

Family Rituals in Platformized Environments: How WeChat Posts Visually Rearticulate Contemporary Family Traditions

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Abstract

Family rituals such as birthdays, school entry, and seasonal festivals continue to play a central role in sustaining familial belonging and intergenerational continuity. In recent years, however, these ritual moments have increasingly been mediated through social media platforms, where visual records circulate beyond the household and enter semi-public networks. Rather than remaining private commemorations, ritual photographs now participate in everyday digital communication. Focusing on WeChat Moments in contemporary China, this study explores how family rituals are visually articulated through platform-based sharing. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of a small set of ritual-related posts collected in 2024, the study examines how visual composition, captions, and audience responses contribute to the reinterpretation of ritual meaning. The analysis shows that ritual photographs are shaped by expectations of visibility: symbolic elements are foregrounded, emotional narratives are condensed, and interaction from viewers reinforces particular understandings of family roles and tradition. The findings suggest that digital platforms do not simply document family rituals but become part of how rituals acquire social significance. Through visual circulation and public acknowledgment, family rituals are reconfigured as communicative practices that connect domestic tradition with everyday digital publics.

Keywords: Family Ritual, Family Photography, Platformization, Wechat, Chinese Social Media

Introduction

Family rituals have long relied on visual practices to sustain shared memory and a sense of continuity. Photographs taken at birthdays, school entry ceremonies, weddings, or seasonal festivals often function as material traces through which family members recognise their place within a collective history. Traditionally, such images remained embedded in domestic

spaces, circulated within households, or shared selectively among relatives, where their meanings were anchored in familiarity and co-presence(Hirsch, 1997).

This situation has gradually shifted with the widespread use of mobile social media. Family photographs are now frequently posted, viewed, and responded to within platform environments that extend beyond the household. Images of ritual moments appear alongside everyday updates, entertainment, and news, becoming part of routine digital communication rather than exceptional commemorative artefacts.(Abidin, 2016; Boyd, 2010) As a result, family rituals are no longer only remembered; they are increasingly performed and acknowledged through mediated visibility.

Existing scholarship has documented this transformation from multiple perspectives. Studies of family photography emphasise how images construct intimacy, belonging, and intergenerational relations through visual conventions. Research on sharenting and mediated parenting further shows how digital platforms shape parental self-presentation and normative expectations surrounding family life.(Abidin, 2018) While these studies offer valuable insights into what family images represent, they often pay less attention to how platform environments actively shape the conditions under which ritual photographs circulate, attract attention, and acquire social significance.

Platform studies provide a complementary lens by conceptualising social media as socio-technical systems organised around visibility, engagement, and algorithmic sorting(Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). From this perspective, visibility is not simply a consequence of posting but an outcome of infrastructural arrangements that privilege certain forms of content and interaction. Yet within this body of work, ordinary family imagery is rarely examined as an object of analysis. Domestic photographs tend to appear as background examples rather than as sites where platform logics intersect with everyday cultural practices.

Taken together, these strands of research leave an unresolved question: how do family rituals come to matter when they are visually articulated within platformised environments? Rather than focusing solely on symbolic representation or technical visibility, this article approaches family ritual photography as a communicative process shaped by visual composition, posting practices, and audience response. The concept of ritual articulation is used to capture how photographs do not merely depict tradition but participate in its ongoing negotiation through circulation and recognition.

Empirically, the analysis draws on ritual-related posts from WeChat Moments in contemporary China. This context is analytically useful because ritual photography circulates within dense social networks where visibility is relational rather than fully public. The study does not aim to generalise about Chinese families as a cultural whole. Instead, it treats WeChat as a situated platform environment through which the mediated transformation of family rituals can be closely observed.

Two questions guide the discussion. First, how are family rituals visually structured when they are shared through platform interfaces? Second, how do interaction and audience response contribute to the reinterpretation of ritual meaning? Addressing these questions allows the

article to examine family photography not as static documentation, but as a communicative practice through which tradition is visually reworked in everyday digital life.

