may also have to do with the majority of respondents

being middle-aged, while the tendencies mentioned are potentially more likely to be found among users from younger age groups.

5.6.2 Chinese

48 respondents (ca. 23%) state that they very often pay attention to language correctness in Chinese, and 41 people (ca. 20%) often pay attention to communicating correctly. In Chapter 5.1. above, the survey has shown that 21 informants (ca. 10%) indicate Chinese as their L1. If one assumes that all of these respondents place a correspondingly high value on language correctness in Chinese, this leaves a further 27 informants (ca. 13%) who do not have a command of Chinese at L1 level, but who nevertheless want to communicate particularly well in this language. Some of the German-speaking expatriates are university-educated sinologists, some of whom have lived in China for many years and have a correspondingly good command of the Chinese language. In addition, there are 41 expatriates who frequently pay attention to the correctness of their Chinese (ca. 20%). Thus, almost 90 of the 208 respondents (ca. 43%) display a pronounced awareness of the Chinese language. This contrasts with a group of 76 users (ca. 37%) who never pay attention to language correctness in Chinese. The size of this group may have to do with many of those answering in this way do not know Chinese, therefore do not use it in their WeChat communication and accordingly do not attach importance to language correctness. Relatively small groups of users (about 10% each) state that they rarely (21 respondents) or occasionally (22) pay attention to their Chinese in the WeChat context. Therefore, the distribution can in principle be read as a dichotomy: Either pronounced attention is paid to good Chinese when using WeChat, or not at all, i. e. one has a fairly good command of Chinese up to almost L1 level, or practically no Chinese skills at all. A kind of “gray area” with a rather indifferent attitude towards the quality of the Chinese used (rarely/occasionally paying attention to language correctness) is represented by a relatively small group (ca. 20%).

5.6.3 English

The results for English are analogous to the assessments of language correctness in German discussed above: 88 of the expats (ca. 42%) state that they very often pay attention to the language correctness of their English-language WeChat communication. “Frequently” was mentioned in this context by 79 people (ca. 38%). A total of 167 of the 208 participants in the survey (ca. 80%) thus pay high attention to the correct linguistic form of their WeChat messages. It can be assumed that this often concerns professional content and instructions that should not be misunderstood. Given the complex intercultural situation in China, even a lingua franca such as English, which otherwise functions relatively well globally, is often put to the test. When sending German-speaking employees around the world, the sending companies assume that the English competence of those sent is high enough. Even if those German speakers who give instructions to colleagues in English via WeChat strive to do so correctly and actually also do so, it may still be far from guaranteed that these instructions will be understood or carried out correctly. Pragmatically, to prevent errors and misunderstandings, expatriates are likely to take great care to express themselves clearly. In addition, there is potential pressure to have particularly good communication skills in English, since it is not uncommon for Chinese managers, in particular, to be educated at top English-speaking universities and/or to speak excellent

English. English is also used in international family constellations; here it is also of central importance to be clearly understood.

5.7 German and Chinese Against the Backdrop of the Other Language

In this section, German and Chinese are considered in exchange with the respective other culture. To this end, the informants were asked relevant questions in the survey. First, the use of German with Chinese speakers is analyzed (5.7.1), then the use of Chinese with speakers of German (5.7.2) is looked into.

5.7.1 Using German with Chinese Speakers

German on WeChat is a potentially frequently used language in the interaction of the surveyed expatriates. In intensive Sino-German business collaboration, German often plays a key role because it is potentially – despite all the intercultural differences that make communication difficult in the first place – better suited for understanding each other than English. The German speakers can use their L1 language, and those Chinese who speak good German and whom the German speakers encounter in everyday professional life mostly have a background in German studies as well as economics. This contributes to potentially successful communication across cultural boundaries, although of course not all differences can be leveled. In the case of English, which both speaker groups speak as a potential L2 language and in which there is room for improvement in the fluency of some German speakers as well as Chinese (despite a (probably often overly) confident assessment by L1 speakers of German of their English competence; see metadata), communication potentially fails more often due to linguistic and cultural differences. In private contexts, the use of German in exchanges with service staff (drivers, housekeepers, etc.), who are often less educated and accordingly do not speak foreign languages, is rather unlikely. 22 respondents (ca. 11%) report using German very frequently with Chinese people via WeChat, 37 people (ca. 18%) frequently. This is a good quarter of the respondents; the other answer alternatives “occasionally” (54 respondents, ca. 26%), “seldom” (52 respondents, 25%) as well as “never” (42 respondents, ca. 20%) are – very roughly – chosen approximately by a quarter of the informants each. Except for 42 respondents, all informants use German in WeChat communication with Chinese. One person did not provide any information on this question.

