

# Dissolution of the Self: Digital Technology, Privacy and Intimacy in Europe and the Sinophone Regions

*Jana S. ROŠKER\**

## Abstract

This article explores the connection between digital technology and privacy and intimacy in Europe and the Sinophone regions, with a particular focus on the changing role and constitution of human personhood. It argues that digital technology has fundamentally altered the ways in which individuals construct and maintain their personal boundaries, resulting in the erosion of traditional notions of the human self. Through an analysis of cultural and historical factors, the article demonstrates how this phenomenon manifests itself differently in Europe and mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively, highlighting the specific challenges and opportunities that arise in each context. The article also considers the cultural differences between the European and Chinese cultures regarding privacy and intimacy, and the ways in which digital technology has amplified these differences. It argues that while digital technology has created new opportunities for connection and intimacy, it has also exposed individuals to new risks and vulnerabilities, including the loss of privacy and the erosion of selfhood.

Overall, the article aims to contribute to our understanding of the cultural and social implications of digital technology. It highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to the regulation of digital technology, one that takes into account cultural differences and the complex ways in which technology is reshaping our sense of self and our relationships with others.

**Keywords:** digital technology, humanism, the human self, personhood, privacy, intimacy

## Razkroj sebstva: digitalna tehnologija, zasebnost in intimnost v Evropi ter sinofonih regijah

### Izvleček

Članek raziskuje povezavo med digitalno tehnologijo ter zasebnostjo in intimnostjo v Evropi in sinofonih regijah, s posebnim poudarkom na spreminjajoči se vlogi in konstituciji človeške osebnosti. Trdi, da je digitalna tehnologija temeljito spremenila načine, kako

\* Jana S. ROŠKER, Professor of Sinology, Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.  
Email address: jana.rosker[at]ff.uni-lj.si



posamezniki gradijo in ohranjajo svoje osebne meje, kar je povzročilo razgradnjo tradicionalnih pojmov človeškega sebstva. S pomočjo analize kulturnih in zgodovinskih dejavnikov članek prikazuje, kako se ta pojav manifestira drugače v Evropi ter na Kitajskem, v Hongkongu in Tajvanu, pri čemer poudarja specifične izzive in priložnosti, ki se pojavljajo v vsakem od obravnavanih kulturnih kontekstov. Članek prav tako upošteva kulturne razlike med evropsko in kitajsko kulturo glede zasebnosti in intimnosti ter načine, kako digitalna tehnologija te razlike poudarja. Avtorica trdi, da je digitalna tehnologija sicer ustvarila nove priložnosti za povezovanje in intimnost, vendar je hkrati izpostavila posameznike in posameznice novim tveganjem ter ranljivostim, vključno z možno izgubo zasebnosti in razgradnjo sebstva. Namen članka je prispevati k razumevanju kulturnih in družbenih posledic digitalne tehnologije. Poudarja potrebo po bolj tenkočutnem pristopu k regulaciji digitalne tehnologije, takšnem namreč, ki upošteva kulturne razlike ter mnogotere kompleksne načine, s katerimi tehnologija preoblikuje naše refleksije lastnega sebstva in naših odnosov s soljudmi.

**Ključne besede:** digitalna tehnologija, humanizem, človeško sebstvo, osebnost, zasebnost, intima

## Introduction: The Agony of Enlightenment Values

The digitalization of our lives has brought about many unprecedented benefits, but it also requires us to make significant sacrifices. As digitalization continues to evolve, we may need to relinquish certain values and ideals of modernity that were born out of the European Enlightenment and have been ingrained in Western society.

Given the likely increasing role of digitalization in our lives, it's essential for us in Europe and other parts of the Western world to engage with it in a new way and explore new conceptualizations of autonomy, freedom, and democracy that are compatible with it. The relevance of this topic is particularly heightened in light of the current global crises faced by humanity. Therefore, the final section of this paper will illustrate potential dilemmas that may arise when utilizing digital technology during critical situations, including the digital measures implemented to combat the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021.

The key to ensuring that digital technologies<sup>1</sup> are used to safeguard human life and preserve fundamental human rights and freedoms is through the

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1 In the context of the present paper, digital technology refers to the use of electronic devices, tools, and systems that are designed to manipulate and transmit information in digital form. This includes computer software, hardware, networks, and other related technologies that enable digital communication, storage, and processing of data. From a philosophical perspective, digital technology can be seen as a transformative force that shapes our understanding of the world and ourselves. It has redefined the ways in which we interact with each other, our environment, and our own consciousness.

implementation of strong, yet adaptable legislation and ethical frameworks that prioritize values such as interpersonal responsibility, solidarity, and cooperation, as well as the fundamental freedom and dignity of every individual. But in our search to appropriate methods that could allow us for a comprehensive and reasonable adaptations of such a new, humanist legislation, it's necessary to expand our perspectives beyond the narrow confines of Enlightenment conceptualizations of the human self and consider alternative forms of personhood and autonomy. By doing so, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how digitalization affects our lives and create a new framework that integrates digitalization with the most significant human values and ideals.

