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Mark Dixon

Me, my selfie and I: A visitor's view of city

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FOREIGN VIEWS

I NEVER liked selfies, neither taking them, nor seeing them being taken, nor receiving them.

The true vanity of human beings is exposed by the pictures they take — it has become all about me, myself and I. Indeed, a selfie should really be called a selfishie. Fed up with this increasingly selfish environment in Europe, I flew to Shanghai. There I discovered the selfie has been taken to further extremes. What is a disease in Europe has become an epidemic in China.

No one at all is taking pictures of others. The smartphone hardly needs the button that switches from front to back lens — it should just point inwards. I went to a cafe. Three young women sat down for tea. Not a word passed between them. They ordered their cakes and started communicating on their smartphones. Each was taking herself. Not a single picture of one another, and apparently no shame either. They then started taking pictures of the cakes — but their own cakes, not each other's. They were taking food selfies. These were then posted on WeChat. Not a word passed between their lips, but herselfies and itselfies were flying around the Internet.

A photo of someone else has become so rare that we now need a new word, the unselfie. It's a sad day indeed when society's behavior forces language to be turned inside out like the lens of a camera. Things got worse. Sitting around the dinner table, a Chinese friend opposite held up her smartphone to take a picture. In turn, I put my arm around my neighbor and pulled her closer. Only then did we notice that the people on the other side were also pulling closer.

"Why on earth are you posing?" the photographer asked. "We're taking a selfie!" It was in that moment that I realized there's one thing more vain than posing for your own selfie, and that is posing for a someoneelse.

WeChat gone wild

Stung with embarrassment, I hit back: "It seems you've forgotten how to take a selflessie." But, because she was in fact taking an ourselfie, I wasn't on the strongest ground.

WeChat seems to be the way people communicate now in Shanghai — they don't look at each other, don't talk to each other, and don't even phone each other. I decided to sign up. The language is often pictorial and if you join friends into a group anything someone posts gets broadcast to the rest.

I finally wrote back to the whole gang, "Guys, please, I really can't look at one more yourselfie today." Indeed, the problem is selfie-perpetuating because someone posts her herselfie in a competitive sort of way — no doubt with a round of selfie-applause — only

to find her friend has replied within a nanosecond with an image prettier than the last, which of course is interpreted as nothing less than throwing down the gauntlet.

I even received a selfie which a woman had taken of her face in the mirror, having had to turn the lens inside out to its old-fashioned position. I call this type of photo a selfie-redundant.

Selfies also create confusion in the ability of human beings to recognize each other. There are so many unlikeherselfies out there that I wonder if the cosmetics industry is behind the trend, and if it's not make-up that makes a person look like her unlikeherselfie then it's probably the angle selfie technique. Some images are totally selfie-contradictory. My complaint is not just that people are having these virtual relationships but that, if they ever meet, they probably won't recognize each other.

To understand the moral hierarchy it's necessary to dip into the psychology of selfies. Some know how ridiculous they look when they take a photo of themselves — these are the selfie-aware. They are selfie-conscious or even exhibit selfie-doubt. These are the ones I most respect, or, at least, least disrespect.

My first selfie

By contrast there are those who are totally selfie-assured, selfie-satisfied and selfie-important. Then there are those who use selfies as a tool for selfie-promotion and selfie-advancement.

Then there are those who get selfie-help. They take pictures of themselves for only personal consumption, and it does seem to make them feel better.

Finally comes my favorite category, the selfie-deprecating. At least these have a sense of humour as they try to take bad photographs of themselves and then broadcast them to their friends. I need to meet more people like them.

In a state of total selfie shock from this selfie-regulatory system which clearly isn't working, I returned to Europe, relieved to be out of 'selfie city' and hoping I would never hear the s-word again. Walking down the street in London, WeChat kicked in on my iPhone. My new virtual world was still with me, watching, sharing images, and for a moment I almost forgot where I was.

"Are you back in London?" Someone asked.

It seemed so natural to do what I then did. I pressed the little plus sign beside the reply box, clicked on the camera symbol, flipped the lens toward myself standing in a London street, and two clicks later I had answered the question with a thousand words.

I had in that instant taken and broadcast my first selfie.

And it felt ... so, so good!

The author is a British freelancer who lives between London, Paris and Shanghai.

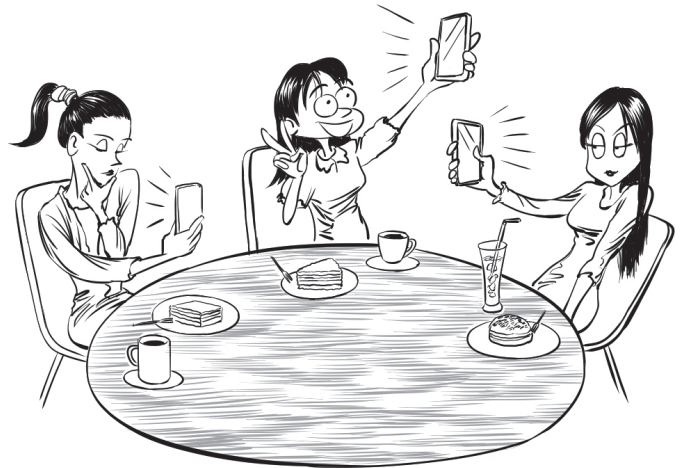


Illustration by Zhou Tao/Shanghai Daily



Three young women sat down for tea. They didn't say a word to each other. They ordered their cakes and then started communicating on their smartphones. Each was taking herself. They didn't take a single picture of each other, nor apparently felt any shame in not doing so.

A Selfish Language

<i>Selfishie</i>	A more honest word for a selfie
<i>Herselfie</i>	Female self-portrait
<i>Food selfie</i>	Photo of my own food, mine, mine, mine
<i>Itselfie</i>	Photo of an inanimate object owned by the photographer
<i>Himselfie</i>	Male self-portrait
<i>Unselfie</i>	Photo of someone else
<i>Someoneelse</i>	When you erroneously pose for a camera that's pointed in the direction of someone else
<i>Selflessie</i>	Another word for an unselfie, to emphasize its virtue
<i>Ourselvie</i>	Group self-portrait
<i>Yourselvie</i>	What someone else's selfie is to you
<i>Selfieregulatory</i>	The current system where there are no laws limiting the amount of time society wastes taking and posting selfies