New Media and Nongmingong's New Identity

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ABSTRACT This paper aims to analyze the communication and application of Internet chatting (mainly QQ) in the *Nongmingong* Group by anthropological methods and fieldwork. By using the case study and participant observation of the You-county taxi drivers (who are all originally from Hunan province) in Shenzhen city of Guangdong province, this paper discovers that the spread of a new medium in the *Nongmingong* group has obeyed the power laws that it represents by a series of internet characteristics of a complicated topological structure. Based on participant observation, the researchers found that the new medium has become a tool for *Nongmingong* to build their vocational network in a familiar working place. It has carried out a battery of functions including information exchange and delivery of social capital beyond the limitation of the compression of time and space. This paper concludes that a *Nongmingong* individual has chosen to join the modern society positively and accomplish the modernized construction of their community by using the tool of new medium during the great transformation age.

INTRODUCTION

According to the data from the State Statistical Bureau, the total number of *Nongmingong* in China is 242 million; 153 million of which have migrated from their hometown to work in other cities, and the rest of them (89 million) were employed locally. *Nongmingong* is both a vocation and a kind of identity that this word highlights not only their rural household, but also the fact that they make their living the non-agricultural way in the city. *Nongmingong*'s migration from rural to urban has long been the main focus of academia. Scholars carry out their analysis in two dimensions: 1) the life and work of those *nongmingong* in the city, and 2) the present situation of rural areas.

The former studies show that *nongmingong* would use different communication tools and new mediums depending on the change of atmosphere by the accelerating industry. With the development of the information age, the usage of new the medium has started to get involved and even embedded into *nongmingong's* everyday life. In the early 1990s, *nongmingong*s used cell phones and fixed telephones to stay in contact with their relatives and friends in the hometown; they not only inform them about their safety, but also broaden their fellows' vision about the vocation opportunity and business news, which urged more and more rural-household people to migrate into the city for work. Communication medium becomes an essential tool for con-

structing and maintaining *nongmingong's* identity. In this way, the progression in medium technology constantly helps them to obtain the information, social capital and convenience of interpersonal interaction under the crude life situation of limited time and space.

Regrettably, however, few scholars have paid attention to inter-field research about how *nongmingong* uses new media to build their cyber social network. This research not only carries out a thick description about the usage of new media among *nongmingong* group, but also provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between *nongmingong's* cyber life and social network in the real world. The researchers illustrate the entire transformation of how *nongmingong* reinforce their original social network by new media, how they use new media to introduce more and more fellows to migrate into cities for working, and how they accumulate their social capital by new media to build a new social network based on vocational fields.

Core Concept:
New Medium, Modernity and Social Capital

The communication medium centered on the Internet is called the fourth medium, as a different category from print media, broadcast and television. The academic interests of many foreign scholars have transferred from the characteristics of media (Huberman 2009) to the field of media and society, such as media and social or-

ganizational structure, social mobility and strat-ification, and national identity constructed by media (Turkle 1995; Castells 2007). The role and effect of immediate communication software, like Skype and MSN, in a series of social occasions of interpersonal interactions and business de-velopment have been fully discussed as well (Bodomo 2009). Studying immediate communi-cation software, Chinese scholars mainly pay at-tention to the technology of software and its application on communication in different groups (Zhang 2008; Xie 2010; Yang 2010). However, these kinds of studies only pay attention to the application of immediate communication software (QQ) in some specific fields, such as education and entertainment. In this way, during this age of great transformation, what the role of commu-nication software is in this country, how it affects the different classes, and how it participates into the life construction of these different classes, are worth thinking about and investigating.