In light of the foregoing, let's take a closer look at Sinophone societies. While there are significant differences in how "autocratic" and "democratic" societies in the region utilize digital technology, it's evident that the Chinese cultural and linguistic area as a whole has a distinct approach to digital objects that differs significantly from that of the West. In previous discussions, I have delved into several factors contributing to this culturally influenced divergence (refer to Rošker 2022 and 2023a). Nonetheless, this essay will focus on another specific issue linked to these differences, an issue that is closely tied to the safeguarding of personal data, which is central to our apprehensions regarding the diverse potentials of digital technologies. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is rooted in different specific traditional concepts of intimacy and privacy.

## Two Types of Inhumanity

However, before delving into Chinese conceptualizations of privacy, it is useful to recall the intellectual foundations of European Enlightenment and modernization. Jean-François Lyotard, one of the pioneers of the theorization of post-modernism, saw modernity not only as a new period in history, conditioned by the explosive rise of industrialization and new technology, but also as the prevalence of a different perception of time (Lyotard 1991, 68); for him, modernization meant the way in which successive sequences of moments are arranged in such a way that, unlike earlier periods, they contain a high degree of contingency. At the same time, however, and perhaps for this very reason, the "grand narratives" or meta-narratives of the Enlightenment were reconstructed within the metaphysics of modernity, ranging from Romanesque through classical German philosophy, and then to Marxism. These narratives were in many ways reminiscent of mythic storylines. The important common feature of all these narratives is, of course, the kind of conception of time that leaves the future open in the name of emancipation as

the ultimate or highest goal of human history. But they are also all based on the conviction that the flow of history is something that can be thought. Lyotard sees one of the major differences between traditional and modern narratives in their principal attitudes towards society; while the former based their stance on ritual-ity, the latter took a more political stance in this sense (ibid.). Nevertheless, it is important to see that the ideals for which these meta-narratives of human libera-tion argue, and which can supposedly be achieved at the end of this emancipatory development, remain indeterminate and empty, even though the entire historical development that led to them is supposed to be comprehensible and understand-able. Of course, this also means that the highest goal or the final destination (in the sense of the German notion of *Bestimmung*, which includes the connotation of determination) can nevertheless not be fatally set or determined.

Both types of narratives, the mythical and traditional, as well as the modern me-ta-narratives, mark in the same way diachronic series of events which should be able to be rationally ordered and explained. While in the narratives of the first type this role is assumed by tradition, in the second type it has been assigned to political philosophy or ideologies.

Admittedly, modernity nevertheless draws its legitimacy not from the past, as tra-ditional narrative forms do, but from the future, which, as we have seen, is open. This gives it new possibilities with which its narratives can become ever more complex. It is also clear that the project of human emancipation itself can in no way be equated with a pre-programming of the future as such. Lyotard points out here that “liberty is not security” (ibid.). The contingency that the project of modernity entails is based on an indeterminate future, and it is precisely this in-determinacy that conditions human freedom.

The digital age cannot, of course, abolish this contingency, even though it brings us hitherto undreamed-of possibilities of programming. Here it becomes all the more clear that digital objects, together with their own online infospheres into which they are placed, belong to the realm of technology, which can be used in ways that are beneficial, responsible and liberating, but also harmful to humanity. Thus, some philosophers of technology, such as Bernard Stiegler, see it as a dou-ble-edged sword, as described by Derrida in his work *Plato's Pharmacy*. Paraphras-ing the core message of this work, Stiegler writes that, much like the writing that underlies Plato's and Derrida's problematization of the *pharmakon*, technology is both “remedy” and “poison” (Stiegler 2013, 10). Precisely for this reason, it is all the more important that in the current times of social transformations and transitions, we create new models of autonomous decision-making that meet the demands of the digital age.

The explosive spread of digital technologies has unimagined consequences for the Enlightenment concept of the subject, even in the epistemological sense, since such technologies represent the externalization of knowledge not only into tactile and physical objects, such as books, but also into virtual infospheres of digital objects. Certainly, post-industrial technologies, the digitization of data, and computer science bring new forms of knowledge that replace the aforementioned meta-narratives of philosophy and science in earlier periods, especially those that speak of emancipation and the freedom of people as autonomous beings (Kos 1995, 15). In this sense, its mechanisms have completely replaced the traditional notion of knowledge, which used to be something that could only be acquired through education in the sense of the German word *Bildung* or the Chinese term *xiu shen* 修身 which are both connected to the cultivation of human personhood. Although knowledge cannot be reduced to mere data, either now or in the future, even in the digital age, it is certainly more easily transferable and immediately usable with such technologies. In this sense, Lyotard paints a rather bleak picture that certainly points to the slow disappearance of the Enlightenment subject, as it no longer has a purpose in the digital era:

The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information. We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language. The “producers” and users of knowledge must now, and will have to, possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn. Research on translating machines is already well advanced. Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as “knowledge” statements. (Lyotard 1984, 4)

This, of course, allows knowledge to be reduced to the function of commodities that can be traded. Digital technology enables a faster and easier market exchange of knowledge, which is no longer measured by the criteria of values, but by measures of worth. The production of knowledge itself is now directed towards its sale, with its value measured according to the degree of its direct usefulness. This way of appropriating, transmitting and valuing knowledge is, of course, a threat to human autonomy, since it depends primarily on the laws of the market rather than on the free choices of the people who produce and receive knowledge. The decay of education in the aforementioned sense of *Bildung* or *xiu shen* is also fatal to the capacities of the human mind and the human ability to make value judgments.