5.7.2 Using Chinese with German Speakers

Why does the question arise to investigate the use of Chinese with speakers of German among German expatriates based in China as part of a study of their communication habits on WeChat? At first glance, it could be considered marginally relevant; this mainly for the pragmatic reason that it may seem unlikely to outsiders that a use of Chinese with other L1 speakers of German takes place at all. The impulse to investigate this was provided by observations in the context of face-to-face interactions at social events such as receptions, network meetings etc. It turned out that in the course of such events, constellations occurred in which several German speakers switched to Chinese when interacting with several L1 speakers of Chinese. In such situations, Chinese quickly becomes the dominant language, and if a German speaker does not want to interrupt the conversation (or does not want to exclude Chinese speakers who do not speak

German), it is practical to stick to Chinese in such moments, even when addressing an L1 speaker of German, if one has the necessary linguistic competence to do so.

Another constellation arises when German speakers, who have been living in China for a long time (possibly with a Chinese-speaking partner) and are correspondingly Sinophile, meet. I have witnessed such encounters myself, in which the interactants showed an impressively advanced level of competence in spoken Chinese and took the opportunity to demonstrate this. From this point of view, I think it is obvious to ask such this question, especially in the context of using WeChat, since it is potentially easier to communicate Chinese language material also to German speakers via translation apps and the forwarding functions than it would be possible in spoken interaction with a low level of language competence. In the digital sphere, the inhibition threshold tends to be particularly low, perhaps, as there is no great pressure to act correctly in terms of linguistic accuracy and intercultural pragmatics.

The empirical research shows us the following: just under half of the respondents never use Chinese with other speakers of German on WeChat. In total, 103 people (just under 50% of respondents) state this. Chinese is rarely used in interaction with other speakers of German by 49 users of the application (just under 24%), and occasionally by 36 people (ca. 17%). Nine informants each (ca. 4% respectively) indicate frequent or very frequent use of Chinese in WeChat communication with other German speakers (this is roughly consistent with the number of users who estimate their Chinese as being at L1 level). Two individuals did not provide any information on this question. As the analysis shows, Chinese on WeChat is at least occasionally used by about half of the respondents when communicating with other German speakers. In my opinion, this indicates the relevance of Chinese-language content on WeChat exchanged with an interested expat community.

5.8 Translation Feature

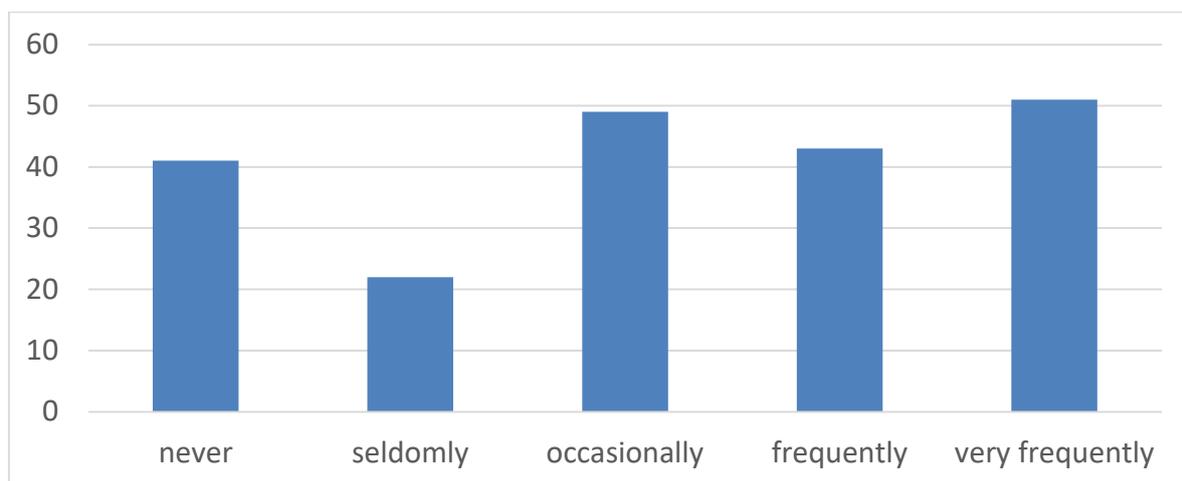


Figure 17: Use of the Translation Feature

As Figure 17 shows, a significant proportion of the German-speaking expatriates use the translation feature to understand posts. 51 users (ca. 25%) say they use it very frequently, and 43 of them use automated translation frequently. 94 of the 208 respondents (ca. 45%), thus use this feature at least frequently. 49 informants (ca. 24%) state that they occasionally make use of the translation option. 22 respondents (ca. 11%) seldomly make use of this function, while 41