The immediate communication tool like QQ belongs to the new medium or the fourth medi-um of Internet communication. Since the birth of the Internet, there are a large number of studies investigating what effects it would have on peo-ple, what is the implication of the information age, how people's real life would change. After Castells started to use the concept "Information Age", a lot of global Internet-style cyber bios and complicated digital organisms have occu-pied our lives. The logic of the Internet world constructs the new social forms in the present. In this social context, the Internet is a kind of social organization constituted by decentralized social groups sharing the same interest or hob-bies (for example, politics, economics, and cul-ture). They have interactive relationships that provide help and support multi-dimensionally by information sharing. According to Castells' the-ory, the factors constructing and forming the Internet turn to be the key processes of produc-tion, experience, power and culture during the information age. The primary steps of an infor-mationalized society historically put self-identi-ty as the chief organizational rules of the Inter-net civilization. Self-identity indicates the self-recognizing and self-constructing process of social activists. They are a suite of natures, based on established culture attributes, without refer-ring to the other special features of social struc-ture, which might be more wide and broad (Cas-tells 2007: 26).

Compression of time and space aim to focus on how capitalist development accelerates the progress of a global society and what kinds of asynchronism it brings to movement and time. The construction of modern society depends largely on the compression of geological distance and time. Internet erases the geological differ-ence furthermore as people can contact anyone at anytime in the world by video and text com-munication (Harvery 1991).

Since the birth of Internet, the opinions of scholars vary. Some scholars assume the Inter-net is a kind of modern utopia and they are more oriented to be positive to its broad social effects. However, some other scholars seem more nega-tive about the effects the Internet brings to the world and they point out that the Internet iso-lates people and makes them depressed. Theo-retically, Internet can be used by anyone in the world, but it still can be categorized for devel-oped countries and developing countries as it closes off many channels of communication be-tween different national, cultural and identity groups. Some research on the digital device il-lustrates that minority or disadvantaged groups are largely restrained in obtaining, understand-ing and using it because of their social environ-ment. *Nongmingong* group is always regarded as the disadvantaged group, even when they started using this new medium. But this study shows that, instead of understanding and using the new medium passively, *Nongmingong* group would be actively embracing the tool for inter-personal interacting, obtaining information and accumulating their social capital.

METHODOLOGY

The main method used for this research is anthropological fieldwork of business ethnog-raphy (Tian et al. 2013; Tian 2010). As a qualita-tive research, the researchers to collect basic data frequently use unstructured interviews, focus groups and participated observations. For on-line part, which is considered difficult to count digital data, the researchers write down every sentence that the informants say to their friends by QQ. For the offline part, the researchers did not take notes when engaged in informants' ac-tivities. Rather, daily summaries and brief reports were the major field notes taken throughout the whole process of fieldwork. Published materials, however, government reports, newspapers, mag-

azines and documents were also collected if possible and made available during the fieldwork.

You-county taxi drivers in Shenzhen are the protagonists both in the research and this paper. Following classical ethnographical method, the researchers chose one village as the field site to enter their ordinary world. The Shixia village, this paper discusses, was formed during the urbanization process of historical reform and development in the Futian district of Shenzhen. Shixia village is a typical community in urban village, which is located in the political center of Futian district, close to Futian government and party committee office. Regardless of whether they were former farmers or not, You-county taxi drivers construct their urban lives with a famous label or stigma, *Nongmingong*, and within new media.

RESULTS

By investigating how the *nongmingong* group as an immediate communication tool uses QQ, this paper proves that, the usage of new medium by *nongmingong* follows the rule of power laws, and it represents a series of complicated network characteristics of topological structure. Based on the qualitative interviews on the job-hunting process of You-county taxi drivers who have migrated from Hunan to Shenzhen for work, the researchers find that QQ is widely accepted and frequently used for contacting family members and friends because of its low cost. The change of working place does not affect *nongmingong*'s family chain, although they have left their hometown. It seems to represent the main characteristic of "compression of time and space" in a postmodern society. In this age of great transformation in China, *Nongmingong* starts to use this new medium tool so positively that it reflects how they motivate their conscious activity to participate with the modern society forwardly. By using new medium tools, they obtain so much information to connect the urban life with their hometown world.