This has negative consequences not only for personal morality and social ethics, but also in terms of the growing possibilities for manipulation of the individual by the system or by the holders of political and economic power. This epistemological dimension is problematic everywhere, both in Sinophone and Euro-American societies. Culturally conditioned differences between models of understanding the relationship between people and digital technologies are more pronounced in other segments of human existence.

As I have shown elsewhere (Rošker 2023a), digital systems are relationally structured networks, which also allows in them an efficient centralization (and thus consolidated control) of the data on the basis of which they were created. Humans are not simply thrown into this world, but are both objects and subjects of the information and data with which they have been networked. In this digital reality, it is difficult to preserve the autonomous Self, which, in the role of the free subject, is supposed to confront the outside world as the object of its own perception and understanding. This simultaneous position of subjectivity and objectivity presents us with the problem of the need for a fundamental redefinition of one's Self as a human being. Chinese cultures do not assume a fixed line between subject and object in their perception of reality and the human being. Rather, in those traditions, the human being is seen as a being that has organically grown into reality. The dilemma of such a fusion of subject and object may therefore not exist at all in Chinese societies, or may exist in a much milder form.<sup>2</sup>

Starting from the cultural and philosophical transformations triggered by the digital age in Euro-American cultures that are the closest and most direct descendants of the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment and modernization, Lyotard has founded and developed the concept of the so-called inhuman. The French philosopher distinguishes between two forms of inhumanity as follows:

What if human beings, in humanism's sense, were in the process of, constrained into, becoming "proper" to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman? Which would make two sorts of inhuman. It is indispensable to keep them dissociated. The inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others) must not be confused with the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage. To believe, as has happened to me, that the first can take over from the second, give it expression, is a mistake. The system rather has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it. But

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2 For readers who are not familiar with the essential features of the conventional perspectives on the relationship between the subject and object, I recommend referring to two of my forthcoming publications, namely Rošker (2023a) and (2023b).

the anguish is that of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious but also making it think—if one claims to exclude it, if one doesn't give it an outlet, one aggravates it. Discontent grows with this civilization, foreclosure along with information. (Lyotard 1991, 2)

In an interview with Anders Dunker, the Chinese philosopher of technology Yuk Hui points to the first form of Lyotard's inhumanity, which he describes as positive and which he explicitly associates with the Chinese system of social credit:

Positive inhumanity captures us in rigid technological systems, like we see in China with the social credit system. The positive inhuman is one that is "more interior in myself than me"—for example, God for St. Augustine. We humans carry something inhuman in us, which is irreducible to the human and which maintains the highest intimacy with us. (Dunker 2020, 12)

The problem of intimacy and privacy, which represents one of the reasons for the differences in comprehension and acceptance of digitalization and its objects in the Western and in Chinese cultures respectively, is related to such "positive" types of inhumanity. This is most likely to be found in the different perceptions, feelings and understandings of concepts associated with notions of privacy and intimacy. In what ways does the human self respond within different linguistic and symbolic orders to new, hitherto unknown challenges of the information age?

In what follows, I will attempt to illuminate the development of the concepts of intimacy, privacy, and publicity from a transcultural perspective. As a starting point I will take the history of semantics in the Chinese-Sinic and in the European area. In the development of these concepts, we can locate a number of theoretical indicators that reflect the structures of modern society, but at the same time represent factors that retroactively influence the development of the society in which they emerged and the transformations of these societies (Tang 2020, 1). Here I will start with the assumption of the close and complex connection between semantic and social structures.

## Intimacy, Privacy and Isolation and Their Modern Fate

Lyotard's concept of the inhuman opens up the question of whether this idea does not also involve the dissolution of human privacy, in the sense that what hitherto belonged only to the individuals and constituted the essence of their identity could be shared by them only if they wished it and only up to the point they chose.

Because of their relational and centralized character, the internalization of digital objects in the processes of knowledge acquisition also represents the internalization of the digital system as the centralized authority of a new agenda of existence. If in this way the external system actually invades our most private interiority and becomes a part of us, it also means that we no longer have a home to which we could retreat at any time and where we would not be afraid of heterogeneous invaders of our inner space. In other words, the hidden dwelling of our minds, which used to be entirely ours, has become transparent spaces along with their flip side, namely the basis of our ability to act autonomously in the outside world. They are not completely open, for we can still close them, but their walls have become glassy in the wake of the death of classical modernity.