people (ca 20%) never use WeChat’s translation function. Overall, this may mean that, according to the data, just under 40 users with the L1 German also find their way around WeChat without using translations. 21 informants had indicated that they speak Chinese at L1 level. The remaining just under 20 respondents either have such a good command of Chinese that they do not need a translation function, or they do not use it because, for example, they never use “Moments” and only communicate via chat in languages that they have a good command of. Another interpretation would be that certain expatriates simply ignore all language material within the application that goes beyond German or English in the moments, i. e. above all Chinese, and thus continuously (inter)act within a “bubble”. Overall, it can be concluded from the figures that there is a need for translations – probably primarily from Chinese into German – because, on the one hand, the language skills and, in particular, the reading skills of many expatriates are not sufficient, but, on the other hand, there is potential interest in the content of many postings. 170 of the respondents (ca. 82%) use this function at least from time to time.

5.9 Internet Language

In the present section, the results on the use of Internet language are presented. First, we analyze the use of typical abbreviations such as *lol* (‘laughing out loud’) etc. (5.9.1; on stylistic features of digital writing, cf. Dürscheid/Frick 2016: 73–92). After that, the focus is on the use of emojis and the associated pragmatics with which these pictorial symbols are used in WeChat (5.9.2). Beißwenger/Pappert’s studies on emojis (2019a, b, 2020) were published only after my survey had been conducted, and thus could not be included in the survey design.

5.9.1 Internet Abbreviations

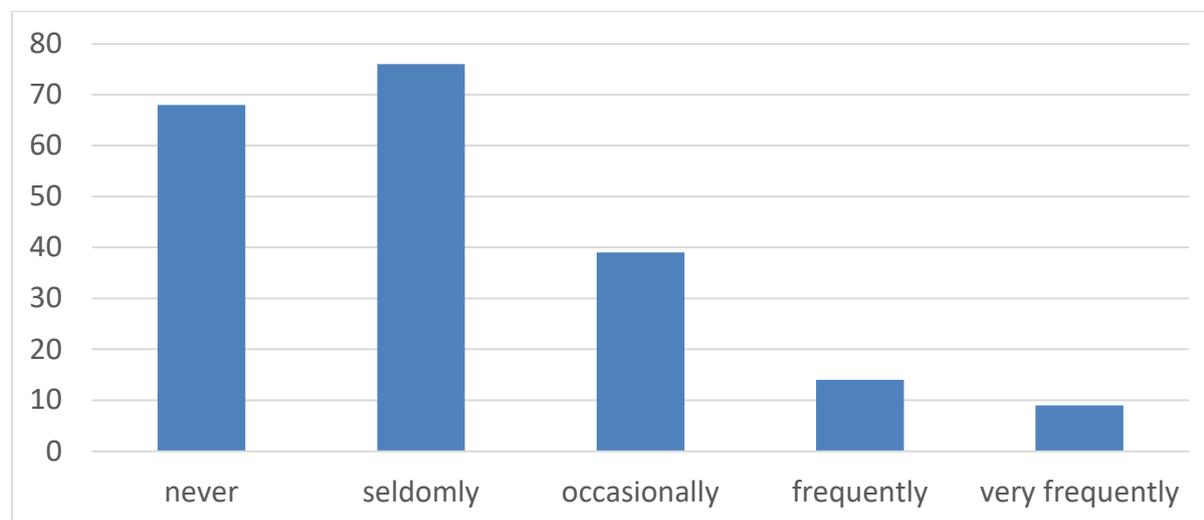


Figure 18: Use of Internet-Related Abbreviations such as *lol* etc.

