The Mobile Hearth: A Case Study On New Media Usage and Migrant Workers’ Social Relationships

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Abstract

In a modern city like Shenzhen, groups of taxi-drivers from You County in Hunan province have built up their social networks to connect with the traditional kin and geo-based relationships in their new living space in Shixia (the urban village in ShenZhen). The enclave provides possibilities of development for this group of migrant workers, but it also forms the basic geographic and ethnic boundaries for their specific identities. This paper deploys an ethnographic approach (such as field observation and in-depth interviews) to explore the social network structure of this specific group through their usage of media technology — including in-car communication systems, mobile phones, and IM services like QQ — to analyse their social relationships.
1. Introduction

Shenzhen was a small fishing village 30 years ago, it is situated immediately north of Hong Kong. Owing to the reform and opening-up policy, Shenzhen now became a very modern city with more than 10 million population. It is the second busiest port in China, ranked only after Shanghai, and it is the most important production base of micro-electronic IT industry in China. Now Shenzhen is so prosperous and it is highly intergraded with Hong Kong, the two cities are developing into the twin cities.

During the rapid expansion of the city, the fish men and farmers have built thousands of 5-7 story buildings on their previous residential base since the end of last century, formed hundreds of local communities of urban villages. These buildings are so densely built and they are called shaking-hands buildings or kissing buildings. With these houses, the local residents have become rentier class, they rent their apartments to the migrant workers who rushed to Shenzhen to find work for living.

Our case study took place in one of the urban villages named Shixia which located in the CBD of Shenzhen. According to the statistics of local community management council the population of Shixia is nearly 40 thousand, consists of only 600 native born locals, the rest of the population is the people who migrated from all over China. Interestingly, Shixia village is also named “You county” village in local news media coverage, given that a large proportion of the migrant workers — working as taxi drivers — originally come from the You County in Hunan Province. According to Southern Metropolis Daily in 2005, around 3,000 taxi drivers from You County are living in Shixia. Since the last decade of 20 century, more and more migrant workers (mostly were born farmers) from You county have come one after another to Shenzhen to be taxi drivers, at the same time also attracted their family members, relatives and fellow came Shixia to engage in services and small trades. In recent years, the population of migrants from You county maintains at about 8 thousand, and 2000 of them are taxi drivers. Shixia is a typical migrant enclave in southern China.
2. New Social Space, Social Relationships and Media Technology

2.1 New Social Space and Old Social Relationships

The urbanization process in China is not only a spatial movement of migrant population(mainly migrant workers), but also a reconstruction of social relationships. Studies have focused on the new form of social residence that appeared in the transformation process of farmers into city dwellers, and scholars named it as new social space (Xiang, 2000; Lian, 2003). Much of the literatures have focused upon the lack of changes with regard to social identities and identification among these newly-arrived city dwellers.

Seemingly, new social space could bring about new lifestyles, new jobs and experiences; however, people’s social relations remain unchanged — rural kin and geo-based relationships still prevailing. Although Li Peilin argued that the symbol of identity transformation from rural residents to city dwellers is the transformation of kin and geo-based social networks into occupational based social networks (Li, 1996), empirical studies found that kin-based social networks run through the life of new city dwellers; as Li put it “migrant workers live in cities, but they have not built up the occupational based social relationships.” (Li, 1996)

Migrant population have been considered as an existence that combines kin and geo-base factors which influences their information collection, business management, and emotional support (Xiang, 2000; Liu, 2002). Wang Chunguang studied the social network of the migrant population, found that occupational based social relationships are superficial; the core of their social network is still based on local kin and geo-based relationships (Wang, 1995).

Recent studies indicated contradictory results. While Guo Xinghua and Chu Huijuan (2004) found that younger migrant workers (below 25) prefer to choose traditional social networks, which results in building a larger social gap between migrant workers and city residents; Shan Qingqing (2007) found that the social networks of migrant workers are undergoing a transformation process in which occupational based relationships are gradually being established.

There are no definite results as to whether it is the traditional kin and geo-based relationships or the new occupational based relationships playing a dominant part on migrant workers’ social network. Nevertheless, it is surely significant that more studies need to focus on
migrant workers’ identity transformation and its impact upon macro social structure during the ongoing rampant social change in China.

2.2 New media technology and communication practice of Chinese grass-roots

The aforementioned sociology studies on social relationships have not touched upon the media factors in the personal interactive context, in particular, the influence of media technologies on social relationships as well as social structure. Currently migrant population in China are living in an information society with their communication practices in new ways, and this offers us the opportunity to study the impact of new media technologies upon aspects of social change. In recent years, new media technologies are being rapidly diffused to the lower class. The CNNIC (2008.1) statistics indicate that increasingly lower-income and less-educated people are becoming netizens. In 2007, 40% new netizens came from rural areas, amounting to 29.17 million; at that time, China had 570 million mobile phone users.

According to these statistics, a large number of grass-roots have embraced new media technology. Qiu Linchuan pointed out that China’s information process has stepped from elite monopoly of the late 20th century into the new stage characterized with lower class and their usage of low-end ICTs. (Qiu, 2008). Against this background, what features do these groups of people have with their media usage, as well as patterns of their social interaction? What impact will be made by their newly communication practice? China's domestic scholars have not yet investigated these issues. One exception is Jack L. Qiu’s newly published book named Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-less in Urban China which focuses upon China migrant workers’ new media usage and their social networking; however, this kind of research is rare.