It is therefore no coincidence that, according to Niklas Luhmann, the concepts of privacy and intimacy are also children of the Enlightenment movement, since they are said to have emerged in Europe from the seventeenth century onwards on the basis of increasingly complex social differentiations and to have developed through phases of idealization, paradoxisation and finally to the phase of problematisation. This private intimacy of the individual involves a perfect experience of the Self that is not fully expressible or transferable (Luhmann 1982, 17–18). It is precisely because of the impossibility of the existence and formation of such privacy and intimacy (which, as we have seen, is at the same time the basis of autonomous participation in society) that Luhmann sees pre-modern or traditional group-community systems in a rather negative light, for he points out that what is characteristic of social life in older, locally denser social systems are complex webs of relationships “which disables the emergence of individuals, the existence of private lives, and the escape into relations of two” (ibid., 37). All of this, of course, applies to relational systems or webs of relationships in Confucian Sinic societies. Here, we must not forget that in regions that have been under the influence of Confucianism for a prolonged period, there is a long tradition of local control emanating from the family and broader clan structures, manifested in informal and semi-formal institutions at the level of village and district communities (see Rošker 2023a, 77–84). In such “premodern”<sup>3</sup> communities, therefore, one cannot speak of intimacy or privacy in the modern sense of these terms.

The Western concept of intimacy derives from the Latin word *intimus*, meaning “the furthest from the outside edge” or “the innermost part” (Glare 1983, 952).

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3 The term “premodern” is somewhat misleading, especially when applied to the social structures of non-European or non-Western societies, since it latently implies that “modernity”, which in fact and in concrete reality derives from European social and economic structures, is a necessary phase in the temporal division of historical developments, independent of the cultural origins and cultural diversity of social structures and economic or political orders.

While this term has survived, for example, in my own (Slovenian) language and also in many other European languages,<sup>4</sup> in English, which is a kind of *lingua franca* of academic terminology, it is mainly used as a word expressing the closest connections between people or interpersonal relationships in which individuals share “their innermost parts” with their intimate partners. The contemporary Chinese synonym for Western terms associated with intimacy also refers exclusively to this interpersonal connotation.<sup>5</sup> It should also be noted that in English, unlike many other Indo-European languages, this term has lost its original meaning mentioned above, which refers to individual human inwardness.

This use of language is somewhat peculiar, since it seems to assume that people who are not in close relationship with others cannot have access to intimacy in the sense of the “innermost” that individuals themselves guard and protect from the free access of others. Such a use of language is certainly the result of the semantic evolution that led from the concept of intimacy as the deepest inner space of the individual to its present connotation, which refers to the closest relationships between different people. It is thus the state of a very close relationship between people that can bring about a mutual disclosure of the intimate sphere of the inner space of those who are in such a relationship. As we shall see a little later, the original meaning of the Latin word *intimus* has been at least partially transferred to the concept of privacy in English, while in numerous other Indo-European languages there is still a sharp division between the spheres of intimacy and privacy.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to this development, in Slovenian and in many other European languages the term intimacy is still preserved in the sense of the sphere of intimacy of persons, which denotes something different from the sphere of privacy and refers to what is hidden in the deepest layers of a person’s inner space—and is thus closer to the original Latin meaning of the term. These are the deepest layers of thoughts and feelings, but also information that we do not want to share with others. The intimate sphere is inviolable because this realm of being human is the one most closely associated with human dignity (Philipp et al. 2017, 4). This sphere includes activities in our sexual relationships, entries in our diaries, our attitudes towards life and death, our personal inclinations and habits, and religious beliefs (Zhao 2015, 64).

4 For instance, in German, Spanish or French.

5 亲密关系

6 Let me cite, for example, a differentiation that can be observed in German not only in the social sciences but also in legal terminology: “In German there is no term, which would completely correspond to the English phrase ‘the right to privacy’, that was introduced in 1890 by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis. ... The phrase ‘private sphere’ has in theory multiple meanings. The English word ‘privacy’ actually refers to the intimate sphere, that is, the private sphere in the narrower sense, and sometimes also to a part of the social sphere.” (Zhao 2015, 61)

In the processes of modernization, the original meaning of the Latin word *intimus* was simultaneously transferred to the word privacy in English, and to some extent in other Western languages. As Hannah Arendt writes, “We call private today a sphere of intimacy whose beginnings we may be able to trace back to late Roman [period]” (Arendt 1998, 38). The modern concept of privacy, not intimacy, is still the word in English today that stands in sharpest, most diametrical opposition to the social sphere. On the other hand, the most important function of the modern idea of privacy is that it protects the sphere of intimacy (*ibid.*), even though the latter is a hyponym of the former in English. This is despite the fact that intimacy is a hyponym of privacy in English. Consequently, many modern writers stress that the concepts of intimacy (referring to our closest and most personal relationships) and privacy are closely interrelated, and that without the preservation of privacy, interpersonal intimacy cannot be sustained (Gerstein 1978, 76).