As shown in Figure 18, there is a group of about one third of the respondents who never use Internet-typical abbreviations in their WeChat communication; a total of 68 users (ca. 32%) state this. However, 140 of the 208 informants (ca. 67%) make at least seldomly use of this type of communication: “seldomly” is indicated by 76 users (ca. 37%). Towards a more frequent use of Internet-typical abbreviations, the number of mentions decreases with each step: 39 persons (ca. 19%) use Internet-typical abbreviations occasionally, fourteen persons (ca. 7%) do so frequently, and nine expatriates (ca. 4%) indicate a very frequent use. Thus, 23 users (about 11%)

use Internet language in an accentuated manner. Overall, it can thus be stated that there is no great affinity to this type of Internet jargon. WeChat is often used in a professional expatriate context in which this jargon might be regarded as inappropriate linguistic and stylistic alternatives on part of both producers and recipients. The use of Internet-typical abbreviations, which are mostly based on English (*lol*), sometimes also on German formulations (*hdgdl; hab dich ganz doll lieb* ‘am utterly in love with you’), is made more difficult by the different nature of the characters in Chinese (about 10% of the respondents chat mainly in Chinese); here, there would have to be corresponding code switching specific to the abbreviations used. As has already been noted several times with regard to individual features, there is also a small group of (most likely young) users here for whom the common abbreviations are quite frequently part of the language use.

5.9.2 Emojis

5.9.2.1 Emoji Usage

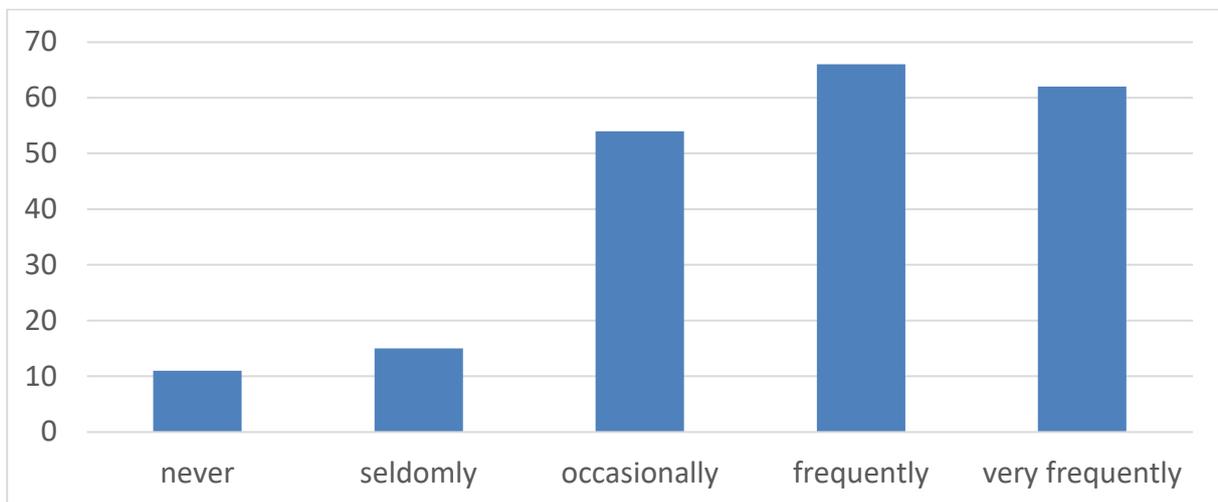


Figure 19: Use of Emojis

As shown in Figure 19, the use of emojis in the WeChat communication of the surveyed German-speaking expatriates enjoys great popularity, more than 60% of them use emojis at least frequently: 62 users (ca. 30%) state that they use emojis very frequently. 66 users (ca. 32%) use the small icons frequently, 54 occasionally (ca. 26%). The infrequent users of emojis in WeChat are in the minority with 15 people (ca. 7%), eleven respondents (ca. 5%) state that they never use emojis in WeChat. These results show an affinity to digital communication with emojis, which one would probably associate with younger users of WeChat in particular, and of messenger communication in general. It can be shown that, on the basis of the empirical results, emojis represent a relevant phenomenon even beyond user groups of “digital natives”. The acceptance of emojis by German-speaking expatriates is made easier by the fact that the digital environment in China is highly penetrated by emojis. This potentially suggests that they should also be adopted in one’s own WeChat communication. Our findings show that almost 70% of respondents mix languages within their chats. Potentially, the numerical analogy suggests that those who mix languages in chats also have an affinity for including emojis. Emojis would have to be used as well as read against the respective cultural or intercultural backgrounds, especially

semantic universality is only likely to potentially work in the iconic representation of concrete objects/persons. The wide field of emotions, on the other hand, is already intraculturally difficult, interculturally even more so.