Literature Review

Family Rituals: Tradition, Domestic Practice and Cultural Continuity

Family rituals occupy a distinctive position in everyday family life because they mark moments where relationships are publicly acknowledged and symbolically stabilised. Events such as birthdays, weddings, or children's school transitions are not only celebrated but also repeatedly framed as meaningful occasions through shared practices. Anthropological discussions of ritual have long emphasised this function, describing ritual as a patterned activity that links individual experience with a sense of collective continuity.(Bell, 1997; Turner et al., 2011)

Photography has become one of the most common means through which such ritual moments are fixed and remembered. Within families, photographs do not simply record what happened; they help organise how events are later recalled and narrated. Hirsch (1997) observes that family images allow memories to circulate across generations, while Kuhn (2002) points out that their significance often emerges through repeated viewing and storytelling rather than through visual content alone. (Hirsch, 1997; Kuhn, 2002)In this sense, ritual photographs operate less as neutral documents than as prompts for shared interpretation.

Ritual imagery also relies on visual repetition. Posed arrangements, symbolic objects, and familiar gestures contribute to recognisable patterns that render family traditions visually legible. As Rose (2010) notes, domestic photography frequently draws on established visual conventions that help normalise particular ideas of family life.(Rose, 2010) Through repetition, these conventions lend ritual images a sense of continuity, even when social circumstances change.

Digital media have begun to alter how ritual memory is sustained. Rather than remaining in albums or private archives, ritual photographs increasingly circulate through everyday communication platforms. Van House argues that digital photography prioritises sharing and response over long-term preservation, shifting attention from storage to interaction. Ritual images therefore become part of ongoing relational exchange rather than retrospective commemoration.

This shift suggests that ritual memory is no longer produced solely through preservation but through circulation. Images acquire significance when they are posted, noticed, and responded to by others, embedding ritual moments within everyday communicative flows. Yet much existing research continues to approach ritual photography primarily as representational material. Less attention has been paid to how ritual meaning is actively shaped by the conditions of mediated visibility under which these images are shared. Addressing this gap requires examining ritual photographs not only as cultural symbols, but as communicative practices situated within platform environments.

Digital Family Practices and Platformization

Family rituals have traditionally depended on co-presence and shared participation for their social recognition. In platform environments, however, ritual moments are encountered under conditions of mediated visibility shaped by interface design, algorithmic ordering, and engagement metrics. Visibility in this context is not simply about being seen, but about how images are circulated, ranked, and sustained within everyday feeds.

Platform studies emphasise that visibility is unevenly distributed. Content gains prominence through interaction and responsiveness rather than intrinsic significance alone (van Dijck et al., 2018). When ritual photographs enter such systems, moments valued within families are repositioned within infrastructures that privilege attention and participation. A birthday or festival image becomes visible not only through posting, but through the responses it elicits. This shift alters how ritual recognition operates. Offline, recognition is largely confined to those physically present or closely involved. On platforms, recognition extends across wider relational networks, where responses function as visible acknowledgements of relational value. As boyd (2010) argues, networked publics collapse diverse audiences into shared spaces, making acts of sharing simultaneously intimate and socially legible. (Boyd, 2010) Ritual photographs thus become sites where family roles and relationships are publicly affirmed.

Interaction is central to this process. Comments and reactions do not merely register approval; they shape interpretation. Feedback translates affective responses into signals that influence further circulation, linking recognition to visibility (Bucher, 2018). In the context of family rituals, congratulatory comments or moral affirmations contribute to shared understandings of what a ritual signifies.

Over time, platformized visibility may also recalibrate expectations of ritual display. Images that attract engagement become more prominent, subtly shaping how ritual moments are visually articulated. This does not imply strategic calculation in every instance, but suggests that users orient their sharing practices toward anticipated audiences. Ritual recognition, in this sense, becomes intertwined with the conditions of mediated visibility rather than remaining solely grounded in domestic participation.

Visual Photography and Communicative Meaning

Photography has long been understood as a medium through which meaning is visually organised rather than passively recorded. In family contexts, photographs do not simply show relationships; they participate in shaping how relationships are recognised and remembered. Visual rhetoric scholarship emphasises that images propose particular readings through composition, framing, and the arrangement of bodies and objects, guiding viewers toward certain interpretations while obscuring others (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Within ritual settings, these visual strategies become especially pronounced. Group positioning, bodily proximity, and the use of symbolic elements—such as cakes, school uniforms, or festive decorations—work together to signal what kind of event is being marked and why it matters. Such conventions allow ritual photographs to be quickly legible, even to viewers who were not present at the event. Meaning, in this sense, is not located solely in the image itself but emerges through shared visual literacy.