In order to clarify the historical background of these semantic transformations, which undoubtedly have important political and psychological implications, let us first take a brief look at the evolution of the terms denoting the private, intimate, and social spheres in European culture as presented by Hannah Arendt. She emphasizes that the private sphere in ancient Greece was limited to family communities and households, which were perceived as separate from the public sphere. However, the meaning of both spheres narrows in pre-modern times when the so-called social sphere is formed, which belongs to neither the private nor the public sphere and is the seed of nation-states (Arendt 1998, 28).

In the relationship between the private and the public (which is also the political), freedom is possible only in the latter sphere, since the private in ancient Greece served exclusively the needs of survival and all the related determinations that define man’s “metabolism with nature” (*ibid.*, 98). The public or political sphere, known as the polis, differed from the private in that it represented the community of “equals”, whereas the private sphere within the family or household was based on a strictly hierarchical inequality (*ibid.*, 32). In this framework, the term privacy (*idion*), which literally means “belonging to oneself”, acquired a slightly negative connotation, as it became associated with the idea of being cut off from certain freedoms that were only possible in the public sphere:<sup>7</sup>

A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human. We no longer think primarily of deprivation when we use the word “privacy,” and this is partly due to the

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7 Hannah Arendt also points here to the etymology of the English term “privacy”, which is further connected to the word “deprived”.

enormous enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism. (ibid., 38)

Thus, it is probably no coincidence that the modern, i.e. individualized, meaning of “privacy” as the antithesis of the social rather than the public developed primarily as an idea to protect intimacy (ibid.): “The first articulate explorer and to an extent even theorist of intimacy was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, characteristically enough, is the only great author still frequently cited by his first name alone” (ibid., 39). Rousseau came to his discovery through his rebelliousness, which was directed not primarily against the oppression of people by the state, but against society with its “unbearable perversion of the human heart, its intrusion upon an innermost region in man which until then had needed no special protection” (ibid.). For him, intimacy and sociality were two distinct subjective forms of human existence. This form of intimacy discovered by the Romantics was directed against the social sphere, or rather against what it necessarily leads to with its pressure on the individual and its demands for compliance with standards and norms, namely conformism (ibid.). In this context, the intimacy of the individual gradually became part of the modernized public sphere and the close relationships within it:

Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. (ibid., 49)

Thus everything that belongs to the individual is attributed to his or her public sphere, in which everyone is responsible only for themselves and in which—despite the equality of all members of society—it is still possible to shine with one’s own uniqueness and unrepeatability.

But society equalizes under all circumstances, and the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual. (ibid., 41)

The concept of privacy in the contemporary sense has been transferred to the level of individuality in the West and eventually formed through processes of modernization in Europe and the United States in the 20th century. Here it is worth

noting the incredibly influential article entitled *The Right to Privacy*, published in 1890 in the journal *Harvard Law Review* by legal experts Samuel D. Warren and Louis Brandeis. In it, the authors defined the concept of privacy as “the right to be let alone” (Warren and Brandeis 1890, 193). The right to privacy is one of the universal human rights and is protected in all liberal democracies. At this point, it is worth recalling the difference between the word “privacy” in English and the word “intimacy” in many other European languages. The English word “privacy” covers the concepts covered in German, for instance, by two words, namely intimate sphere and private sphere (*Intimsphäre, Privatsphäre*), where the sphere of intimacy denotes an even narrower (i.e. even more internal) sphere than that referred to by the term privacy.

Modern digital technologies, admittedly, can cause a fundamental reduction or often even a complete loss of privacy, which is threatened not only by devices such as surveillance cameras and facial and motion recognition technology, but also by a range of useful and nowadays almost indispensable digital products that facilitate everyday life, such as smartphones and bank cards. It is often virtually impossible to escape such ubiquitous devices from technological control. The sphere of privacy is often even more threatened by virtual identities that people create in online networks and that are theoretically preserved for all time, surviving even the death of the individual who brought them into being. It is therefore no coincidence that in the shadow of online environments, the discourse on privacy has changed from the “right to be left alone” to the “right to be forgotten” (see e.g. Santor 2014; Pagallo and Durante 2014).

In the Euro-American cultural sphere, fears that their virtual identities will become objects of heteronomous manipulation in the form of diverse digital objects over which individuals have no control have certainly become one of the main reasons for resistance to any kind of centralized use of digital technologies by the state.

