

On the subtlety of handling social media accounts of the deceased



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During the Chinese new year holiday, there is a long enshrined ritual, at least in my hometown, to conduct a general cleanup in the home, with the injunction against wielding any broom during the New Year period for fear of inadvertently dissipating the vibes of the God of Fortune.

Or do we also need to conduct a cleanup, or decluttering, in the digital space, particularly with regard to those accounts that have long fallen into disuse, or belonging to those who might have passed away?

I used the conjunctive mood for it is not always easy to be sure.

For instance, I used to have regular correspondence with Mr Chen, an accomplished writer, first through letters, and in later years via WeChat. In early April 2022, he complained of running a “hellish” high fever after being suspected of having contracted the pandemic, and then rushed to hospital. In his last message dated April 21, he wrote: “I have survived nine deaths, and will contact you again when back home.”

He did not reply to my subsequent solicitations and has never been heard of again.

Chen had a Bible and a well kept old copy of the English-Chinese Dictionary in his small bedroom, though he professed to be a “materialist,” in other words, an “atheist” many Chinese would take pride in.

This enlightened outlook in no way interferes with our apprehensions about the afterlife.

Once Confucius was consulted as to

the nature of death, and the sage had to equivocate: “We do not yet know about life, how can we know about death?”

Unlike some Westerners who would make their last will and testament fairly early in life, many Chinese choose to procrastinate, until it is too late.

In the case of Mr Chen, he probably failed to notify his grandchildren as to how to dispose of his digital legacy — the WeChat account.

And a once active but abruptly and permanently dormant WeChat account can be spooky, given the wonted expectation for immediate reply, and the fear of getting one.

It is only today, when I am working on this article, that I mustered enough courage to revisit Chen’s account to ascertain the date of the last message.

Is it possible for a more foresightful individual to take preemptory action?

Well, yes, to a degree.

Lao Liu, a veteran newspaper editor, breathed his last on January 10. On January 12, there appeared a message in his Moments: “Dear my friends and relatives, I breathed my last on January 10, a good riddance to the lingering sickness, and will transcend to the upper sphere at *weishi* (1pm-3pm) today, and thus my farewell to you all!”

A number of people posted their R.I.P messages at the end of this notification.

But of the four acquaintances who had taken leave of this world during the past two years, Liu was the only one to say something about the life/death dichotomy in the otherwise immortal cyberspace with its disorienting lack of a topical perspective: Any old event could be preserved in their pristine

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state ad infinitum, would be recalled at a click, and resurrected at will. The sheer weight of this unfiltered, unmediated and undigested past is encroaching on our present.

Our reluctance to give any instructions regarding the disposal of our worldly goods often lead to needless litigation and contention. The lack of foresight concerning how to deal with our digital footprint is relatively innocuous, but is in need of legal clarification.

Given the ascendancy and predominance of digital communication, some of the most private intimations of ours now exist in the personalized cyberspace, in ruminations, reflections, or confidences in friends in times of frustration or bewilderment. In some cases, it can be a more truthful alter ego.

These revelations go beyond WeChat accounts, including accounts for games, video dramas, or online literature, or

mart.

It is quipped that some young people’s digital assets are not second to their worldly possessions. This is probably no exaggeration, for as they spend more and more time in cyberspace, their life becomes a sort of digital reincarnation that could be somehow pieced together with the myriad digital bits and pieces left behind.

It is reported that in China netizens total more than 1 billion, while the number of deaths for 2023 exceeded 11 million. The proper disposal of their digital assets is already an issue.

There is evidence that the so-called Generation Z appear to confront deaths with more equanimity, as more and more youths begin to make their last will. According to one report, by 2022 the number of those people born since 1990 who had made their last will numbered 1,787, and is rising, though about 20 percent of their legacy concerns their virtual assets, which include social media accounts.

While some prefer to make over their accounts to their children as mementos, some are adamant about deletion, with one observing: “I have little to aspire to in my afterlife, except one wish: That all my social accounts should be exterminated at the click of a button, so that I might die a thorough death.”

There was even a 2018 Japanese film “dele.LIFE” about an agency that could be entrusted with clients’ request to delete all digital data stored away in their accounts in the wake of the clients’ demise. It would be money well spent if you have a clue about the near impossibility of “deleting” anything in the cyberspace at all.