Recent work in visual communication increasingly treats photographs not as fixed representations but as communicative actions embedded in social practice. From this perspective, images gain significance through practices of showing, viewing, and responding, rather than through visual content alone. This approach is particularly relevant in digital environments, where photographs rarely circulate in isolation but appear alongside captions, reactions, and comments that actively shape interpretation.

In platform contexts, visual meaning is therefore co-produced. Captions may foreground emotional tone or moral evaluation, while audience responses can redirect attention toward particular aspects of an image. A ritual photograph initially framed as a celebration may be reinterpreted through comments that emphasise parental effort, intergenerational responsibility, or family cohesion. Visual meaning thus unfolds across interactional sequences rather than remaining fixed at the moment of capture.

This communicative dimension complicates earlier accounts of family photography that privilege symbolism or memory alone. While ritual images continue to draw on established visual conventions, their significance increasingly depends on how they circulate and are taken up by others. Van House (2011) notes that digital photography foregrounds social connection over archival permanence, suggesting that meaning is sustained through engagement rather than preservation.

Understanding ritual photography as communicative practice helps explain why visual articulation matters in platformised environments. Photographs are not only records of ritual moments; they are invitations to recognition, interpretation, and response. Through this process, visual form becomes a key mechanism through which ritual meaning is negotiated, affirmed, or subtly reshaped within everyday digital communication.

Research Gaps and Analytical Positioning

Existing research provides rich insights into family photography, platform visibility, and visual communication, yet these strands often remain analytically separated. Studies of family imagery tend to privilege representation and symbolism, focusing on what photographs depict and how they reflect familial values. Platform-oriented research, by contrast, examines visibility, circulation, and algorithmic governance, but rarely attends to the mundane visual content through which these processes operate. As a result, the communicative work performed by ordinary family photographs—especially those tied to ritual moments—remains under-examined.

One limitation of current scholarship lies in how meaning is located. Visual meaning is frequently treated as inherent to the image or as a reflection of cultural norms, while the sequential processes through which images become meaningful are left implicit. Similarly, platform studies often conceptualise visibility as a technical outcome, rather than as something produced through everyday practices of posting, responding, and recognition. This division obscures how visual meaning and platform visibility are mutually constituted in routine digital interaction.

Research on sharenting and digital family display has begun to address the circulation of intimate imagery, but it typically foregrounds ethical concerns, parental motivation, or

children's rights. While these perspectives are important, they offer limited analytical tools for understanding how family photographs function communicatively once they enter platform environments. In particular, little attention has been paid to how ritual photographs operate as shared reference points through which family traditions are publicly affirmed, negotiated, or rearticulated.

This study addresses these gaps by approaching family ritual photography as a communicative practice situated within platformised environments. Rather than analysing images as isolated representations, it examines how visual staging, posting practices, and audience responses interact to produce meaning over time. By focusing on recognisable ritual moments—such as festivals, birthdays, and school transitions—the analysis grounds abstract discussions of visibility in concrete, repeatable practices.

Positioned at the intersection of visual rhetoric, family studies, and platform research, the study does not seek to generalise cultural norms or platform effects. Instead, it offers a process-oriented account of how family rituals are visually articulated and socially recognised through everyday digital practices. This positioning allows the analysis to remain empirically grounded while contributing to broader discussions of visual communication and digital intimacy.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore how family ritual photographs are produced and circulated on digital platforms. Rather than treating images as isolated objects, the analysis focuses on the communicative and symbolic processes through which rituals are visually articulated, shared, and made meaningful online. A qualitative orientation is appropriate because the purpose is not to quantify posting frequency, but to understand how platform conditions influence visual choices and ritual interpretation in everyday contexts. (Pink, 2020)

Data Sources and Platform Context

The empirical material comes from WeChat Moments, which remains one of the most common spaces for documenting everyday family life in China's digital environment. Moments is particularly suited for studying ritual photography because it merges private communication with semi-public visibility: family members, relatives, colleagues, and acquaintances often occupy the same viewing space. This hybrid audience encourages users to treat ritual occasions—not just daily moments—as worthy of recording and sharing.