Historical Background

People in You-county of Hunan province left the rural village since the reform and open policy from 1978 and accomplished a series of vocational and social identity transformations from peasants in You-county to taxi drivers in Shen-

zhen. Xinzhong, which has been administrated by Zhuzhou Government, is a small village dependent on crop farming and livestock breeding but lacking coal and sightseeing resources, which the other towns and villages of You-county possess. Xinzhong village, as one of twenty-two villages of Xinshi, has a neat and orderly urban plan and standardized roads connecting all areas of the village. Furthermore, there are fields of ripe paddy in farmlands and all of them belong to a promotion project of agricultural production technology. Since the implementation of reform and open policy, people in Xinzhong were the earliest crowd of labor for transporting live pigs. But up to this day, the chief source of income of Xinzhong's families has been the money which is earned by their migrant labors working in the other cities; and most of this migrant money comes from the income of You-county taxi drivers in Shenzhen.

In March 1979, China's authority and Guangdong government decided to upgrade Bao'an-county to Shenzhen city. This new city has been administrated both by the Guangdong government and Huiyang city. In November, the Guangdong government decided to upgrade Shenzhen from a secondary city to first-level city. In May 1980, China's authority and the state council set Shenzhen as a "Special Economic Zone" and Shenzhen was endowed with policy support to develop its economy. Till the end of August 2005, the regular residents in Shenzhen accounted to 10 million, including 1.65 million household residents and more than 8 million non-household residents (Yin 2005). All vehicles in Shenzhen, including bus, minibus, taxi and subway, carried about 1.56 billion people during the year of 2005. Between these four ways of public transport, the buses take sixty-five percent of the volume, minibus fifteen percent, taxi sixteen percent and subway four percent. In 2005, there were 6,091 buses, 2,312 minibuses, and 10,300 taxies in total. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the non-local taxi drivers, especially You-county taxi drivers, have begun to migrate into Shenzhen. Until now, You-county taxi drivers have occupied eighty to ninety percent. The first golden age for You-county taxi drivers matched with the time of rapid development in Shenzhen in 1992. The market requirement also led to the large-scale immigration of You-county people. It has been well known that You-county people are good at driving; they can drive, and handle long-distance

business. They learned these qualities from their experience with form transportation of livestock pigs.

In 1998, the labor bureau staff of You-county visited and investigated Shenzhen, and then signed a labor-export contract with the Shenzhen Public Transportation Company (the predecessor of Shenzhen Public Transportation Group). In August 2008, the labor bureau dispatched one commissioner to organize 38 drivers to take coaching for working in Shenzhen (You-county Archives Bureau 2004:336).

The quotation above is the earliest record about You-county taxi drivers in Shenzhen in government documents. A large amount of *Liudongrenkou* decided to live in the urban village when they arrived in Shenzhen. You-county taxi drivers are no exceptions.

The Compression of Time and Space and Virtual Reality

The immediate communication software like QQ, make *nongmingong* groups in different places break the restriction of time, space and location to keep contact with their hometown community. "Empty Time" and "Empty Space", discussed in sociologist Anthony Giddens' *The Consequences of Modernity (1991)*, are the prerequisites of modernization. In pre-modern society, the time and space things happening are coincidental; the space dimension of social life is dominated by "presence", and the interactive situation is dependent on face-to-face. In Giddens' opinion, the process of modernization is gradually stripping time and space from regional communities, at the same time modernity connects different regional communities by capital flows.

Although You-county labors work in Shenzhen for the taxi business, they use QQ to keep in touch with their family members and friends, including features like video chatting, which synchronizes video and audio, and helps them overcome the restrictions posed by time and space. It is also one of the most essential characteristics of the compression of time and space. For a long time, one critique about the transfer of rural labors is the lack of custody over rural children because their parents (labors) go to the city to earn an income and leave grandparents to take care of children. In the past, these children could only communicate with their parents by tele-

phone, which did not include seeing each other. For the children, a visible image of their parents is the easiest way to sense their parents' existence. However, QQ chatting helps parents take care of their responsibility through long-distance custody. According to the researchers' field notes, it has always been observed that parents would use QQ video chat to examine whether their children have finished their homework or know about the children's school teacher after they were off duty.