Many see a viable way out of this dilemma in the possibility of founding digital cooperatives that are structured according to grassroots democratic principles.<sup>8</sup> In

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8 One example of a digital cooperative in Taiwan is the “Taiwan Association of Digital Cultural Content Industry” (TADCCI), also known as “DIGI+”. DIGI+ is a non-profit organization that was established in 2011 with the aim of promoting the development of Taiwan’s digital content industry. DIGI+ operates as a cooperative by bringing together content creators, distributors, and consumers. The cooperative model allows members to share resources and knowledge, collaborate on projects, and collectively negotiate better deals with suppliers and customers. In this sense, DIGI+ serves as an example of how digital cooperatives can help foster innovation and collaboration in emerging industries, while also providing benefits to their members and contributing to the overall development of their communities (see DIGI+ Taiwan).

such associations, digital data belong to the cooperative members, who manage and use them for purposes that do not involve control of the individual by the community, nor do they have the exclusive goal of making a profit, but rather are guided by the aim of achieving transparent justice for all members. The beginnings of such cooperatives can be found in Europe and the United States as well as throughout Asia and especially in the Sinic region or East Asia, with the exception of North Korea and China, where, of course, the politics of the strong arm and general control prevail.

### Intimacy and Privacy in the Sinophone Context

The idea itself, as well as the concrete practice of digital cooperatives, is probably most prevalent in Taiwan, which also has a minister without a portfolio for Digital Affairs. Minister Tang Feng (Audrey Tang),<sup>9</sup> who contributed in important ways to Taiwan's unforeseen success in limiting and stopping the spread of the recent Covid-19 epidemic by democratically disseminating digital technologies for disease control and tracking accessible medical devices, emphasizes the value of digitization in the context of the widest possible consensus among the entire population; the measures she proposed were based solely on recommendations, as no one was forced to adopt the digital applications used in the process. Nevertheless (or precisely because of this), they were voluntarily used by a large majority of the Taiwanese population. This is why she sees Taiwan's successes in fighting the epidemic, where no general quarantine or self-isolation had to be declared and where the majority of public businesses, shops and even venues such as pubs and restaurants remained open throughout, as a result of the grassroots use of digital technologies. Tang stresses that forced action is by no means an effective means of combating the epidemic: "Any top-down coercion, whether from capitalists or the state, is equally bad" (Audrey Tang in Kim 2020, 12).<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Taiwan, one of the reasons for the acceptance of digital technologies in the fight against the epidemic was certainly the confidence of the majority of the population in the state and their fellow citizens. In China, on the other hand, with the wide acceptance and positive evaluation of the social credit system based on digital control, we see an idea diametrically opposed to that of mutual trust, or privacy protection. Moreover, the Chinese online social network WeChat is more

9 Tang is a transgender person who was known as Tang Zonghan, or Atrijus Tang before her gender transition.

10 For a more concrete description of how digital technologies have served in the process of Covid-19 elimination, see for instance Wang, Ng and Brook (2020, 1341–42).

or less ubiquitous as it increasingly becomes an indispensable part of everyday life and communication, a way to access important information and use public infrastructures, from public transport to libraries. A number of recent studies show that there is a high degree of what might be called the “privacy paradox” in China:

Users’ individual privacy attitudes and behaviour in practice suggest they have a declined sense of their own freedom and right to privacy. A privacy paradox exists when users, while holding a high level of concerns, in reality do little to further the protection of their personal information on WeChat. We argue that once a user has ingrained part of their social engagement within the WeChat system, the incentive for them to remain a part of the system outweighs their requirement to secure their privacy online as their decision-making is largely based on a simple cost-benefit analysis. The power and social capital yielded via WeChat is too valuable to give up as WeChat is widely used not only for private conversations, but also for study or work-related purposes. It further blurs the boundaries between the public, the professional and the private, which is a rather unique case compared with other social media around the world. (Chen and Cheung 2018, 1)

The omnipresent system of social credit, which for Westerners often evokes associations with Orwell’s society of total control, since it is also directly linked to rewards and punishments, is widely accepted in China, and its implementation has met with little domestic criticism.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, it is also worth noting that since the 2020s, China has begun to pass a series of laws designed to protect individuals’ right to privacy online. Of course, these laws, which many experts believe are far too weak and carry only symbolic weight in practice, will apply only to individuals and companies that trade in digital data, not to the central government, which uses the ubiquitous system to digitally monitor citizens’ “social credibility” (see Wu 2020).

Of course, in principal attitudes towards digital objects in China—and as a tendency across the whole Sinic cultural-linguistic area—differ considerably from Western ones, and this is among other things surely tied to different traditional perceptions of intimacy and privacy.

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11 As mentioned above, surveys show that the system is unconditionally accepted by up to 80% of people in China, while 19% of informants remain neutral and only 1% of respondents are against the introduction of this application for the purpose of social control (Kostka 2019, 1573). It is interesting to note that acceptance is highest among the upper middle and upper classes, the rich and the most highly educated (*ibid.*, 1565).