The study focuses on visually explicit ritual events such as birthdays, Lunar New Year gatherings, or children's school commencements. These occasions combine embodied tradition with contemporary forms of digital self-presentation, and therefore provide a visible entry point for analysing how ritual meaning is reproduced and negotiated through platform sharing.

Sampling Strategy

The dataset consists of 30 family-ritual photographs collected in 2024. The photographs were selected through purposive browsing, combined with snowball navigation along platform timelines. Sampling was guided by three practical criteria:

1. Ritual occasion is visible (e.g., symbolic objects such as candles or festival decorations).
2. At least two generations appear, or are referenced visually or textually.
3. The post includes some form of interaction, such as likes or brief comments.

The sample is intentionally modest. The purpose is not statistical generalization, but close observation of how ritual meaning emerges through posting practices and audience responses. A smaller dataset makes it possible to examine visual features, captions, and interaction sequences with sufficient interpretive depth.

Analytical Procedures

Each post was saved as a screenshot and accompanied by notes describing visual elements (e.g., composition, gesture, objects), textual framing (captions, emojis), and visible interaction. These notes were reviewed repeatedly in order to identify recurring patterns across the dataset.

The analysis followed three steps:

- first, identifying visual cues that signify ritual performance;
- second, examining how captions, comments, and emojis frame the ritual as meaningful;
- third, interpreting how these elements relate to broader cultural understandings of family and tradition.

This iterative reading helped reveal not only what rituals look like online, but how platform sharing actively shapes their meaning.

Ethics and Privacy

All material was collected from publicly visible accounts, and no attempts were made to access closed or private spaces. Personal names and identifying details were removed or anonymized to protect privacy. Visual content was described in text rather than reproduced, in line with ethical practices for online image research that emphasize anonymization and participant privacy when working with social media data. (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Taylor et al., 2023)

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, WeChat represents only one segment of China's digital landscape; other platforms (e.g., Douyin or Little Red Book) may encourage different ritual aesthetics and different interaction styles. Second, the dataset reflects posts that happened to be visible to the researcher, and therefore may not capture less visible or more private ritual practices. A larger comparative study would be needed to address these dimensions. Nevertheless, the present material is adequate for illustrating how ritual photography becomes a site of cultural negotiation under platform conditions.

Analysis: Visual Rearticulation of Family Rituals on WeChat

This section examines how family rituals are visually articulated through everyday photographic practices on WeChat Moments. Rather than treating ritual images as symbolic representations alone, the analysis focuses on how ritual meaning is reworked through visual composition, posting conventions, and interactional cues. Across the dataset, ritual photography does not simply reproduce inherited traditions; instead, it adapts ritual forms to platform-specific modes of visibility and address.

Ritual Visibility and the Selection of “Photographable” Moments

The first pattern concerns which ritual moments are made visible. Across the sample, not all aspects of family rituals are photographed or shared. Posts tend to focus on visually legible moments—cake cutting, group posing, symbolic objects such as red envelopes or school uniforms—while less visually expressive practices remain undocumented. Ritual visibility is therefore selective rather than comprehensive.

For example, birthday posts frequently centre on the moment when candles are lit or blown out, even when the celebration itself extends over a longer period. Similarly, Lunar New Year images privilege scenes of collective presence—group photos, shared meals, or the display of festive decorations—rather than ritual preparation or aftermath. These choices suggest that platform visibility encourages families to foreground moments that can be easily recognised by viewers as “ritual” without requiring contextual explanation.

Such selectivity aligns with the visual economy of social media, where images must be immediately intelligible within a scrolling environment. Ritual photography on WeChat thus privileges recognisability over completeness, reshaping ritual practice into a series of visually concise moments.

Visual Simplification and the Aestheticisation of Ritual

A second pattern involves the visual simplification of ritual scenes. Many photographs reduce complex ritual settings into clean, aesthetically balanced compositions. Visual clutter is often minimised, and attention is directed toward a small number of symbolic elements—cakes, gifts, banners, or coordinated clothing.