This kind of chatting way based on the Internet, not only constructs a virtual reality, but also helps the family members maintain an interactive relationship. According to the researchers' fieldwork observation, when the family members have a video chat, they would present their life to each other continuously, which connects them together. During dinnertime, instead of turning off their video, they take their meal in front of the computer, and lift the meal to the camera to let the people on the other side watch what they are eating today, and then they would also comment on the taste of their meal while eating. This series of actions would construct the "taste" in their minds like they have lived in their hometown (You-county) although they are far away from each other and cannot taste the meal. As David Harvey (1991) pointed out, post-modernity compressed time and space such that we could feel reality in a virtual space. Several family members would appear in front of the camera in turn or together and this would make them feel more intimate despite being far away from each other. This type of acquainting emotional comfort is possible due to new media. In other words, as a communication tool and channel, the most important role of new media for the labor class is the compression of time and space to help them maintain their family bond.

According to the researchers' observation, when You-county taxi drivers come back home, they turn on QQ to contact their friends in the presence of other family members. The presence of family members would not end the communication of QQ-chatters, instead they would transform the background into the stage for performing different social roles at the same time. QQ, different from the other communication tools like cell phones, has the function of video chat. Theoretically speaking, through any phone with one camera and one speaker, people could communicate with one or more friends virtually. This way

of video communication reinforces the construction of virtual reality. In the early studies about social interactions, sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) has made a distinction between front stage and backstage. In his view, people would perform different social roles while socially interacting; in this way the varied social occasions have constituted a kind of stage performance. Contemporary scholars assume that, in real life, though space is limited, people could perform varied social roles in the virtual space. It can be a vocational role, or a family member role. During the process of chatting, while mentioning something, the QQ-users would prefer to present it to the other side through camera.

Another discovery through the fieldwork is, once they chatted with "what are you eating today?" by QQ video chat, they would lift their bowl and dish to let the other side see the same through camera. Although the distance is considerably long, they still could know what dress their wives just bought or what their children are doing through QQ. This kind of "immediacy" constructs a type of "virtual presence" for the people who are geographically far away from each other, and they can communicate and feel comfortable emotionally. In addition, this kind of "presented" life would provide the relatives and friends with a more concrete imagination about the migrant life in the other place, which would encourage them too to migrate into city for work. One of the interviewees was originally doing farm work in his hometown village, but he felt that "the urban life must be very good" when he video-chatted with fellows. In this way, he decided to migrate to the city, where his fellows were at work (to be a taxi driver in Shenzhen). After earning some money, he brought his three family members to Shenzhen to settle down. When the researchers asked him why he decided to work in Shenzhen, he said that Shenzhen seemed very nice in the video chat, so he made up his mind to come here to work. Although the life in Shenzhen was not exactly the same as he imagined through video chat, the information and sight gave him a very primary imagination. All of these compel them to have a virtual sense of reality thanks to an immediate communication tool like QQ.

Building the Social Network Based on Vocation

Based on kin and geo relationship which embedded in traditional identity structure and newly social network which are depended on vocation, You-county *nongmingong* had decided to live in the Shixia village community collectively in Futian district, Shenzhen. Shenzhen City Government and Party Committee Office are located in Futian district as well; in this way, Futian is the center of urban development and construction as it plans to build the center of administration, culture, information, international exhibition and commerce in Shenzhen. All of these support the urban village community in a modernized metropolitan to provide a possibility of residence and development in the dimension of space for You-county taxi drivers and constitute a basic geographical boundary by identifying community life. The formation of their identity community and boundary among different groups is based on several factors as follows: the family pattern based on their residence mode and social flow, the lifestyle of entertainment, the folk beliefs in which they believe that they could be far away from vocational risk and the dialect which is generally spoken in one single community. Shixia village community is located in the center area of Futian district of Shenzhen City, but most people of this community, which is based on vocation, come from You-county in Zhuzhou City of Hunan Province. Shixia village community is one of the urban villages in Futian district (Tian 2008). It has a capacity for a large population from the other provinces. Among them, You-county family who are living as taxi drivers outweighed the other kinds of *Liudongrenkou*, hence Shixia village is also called as "You-county village" or "taxi village".