5.9.2.2 Functions of the Emojis Used

What functions do the emojis used serve? This was asked next. The German speakers in China provided the following information (multiple answers were possible): Valuations and assessments are clearly in focus. 173 times (ca. 83%) positive comments on a statement are mentioned, 110 mentions (ca. 53%) concern negative comments. To mark irony in their statements, 131 people (ca. 63%) use emojis in their WeChat communication. 138 people use emojis for other purposes. This can be broadly connected to Beißwenger/Pappert (2019b: 72) and the functional practice of making things readable/accessible. A total of eleven people also further describe their other uses of emojis in WeChat. These are (quotes translated from free text input):

Greetings; Situational humor; Showing empathy; Emphasis; Congratulations; Expressing emotions; Embarrassment; Instead of words; To illustrate and/or replace a literal comment; Abbreviation by iconic depiction; Explanation; Answering yes-no questions with smiling smiley for “yes”.

Emphasis, use of emojis instead of words, illustration/replacement or abbreviations can also be assigned to the practice of making chats more readable, as above. Abbreviations in the sense of a smaller number of characters and towards a mixture of different semiotic codes within single utterances certainly not only found in WeChat, but also in other media/on other platforms within messenger communication. The pragmatic function “explanation” probably refers to a kind of duplication of the statement, which may have already been formulated in writing and is emphatically underlined in visualizing it by an emoji. The comment “abbreviation by iconic depiction” is formulated in a very condensed way. In this, a dimension of the substitution of nominal sentence elements that can be represented by means of emojis in an otherwise written utterance could be meant, i. e., a deliberate mixed form where the palette of emojis allows this. With Beißwenger/Pappert, the functional explanations of greeting, situational humor, showing empathy, congratulations, expressing emotions, or embarrassment obtained from free text input can mostly be associated with the practice of making a message visible (Beißwenger/Pappert 2019b: 73).

5.10 Orality and Writing-Oriented Expression

Within the survey, the informants were asked for a self-assessment on orality and writing-oriented expression in their communication with WeChat. For this purpose, they were asked whether they tend to orient themselves more to orality in chats, i. e., chat more like they speak, or whether an orientation tends to be more toward writing, i. e., that they chat more like they write. A scale of 1 to 5 was provided for answering, where “1” was designated as “speaking” and “5” as “writing” and 2, 3 and 4 denote corresponding gradations. Only whole number responses could be given by checking boxes.

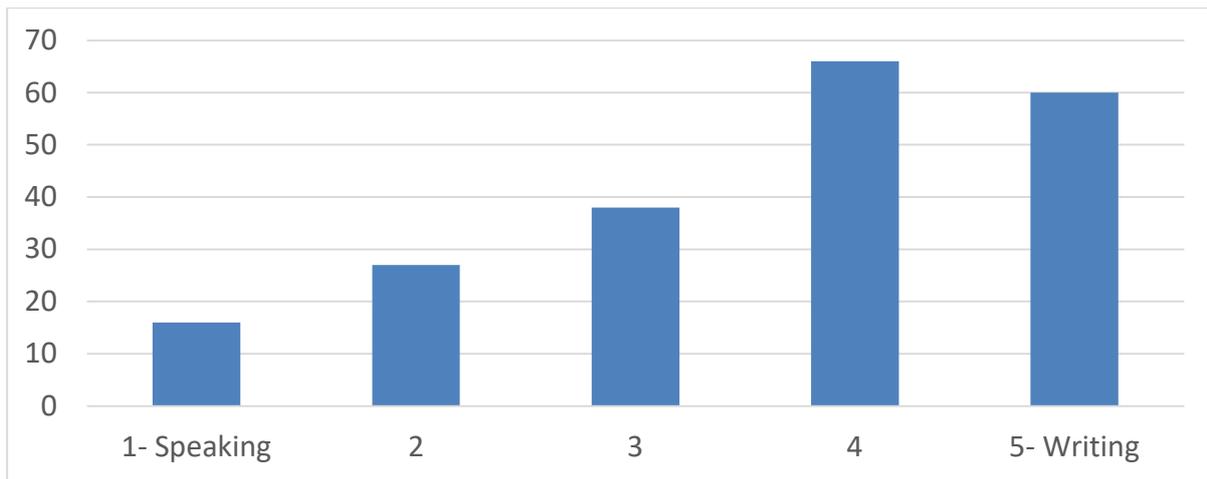


Figure 20: Do You Chat More Like You Speak or Like You Write?