This aestheticisation does not eliminate ritual meaning; rather, it reframes ritual as a visually pleasing event suited for display. In children’s school-related rituals, for instance, uniforms, certificates, or school gates frequently function as central visual anchors. The ritual significance of education is condensed into a single object or setting that signals achievement and transition.

Such visual strategies suggest that ritual photography on platforms operates under dual pressures: maintaining cultural recognisability while conforming to platform-oriented aesthetics. Ritual meaning is therefore stabilised through visual reduction, making it easier for viewers to interpret and respond.

Captions and Minimal Narration of Ritual Meaning

Captions play a supporting but restrained role in ritual posts. Most captions in the dataset are brief, often consisting of a short phrase (“Growing up so fast,” “Another birthday,” “First day at school”) or a small number of emojis. Extended narrative explanations are rare.

This minimal narration places greater interpretive weight on the image itself. Captions tend to frame the photograph affectively rather than descriptively, signalling emotional orientation rather than providing detailed context. In this sense, captions function as cues that guide viewers toward a shared understanding of ritual significance without spelling it out.

The restraint observed in captioning reflects an assumption of shared cultural knowledge. Ritual meaning is treated as self-evident, requiring only light textual reinforcement. Platform communication thus supports a mode of ritual expression that is visually led and textually economical.

Interaction as Affirmation Rather Than Interpretation

Interaction surrounding ritual posts is generally affirmational. Likes and brief comments such as “So happy,” “Congratulations,” or “So meaningful” dominate the responses. These interactions rarely challenge or reinterpret the ritual meaning proposed by the post; instead, they reinforce it.

The function of interaction here is not debate or discussion, but recognition. Through likes and short comments, viewers collectively acknowledge the ritual moment and validate its emotional significance. This process transforms ritual photography into a shared social event, even when interaction remains minimal.

Importantly, the presence of interaction also affects visibility. Posts that receive prompt engagement tend to remain visible for longer within Moments feeds, increasing their exposure. Ritual photography thus gains significance not only through visual content, but through its capacity to attract and sustain light forms of social recognition.

Ritual as Platform-Compatible Family Practice

Taken together—but without assuming uniformity—the analysis shows that family rituals on WeChat are neither preserved unchanged nor fully transformed. Instead, they are rearticulated through platform-compatible practices. Rituals are condensed into visually recognisable moments, aesthetically simplified, minimally narrated, and socially affirmed through interaction.

In this process, family photography becomes a practical mechanism through which tradition is maintained under contemporary media conditions. Ritual meaning persists, but it does so by adapting to the rhythms and expectations of platform visibility. What emerges is not a loss of ritual, but a reconfiguration of how ritual is seen, shared, and acknowledged in everyday digital life.

Discussion

The findings indicate that digital platforms have not displaced family rituals, but have altered the ways in which they are expressed and recognised. Ritual practices continue to appear through familiar visual forms—birthday cakes, school gates, Lunar New Year meals—but their significance now unfolds through an additional communicative layer of posting, reacting, and being seen. Rather than simply documenting offline events, platforms encourage families to anticipate how rituals should appear once shared, subtly shaping how those rituals are enacted in the first place.

This dynamic is particularly evident in rituals centred on children. Events such as birthdays or school commencements are not only celebrated within the household; they are also expected to be shared online. The act of posting becomes a parallel moment of recognition, and the responses it receives contribute to the emotional framing of the occasion. In everyday

practice, families appear to treat platform feedback as an extension of the ritual experience. A brief comment from a colleague or a “like” from a distant relative may not define the ceremony, but it adds a layer of social acknowledgement that once relied more heavily on physical presence.

At the same time, some ritual moments attract disproportionate attention. Child-related posts tend to generate higher engagement, pointing to a broader preference for narratives of growth and continuity. While this pattern is not exclusive to China, its resonance is amplified in a cultural context where intergenerational responsibility and future-oriented family narratives carry particular weight. The circulation of ritual images online thus reinforces the idea that family identity is closely tied to children’s development and anticipated futures.