It is not unusual for villagers to create new lives based on the family tie and kinship in a new environment (Yang 2002; Stewart 2003). One interviewee said, "When I came to Shenzhen for driving a taxi, I felt that I can accept contracting one single taxi; when we were at hometown, we also contracted several pieces of farmland. The reason why I contracted a taxi is for earning the first sum of money. Driving taxi had more possibilities than farm work. There were so many opportunities in Shenzhen; as long as you work hard, you can make money. That was what I thought at that time." Everyday, You-county taxi drivers would hand the money they earned to their wives, and then take some pocket money from them. According to many family interviews conducted, the most welcomed topics were about development, about themselves, about children. Quite a number of taxi drivers started to buy com-

puters, learn to use the Internet and chat by QQ. Interestingly, the account name of their QQ were changing depending on their mood; the names like "learn to all of you", "only the one who struggle can win" and "you do not know my heart", were QQ nicknames of taxi drivers. They also made efforts in developing their children. Among the families investigated, cent percent insisted to pay the tuition fee for the nine-year compulsory education. When they called their family in the hometown, their children's topic was of the topmost priority.

DISCUSSION

You-county, as the most traditional community in China's inner land, has become one of the most important labor outputs as the peasants migrate from rural to urban. Correspondingly, Shixia village in Shenzhen, as an urbanized village community in the economic special zone, has become a space carrier for labor input in the modern urban society. For You-county taxi drivers, both of these communities have special implications for them; the former is symbolized as their real homeland, their root; the latter is their urban residence, a place they make a living through the taxi business and it symbolizes a space where they can accumulate the wealth and dream of urban life.

Only by the vocational flow in such a scale and level, the vocational groups turn to constitute *nongmingong* in the city. They started choosing to co-live with each other in a common social space. Gradually, their family, friends, fellows, resources and information would be ceaselessly brought into this community. Meanwhile, they also transfer the accumulation they earned in the city back to their hometown. Their social identity kept changing between the home in the city and their home at hometown.

Social Capital and Individual Initiative

The income of You-county taxi drivers is relatively high and steady compared to other labor classes. They do not resist or repel new media and its effect on them. On the contrary, they are more eager to use new media because it makes their life more convenient and easy.

QQ, as one kind of medium tools, has followed the chief characteristics of power-law to carry out its communication. The most frequent QQ-users account to twenty percent. When they use new media for communication, their topics also follow the power-law wherein income and daily life are undoubtedly the hottest topics. The hottest topic on the Internet is seldom discussed by *nongmingong*; on the contrary, their topics during QQ chatting are the information about the community and individuals, like job opportunities, income and family situations. *Nongmingong* do not have spare energy and interest to "consume" the Internet. So, the way of using new media and the topics they prefer to discuss also follow the power-law and the social distinction is revealed in virtual space again. Most *nongmingong* have QQ accounts, but the frequent users are only a part of them. The other part of *nongmingong* would share one QQ account to contact other people. The contents of their Internet conversations focus more on transferring information in the real world that those topics that match the power-law. As a kind of information capital, QQ flows among the groups of *nongmingong*. Instead of being QQ-online all day like the white-collar class in the city, considering the vocational situation, most of the You-county taxi drivers use QQ to contact other people only when they are off duty.