Figure 20 shows that the expatriates tend to chat in a way that is oriented toward the written form. A total of 60 respondents (ca. 29%) state a clear orientation towards the standard written form by answering with the maximum value “5”. 66 respondents (ca. 32%) provide the answer “4”, which indicates a clear orientation towards a written standard. Thus, a good 60% of the respondents are oriented towards chatting at least close to a standard writing norm. A neutral answer (“3”) is given by 38 respondents (ca. 18%), who thus express that they use elements of both written and oral language in their WeChat communication. 27 respondents (ca. 13%) answer with “2” and assess their chats as predominantly oriented towards oral language use, and a total of 16 persons (ca. 8%) call their communication fully modeled on orality (answer “1”). One informant did not provide any information on this question. If one connects the assessments of orality and writing-oriented expression collected here with the statements made by the respondents on language accuracy in the languages used, clear parallels emerge for all languages/language groups analyzed. These parallels are most pronounced for German and English, but they are also recognizable in a weakened form for Chinese and the group of other languages. According to these analyses, language correctness and orientation towards written language standards go hand in hand.

6 Conclusions and Perspectives for Further Research

The analysis of the collected metadata yields a prototypical user profile, namely a middle-aged male German native speaker who does not speak any other language at the L1 level, has been in China since before 2015, is an employee, and most often resides in Shanghai. The informants mostly came into contact with WeChat, which was not known to them before their time in China, and is used in parallel with other messengers (mainly WhatsApp) and professionally as well as privately (the latter more intensively so), through friends and/or acquaintances. This contact can be seen in terms of inclusion into a virtual speech island community, whose members actively enable this access to newcomers.

When looking at the features used, we can see that chats and group chats are among the most frequently used functionalities. Voice messages are also popular. Voice calls are used slightly more often than video calls. Speaking, in whatever chosen form, is thus also relevant, apart from just chatting. Location functions (including real-time location) are potentially used frequently. Active money transfers and the WeChat Pay payment function enjoy high popularity

among informants, as does the exchange of digital contact cards. WeChat's digital tools are used to operate and reach out of the virtual speech island community into the real, primarily Chinese-speaking, environment, and also to actively seek contact with people outside the digital community of German speakers.

In contrast, the Moments function, i. e. posting as on Facebook or Instagram, is used much less actively (against the backdrop of the majority Chinese-speaking cultural reception environment). Receptively, i. e., via liking and commenting, this area in comparison is relatively well accepted by German expatriates in China via WeChat. WeChat's photo and video recording features are hardly used by the group of respondents; audiovisual material is not primarily generated via WeChat, but tends to be forwarded. According to the data, the (local, i. e., China-specific) people search feature is rarely used, and the typical Chinese practice of sending monetary gifts (Red Packets) is similarly restrained. In the less pronounced adoption of these majority Chinese-focused features or features embedded in the Chinese-language context, an implicit focusing on the own virtual German speech island and culturally more homogeneous community can be grasped.

English is the language mainly used in (group) chats, at just under 60%, ahead of German and Chinese. Code switching phenomena are relatively frequent at almost 70%, sometimes even within the same message. English is the dominant language in which voice messages are recorded, ahead of German. Almost every second voice message is recorded in English. Speech correctness is a relevant concern for the respondents especially in English, but also in German. For more than half of the respondents, German is a language used at least occasionally in intercultural exchange with the Chinese. Chinese, on the other hand, is used comparatively little with speakers of German. The translation function is used very frequently to understand contributions (probably mostly for Chinese-language communications). The German-speaking WeChat community cannot avoid using English in order to ensure an exchange with Chinese locals as well as expatriates from other countries. In this respect, the language constellation empirically determined here virtually resembles the coexistence of different languages, especially in Shanghai in the 1930s, if one looks at the German-language newspapers and magazines of the time (e. g. the *Gelbe Post*, a Shanghai expat newspaper that existed from 1939 to 1940). The parallels become clear in that there was then, as there is now, a German-speaking community with its own "spirit", which explicitly wants to communicate in German, but has to take into account the requirements of the circumstances, that without English – or some Chinese – it is not possible to interact with the environment outside of the German-speaking bubble.