The visual form of tradition also deserves attention. When families place grandparents in central positions or foreground ritual objects, they often draw on established cultural conventions. Yet repetition in digital space does more than reflect tradition; it sustains it. Platform photography functions as a maintenance mechanism through which ritual knowledge is preserved, normalised, and made available for future reference. Over time, such visual archives may shape how younger generations come to recognise what “counts” as family tradition.

Digital mediation, however, does not produce uniformity. Filters, emojis, casual captions, and light humour introduce flexibility into ritual expression, softening ceremonial tones without erasing their significance. These stylistic adjustments reflect adaptation rather than decline. Ritual meaning remains intact, but it is communicated in forms aligned with contemporary visual and communicative norms.

A further implication concerns audience orientation. When a family ritual is shared online, it is no longer addressed solely to those physically present. The presence of a semi-public audience encourages a degree of performative articulation, even if families do not consciously separate private and public viewers. Authenticity, in this context, is not diminished; it is demonstrated through visibility and recognition rather than secluded intimacy.

What emerges is not a weakening of ritual culture, but a shift in its communicative foundation. Ritual meaning continues to rely on shared symbols, yet its social legitimacy increasingly depends on acknowledgement across digital networks. Platforms thus operate as secondary ritual spaces—less formal than domestic settings, but deeply embedded in how family identity is enacted, recognised, and sustained in everyday life.

Conclusion

This study has examined how family ritual photographs acquire meaning within platformised environments. Rather than treating domestic images as static representations of intimacy or tradition, the analysis has shown that ritual meaning emerges through a sequence of communicative actions, including visual staging, posting, audience response, and algorithmic circulation. In this sense, digital platforms do not replace family rituals, but become embedded in how rituals are enacted, recognised, and remembered.

The findings suggest that posting ritual photographs has become an integral part of ritual practice itself. Events such as birthdays, school transitions, or festival gatherings are no longer confined to the moment of co-presence; they are extended through circulation and public witnessing. Responses from relatives, friends, and acquaintances—likes, brief comments, or emojis—do not merely accompany the ritual but help shape its emotional tone and social significance. Ritual meaning therefore unfolds not only in domestic space but also across platform interfaces where visibility and recognition are negotiated.

At the same time, the analysis highlights how platforms encourage particular visual forms of ritual expression. Images that foreground children, intergenerational togetherness, and emotionally affirmative scenes are more likely to circulate and receive recognition. While these patterns draw on long-standing cultural scripts, their repetition within platform environments stabilises certain visual conventions of family life. Digital photography thus functions less as a disruption of tradition than as a mechanism through which ritual forms are selectively maintained and made visible over time.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis is based on a qualitative sample of publicly visible posts and does not capture ritual practices shared in private chats or closed groups. Nor does it include participants' own reflections on posting decisions or perceptions of visibility. Future research could address these dimensions through interviews, ethnographic methods, or comparative studies across different platforms and cultural contexts.

Overall, the study demonstrates that family rituals in digital environments are shaped not only by cultural tradition but also by platform-mediated visibility. Ordinary photographs, once confined to domestic albums, now participate in wider communicative processes through which family identity, continuity, and intimacy are publicly negotiated.

Theoretical and Contextual Contributions

This study makes both theoretical and contextual contributions to research on family photography, digital rituals, and platform-mediated intimacy. Theoretically, it shifts attention from representational interpretations of family images toward the communicative processes through which ritual photographs become meaningful in platform environments. By conceptualising family photographs as ritual actions enacted through visual staging, circulation, and recognition, the study extends existing work on family photography beyond questions of symbolism or memory to include visibility, interaction, and infrastructural mediation. This process-oriented perspective helps bridge research on visual rhetoric, ritual practice, and platform studies.

Contextually, the study offers an empirically grounded account of how everyday family rituals are rearticulated within contemporary Chinese platform environments. Rather than treating Chinese family practices as culturally representative, the analysis demonstrates how dense social networks and routine platform use make ritual visibility an integral part of family life. This focus illustrates how platforms participate in the stabilisation and negotiation of family traditions through everyday posting practices. The findings therefore contribute to existing knowledge by showing how platform-mediated visibility shapes the contemporary experience

of family rituals, while providing a conceptual framework that can be applied to other cultural and platform contexts.

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