In classical Chinese we find no term corresponding to intimacy in the original European sense. The closest we find is the term *neizi* (內自), which means “the inner self”. However, we find this term predominantly in Confucian sources, where it takes on an intense moral connotation as a sphere that must be constantly re-examined in the process of cultivating one’s personality (*neizi sheng* 內自省); the situation is similar when it comes to the term *jixin* (己心) which refers to an individual’s “own heart-mind”. This term is used in Confucianism as something that must be self-controlled (*keji* 克己), whereas in Buddhism it is tied to the illusory nature of the Self and therefore practically non-existent.

Nevertheless, a parallel could be drawn between the abovementioned original meaning of *intimus* (i.e., “that which is furthest from the edge” or “the innermost”) and the traditional Chinese word for the self or individual (*shen* 身). In the holistic classical view of the relationship between human beings, society, and the cosmos, this term was understood as the center, which expands in concentric circles to include first the family, then the state, society, and finally the entire cosmos (Zhang 2016, 3). For example, let us examine Mencius’s image of such a concentric order: “The basis of the cosmos is the state, the basis of the state is the family, and the basis of the family is the individual” (*Mengzi* s.d., Li Lou I, 5).<sup>12</sup> This is expressed even more clearly than in Mencius’ quote in *Guanzi*, who describes this concentric order in reverse sequence, saying “The cosmos is the basis of the state, the state is the basis of the districts, the districts are the basis of the families, and the families are the basis of the individuals” (*Guanzi* s.d., Quan Xiu 9).<sup>13</sup> If we are dealing with individuals who are not “ordered” at their core, if their intimacy (i.e., that which is closest to the center, the innermost) is in a chaotic state, we will have a hard time ordering the state and politics (*ibid.*).<sup>14</sup> In this sense, this most central element of the concentrically ordered society—even if it is “that which is furthest from the margin”—is nevertheless not comparable to intimacy, since it is politicized, or at least the object of the desires of those in power to be politicized, ordered, and consequently controlled. A tamed intimacy is admittedly no longer an intimacy, but something else. In this sense, the term *si* (私), which is now translated into English as privacy, might be closer to intimacy than any of the three previously given terms.

This term is much more widespread in Chinese tradition, but it usually has a negative connotation, since nowadays it is mostly used in constructed words expressing

12 天下之本在國，國之本在家，家之本在身。

13 天下者，國之本也；國者，鄉之本也；鄉者，家之本也；家者，人之本也；人者，身之本也；身者，治之本也。

14 有身不治，奚待於人？

selfishness or egoism (*zisi* 自私) and exclusive focus on one's own interests (*zisi zili* 自私自利), hiding something (of one's own) from others (*yinsi* 隱私), smuggling (*zousi* 走私), and so on. Its etymological meaning comes from a character composed of two radicals, the first of which (*he* 禾) represents the ear or seedling of a rice plant and the second (*si* 厶) means privacy in the sense of what one hides from others.<sup>15</sup> According to the *Guangyun* dictionary from the Song and Ming dynasties, one could also infer that—because of the radical *he* 禾 (rice plant)—the whole character *si* 私 also carries the meaning of privacy in the sense of private property, as it is meant to refer to those rice plants that are not allowed to be harvested by others (and thus remain private property of the individual, see *Guangyun* s.d., *Si*, 1). Such a connotation of the word *si* 私, which thus denotes private property, stands in sharp contrast to the word public, *gong* (公), which has in its entire semantic-conceptual development in Sinic regions an almost exclusively positive meaning, since it is based on justice or equal sharing<sup>16</sup> and can denote both a just father, ancestor, or ruler, and the old Confucian socialist idea in which everything under heaven is public and the property of all.<sup>17</sup>

The other radical of the character *si* (私) (the one on the right) has the same pronunciation as the whole character, namely *si* (厶). This component of the character *si* (私) carries connotations of inappropriate sexual relations and debauchery, as defined in the oldest dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi*, as *jianxie* 姦褻, i.e. a word meaning betrayal and deceit, composed of two characters, one signifying adultery and the other provocative dress.

Originally, then, the Chinese understood the concept of privacy as something associated with nefarious secrets. Even in formal dictionaries of legal terms, the word translated as privacy in English, namely *si* 私, is defined as *yinsi* 隱私 and described as a term denoting indecent behavior in public and illicit sexual relations, as in prostitution and adultery, or even pedophilia or rape (Cao 2005, II).

It is not uncommon, therefore, for most people to understand privacy as something not to be talked about in public and not to be revealed. Therefore, when their privacy is threatened and someone tries to invade their private sphere, they

15 This radical (namely, *si* 厶) also occurs in the term comparable to the Western notion of public, namely, the word *gong* 公. According to the dictionary *Shuowen jiezi*, *gong*, which is composed of the radical *si* and a roof or something that covers everything (*ba* 八), represents the opposite of what is expressed by *si*. Here the authors cite Han Feizi, who writes that the word *gong* 公 (i.e., public), meaning the equal division, is opposite (*bei* 背) to the term *si* 厶 (i.e., that which is hidden or forbidden to the public, see *Shuowen jiezi* s.d., 716).