Typical Internet expressions such as *lol* are only used frequently by a small group of respondents. Emojis, on the other hand, meet with very broad acceptance and are in constantly high use. In the context of WeChat as a virtual speech island one could say that the special Chinese environment, with its affinity to pictoriality already visible through the characters of its written language, supports a turn towards a more pronounced use of these pictorial iconic signs. The users might pursue a progressive, digitally affine self-image in communication also by means of emojis and stickers. With regard to the functions of emoji use, it is apparent that mostly, positive comments are intended to be conveyed. Embellishments and irony are more frequently associated with the use of the small pictorial symbols than negative comments. In the area of

orality and writing, the majority of respondents rate themselves as communicating modeled rather on writing than speaking.

Those expatriates who contribute free-text comments highlight one aspect in particular as positive, namely the practical multifunctionality of WeChat, which makes everyday life in China easier for them. The virtual speech island can be seen as a comfort zone, so to speak: WeChat offers every foreigner arriving in China a digital starter package with which to network and act practically immediately.

An aspect that contributes to the integration of expatriates through the use of WeChat is the positive reception of their app usage by Chinese acquaintances, both privately and professionally. By actively using WeChat, one sends a signal that one wants to behave – at least digitally – like the Chinese locals. The use of WeChat generally is met with friendly to joyful reactions from the Chinese, facilitates communication as well as networking with them, and, similar to mastering even just a few words of Mandarin, can have a door-opening function in regard to Chinese culture and networks. In contrast to the situation of the German-speaking refugees in Shanghai in the 1930s mentioned above, there is great potential to feel at home in WeChat as a virtual speech island and to find a digital connection to China at the same time.

In view of such key experiences for German speakers in China, one could transfer WeChat's usefulness to countries struggling with the influx of refugees: migrants who are looking for a foothold could possibly also be offered comparable (happy) moments, regardless of whether in face-to-face interaction or via digitally succeeding in something that helps them in their new home country. This is where applications similar to WeChat could potentially be powerful; at the same time, it would also counteract the emergence of digital parallel societies and structures. Our results on WeChat suggest that, on the one hand, a community is constituted via the concept of the virtual speech island. On the other hand, given the diversity of communicative and linguistic possibilities that the application offers in use and networking with the rest of the world and the environment in China, the question whether to consciously withdraw and segregate oneself does not even surface. At times, a retreat into the safety of the German-speaking digital community may be welcome, but overall, there is a clearer tendency towards an interpretation of our active WeChat users being a group quite closely aligned with the Chinese (digital as well as real) world; there is constant exchange.

Lastly, we outline perspectives for further research: the data sets collected are publicly available via the open access repository Zenodo of CERN in Geneva in different formats (see appendix). Thus, all interested parties in the research community have the possibility to further study the data. Especially with regard to possible correlations of several data series, it is to be expected that the data can and will provide further results relevant to the ongoing research discourses. For instance, different frequently used features could be considered together in order to make a more precise sociolinguistic determination of the users of the “top features”. Likewise, there is – as I think the data clearly show – a group of digital-savvy users who are constantly using WeChat. This group could also be more closely defined in future work with the available data. The age distribution would also allow a different approach to the data. However, it should be noted that most of the informants are middle-aged. In terms of gender, it would also be possible to separate male and female users and their communication habits to find out which features

and communication practices can be associated more with one gender than the other according to the analyzed data. By means of data-driven question-raising, further angles could be developed.

Surprisingly, from my point of view, the WeChat app has hardly changed in recent years, both in terms of its external appearance and its functionality. The area of micro apps, which is extremely dynamic, has been so far explicitly excluded from my considerations, since it simply is too vast. The future will show which innovative questions can be connected to WeChat by sociolinguistics and related sciences. Its role during the Corona virus pandemic would certainly be interesting to illuminate. Most recently, the Chinese government announced it would make international health and travel certificates for post-pandemic travel accessible through WeChat. For China's ever-more digital society, WeChat is likely to serve as a common denominator for many years to come. Thus, many developments will occur; new linguistic phenomena emerging through the application seem to be a question of time.

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Appendix: Research Data

The research data collected can be used for further research. They are freely available on the Open Science repository server Zenodo of CERN (zenodo.org). The data set can be downloaded from the following location: zenodo.org/record/3747164 [29.12.2021].

The dataset includes the collected data in Excel, GNU R, SPSS, SQL, and Stata formats, as well as a PDF screenshot version of the survey.