If we view the world as a system, activists bring dynamic to this system, only by their actions, the systematically structural restrictions work (Xie 2005). When *nongmingong* group migrate into the city, they have successfully accomplished the transformation of their social role from rural to modern by using an immediate communication tool actively. During this process, *nongmingong's* subjective initiative is adequately elaborated, as it is highly relevant with the institution and society. The usage of new media has interacted with the construction of *nongmingong's* modernization; for the communication object and topic, individual is represented as an activist (Friedberg 2008). *Nongmingong*, as individual activists, have presented their initiative under the mainstream of market transformation and globalization, on one hand they have obtained the economic benefit by it, on the other hand they have acquired the social network and individual modernity constructed by new media.

CONCLUSION

The relationships between new media and social organizational structure, social flow and social stratification have been the focus of aca-

demia since new media emerged. How new media is embedded into the life construction of different social classes is also one of the most intriguing research questions. During the last 20 years, the group of *nongmingong* and its flow have always been discussed and analyzed again and again. But it is really a new phenomenon that *nongmingong* have begun to use new media.

QQ is a kind of new media that it is based on Internet communication. It has driven communication and contact beyond the restrictions of time and location. At the end of the 20th century, sociologists pointed out "the compression of time and space" to describe the modernization process brought by technological renovation which leads to the swift transfer geographically and asynchronism in the dimension of time. However, how new media has realized the compression of time and space and what its implication to the different social classes, demands further study.

This paper, depending on the instrumental foundation of new media, discusses the effects and implications of new media on the *nongmingong* group, and how it participates in constructing the modernity of *nongmingong*. Firstly, according to the study, new media tools like QQ have provided the possibility of "virtual reality", and it helps them maintain and even reinforce their family relationship in a long distance. Secondly, the new media tools have built their vocational relationship and social network, so that they can exchange information whether online or offline. Thirdly, new media is also a type of information capital; it has been a platform for people to exchange information; their topics follow the power-law, such that conversations about income and daily life are the most frequent and essential topics. During their working process, *nongmingong* would initiate and interact with institutions, earn as much as possible depending on the public policy and obtain more social capital by new media tools like QQ and cell phone. Hence, the research unfolds that *nongmingong* can be highly active and self-initiative to achieve the construction of self-modernization beyond the limits of location and time, by interacting with the outside world through new media, keeping in touch with family members and building their vocational social network.

The research has inspiringly introduced plenty concepts of modernity and post-modernism through investigation, especially the discussions on compression of time and space as well as the stage and backstage theory gracefully displays a post-modern image of *nongmingong*'s cyber life in the view of occidental theoretical repertoire. Instead of simply filling Chinese *nongmingong* narratives into the western theoretical framework, the researchers enrich these theories in methodological application and explanatory width-based with the fieldwork in Shenzhen, China.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The studies about *nongmingong* and new media have been the main focus of China's social science academia. For the field of *nongmingong* studies, on one hand, the migration of *Liudongrenkou* from rural to urban during the last 30 years might be one of the most large-scale collective actions which have bred the most fast and widest urbanization in the world; on the other hand, *nongmingong* has a played very important role in the process of China's urbanization. Therefore, how *nongmingong* live in the city, their lifestyle and mentality, and how they build, expand or maintain their social network would be the research questions Chinese scholars are curious about. At the same time, new media, as a brand new approach of social network, has exploded globally and has changed people's social ways of interaction since 1990s. Whether it is for academic interest or social relevance, new media has become an unavoidable topic for social scientists. Because of the speed of technology change, social scientists might need to consider Android and iOS applications of online money exchange embedded on social network and kinship system. Technology continues to update every second, but more important is how it is embedded in the real world.

NOTE

According to Professor Zhou Da Ming, *nongmingong* refers "to peasant workers, a particular social class and phenomenon in China since China's economic reform launched in the end of 1970s. Before the economic reform the peasants were not allowed to search for employment in cities, but after the economic reform the peasants are free to find employment opportunities in cities and once hired will be categorized as *nongmingong*, means peasant workers".

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