16 The definition of this term in the *Shuowen jiezi* dictionary (Ba bu 516) is as follows: 公: 平分也 (The public is evenly divided).

17 天下為公 (*Li ji* s.d., Li Yun, 1).

tend to ignore it as long as it does not cross tolerable boundaries. As a result, they often resolve such issues themselves rather than in a court of law. Moreover, the privacy protection system in China is still too weak and incomplete. All of this is an obstacle to the establishment of an all-encompassing and efficient protection system in this area (ibid.).

On the other hand, privacy was considered an important virtue even in classical Confucianism. In the Confucian *Analects*, for example, we can read, “Do not look, do not listen, do not say, and do not do what is not in accordance with ritual propriety” (*Lunyu* s.d., Yanyuan 1).<sup>18</sup> In the original Confucianism, it was important that everyone in private only cared about the things that concerned themselves. Rumor mongering and malicious gossip were therefore considered immoral.

Many authors (e.g. Tang and Dong 2006) emphasize other aspects of traditional morality, pointing out that pre-modern Sinic societies never developed the concept of individual privacy because of relational ethics. Instead, privacy was only important in the context of the family, which, as we have seen, was an important and fundamental unit of social ethics.

Thus, the Chinese tend to define *public* and *private* in abstract ethical terms, while the Westerners tend to define them in sociospatial terms. Similarly, members within the Chinese family are clearly differentiated from nonfamily members. Holding back family information from nonfamily members is considered a virtue in the Chinese culture. On the other hand, holding back information from family members, especially from the family head, is considered a violation of family tradition. Hence, privacy in China is not an issue for individuals but an issue for the family. (Tang and Dong 2006, 289)

Such a model of familial privacy is based on the traditional Confucian ethic of relationality or relationalism, which is linked to the paradigm of society or community in relation to the individual, and is to different extents still preserved in most Sinophone societies.

## Conclusion

But irrespectively of our native cultural environments, people on the entire planet were united (perhaps for the first time in history) by the isolation and suspension of normal life in the face of the recent pandemic of Covid-19, which has spread

18 非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。

worldwide between 2020 and 2023. For the first time, we have all found ourselves globally in a position of all-encompassing isolation from social life and thus from the public sphere (see Delakorda Kawashima 2022, 45; Ito-Morales 2022, 69; Picerni 2022, 123). Our privacy has become completely subjectivized, as a merely digital contacts that were the only ones allowed, did not permit closer formation and maintenance of interpersonal bonds, which requires physical contact, whether through work or simply socializing.

In this way, our private sphere has become a prison that cannot replace what happens outside of it and can never perceive the actual reality, which is much more than the sum of individual aspects of life and digital images of our fellow human beings (Sernej 2022, 161). In such situations, everyone is left alone with their own subjectivity, and this paralyzes us in our most intimate human essence, which no longer has access to the “real world”. The latter can only reveal itself to us if the objects in it can be seen, heard and felt by many people from different perspectives, while the identity (or “being”) of these objects does not change. The reality of our common world is then something that can supposedly only be brought about by a kind of common (or equal) “being” of all the people who live in it: for the vital basis of our life is rooted precisely in the fact that, as members of the same community, whether local or global, we speak of the same objects without being prevented from doing so by the differences of our starting positions. A global communication is of course linked to such kind of objectivity, and therefore, we must not lose it.

If we lose this objectivity, if the sameness of these objects can no longer be identified and defined, then nothing will be able to save our common human world, least of all the idea of a supposed “common nature” of all human beings.<sup>19</sup>

The precondition for such an understanding, paradoxical as it may sound, is precisely the diversity of our individual lives and our unique and unrepeatably contributions to objective reality. For the identity (or “being”) of each object, its permanent “sameness” with itself, can only be preserved by being constantly reflected in the mirror of human plurality.

If such a plurality is not possible, each person becomes completely private without even being able to perceive, and more importantly, to understand, what is being

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19 This idea suggests that if we lose our ability to be objective, we will no longer be able to identify and define the sameness of objects in the world. In other words, we will lose our ability to recognize and understand the commonalities that exist between different things. This means that without a shared understanding of the world and its objects, we will be unable to cooperate and work together effectively as a society. This implies that simply believing that all humans share a common nature is not sufficient to create a shared understanding of the world, and that we need objectivity and the ability to identify and define sameness to achieve this.

shown, presented, and spoken by others. In this sense, it makes no difference whether the basic unit of this new privacy is the individual, the family, or the household. This kind of radical privacy does not change in the slightest, even if the same experience is experienced countless times in the consciousness of countless people in countless different ways (Arendt 1998, 58).

To be human is always to be existentially dependent on the plurality and diversity of all the different human perspectives. In this context, it is important to recognize and address the potential dangers that can arise in digital reality. It is crucial that we work to mitigate these dangers by promoting such multiplicity of worldviews, but also by developing critical thinking, and responsible use of technology to ensure that we can harness the power of digital reality while avoiding its pitfalls.

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