As Qiu argued in his book, ICTs are becoming less expensive, more widespread, and more closely integrated with the life of working-class people. In this process, China has been shaping low-end ICTs on a massive scale after 21 century(Qiu J.L. 2009). In our case study, all the taxi drivers have their in-car communication system in their daily work time, all of them and almost all their wives and relatives have mobile phones and about 10% of them have the experience to log on internet either by their family PC or in the Net Bars which are opened in the community.

This paper is about the new media usage of taxi drivers from You county who live in Shixia - their second hometown in this strange metropolis .We totally spent more than one year in the community to conduct field work, adopting ethnographic method of participant observation
and in-depth interviews and collected abundance of first-hand data about the living and working situation, the social relationship modes and the new media usage in the daily life of this specific group.

2.3 Methods and research questions

Our research questions are:

1. With the help of new media technology, what social relationships have been established by the taxi drivers of You County? What are the primary pattern of such social relationships?
2. Does the modern media technology usage break the traditional kin and geo-based relationship or help expanding their social network?
3. Does the modern media usage transform their social network from kin and geo-based relationships into occupational based relationships? In other words, does media technology help marking a new social identity of their new occupation?

3. Finding

The chain migration mode is the main approach by which Shixa taxi drivers of You County come to the city. In this respect, it is clear that a kin and geo-based social relationship is prevailing among them and playing a core role in their migration and new life in enclave (Tian, 2007). This agricultural labor group encountered their very first mobile communication technology as early as late 90’s last century- the CB radio system in their cabs.

3.1. The establishment of a mobile hearth

The CB radio system was noisy and unsafe with a black wired microphone, but it was indeed a convenient and money-saving channel for taxi drivers to communicate with their fellow. When they recalled the past, almost all of them expressed their great feelings to this black stuff.

Originally, taxi companies hoped the CB radio system would facilitate the communication between the control centers and individual drivers. However, as soon as the taxi drivers from You county found that they could set up the frequencies on their own, they began to tune in their own frequencies and form teams on the radio. “People introduce their fellow villagers
and townsmen into the same frequency, and the division is basically based on where we came from.” One of them told us.

Behind this geo-based CB radio division, there exists a powerful and multi-functional social network. The CB radio system was essential for taxi drivers to set up “a community of the air” on their own. This network played an important role in their personal communication, providing a sense of mutuality at work, and it helped fellow drivers when they were in danger.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the first group of You County people came to Shenzhen to work as taxi drivers. Few of them had neither a mobile phone nor a beeper, the CB radio system used to be the only channel through which they could find each other when they were at work. For instance, when a driver’s wife wanted to find her husband at work, she would call the staff of the company’s radio control centers and asked the staff to broadcast in the CB radio system, then the message began to relay until the driver got the news. Fellow villagers and townsmen share information with each other through the CB radio system, which gradually became a mobile hearth for people to find emotional support and comfort.

Moreover, such a mobile hearth established a network of mutual help system, it also dealt with potential risk at work that might happen anytime, anywhere. Due to dialectal differences and psychological reasons, taxi drivers would rather ask for help to their fellow villagers and townsmen than to the company’s control centers. As for newcomers, this community of the air was almost the only channel which they could depend on. When accidents occurred, most of them said that they preferred to seek the experienced fellow drivers for help.

The night-shift drivers would find out the position of their fellow at the beginning of work. “It’s important to know where and how far away they are. If there is an emergency, we would rush to the spot and inform others at the same time.” Said Liu Haiqing. So far, the community is still wildly spreading a story about how a driver informed his fellow drivers through CB radio system in You county’s dialect for help and seized a suspect who robbed passengers with a gun.

The rules and customs of this ‘community of the air’ were described as “pretty similar to those of our hometown” by one of the senior drivers named Zhu Jianguo. They still keep their rural habits in this community, such as sharing information, giving mutual help, getting to know new fellow and expanding one’s network, solving problems that happen in daily life, etc. It is reasonable to say that the CB radio system helped building up a mobile hearth among taxi drivers of You County. Superficially, it seems that these taxi drivers have an occupational
based social relationship, but actually, it still deeply rooted in the kin and geo-based social relationships.

3.2 The boundary: fellow and strangers

The 'community of the air' had a relatively clear geographical boundary, gathering the membership of You County taxi drivers, while it has very weak ties with the colleagues from other provinces in the same taxi company; the taxi drivers are also isolated from the local Shenzhen residents. In Shixia, drivers and Shenzhen locals have their own gathering places respectively, and probably the only local people taxi drivers know is their landlord who show up once a month to collect the rents.

The 37-year-old Yi Donghai came to Shenzhen in 1998 and has driven a taxi since then. Currently he works as a coordinator for his taxi company. His job requires him to have all his contacts in his mobile phone. Thus Mr. Yi became our study sample, and we attempted to trace his social relations according to his mobile phone contact list.

There are 81 persons in total. 61 contacts are his fellow villagers and townsmen, among them 19 are from the same village - including family members, relatives and friends, some of his friends are also taxi drivers; 42 persons are from you county out of his village, most of them are taxi drivers whom he got to know through CB radio system or living in the same building in Shixia. Yi contacts these persons with high frequency calls or regular calls (between family members and relatives).

The other 19 persons are Yi’s colleagues, bosses and garage repair man. All from across the country besides You county. Yi contact them with occasional calls. There is only 1 passenger who is Shenzhen local resident who makes few calls for the ride each year.

Nowadays, this boundary is also reflected in Internet use among taxi drivers. Wen Hansheng asked a friend to assemble a second-hand computer in 2006 and since then he often uses an IM software called QQ (it's the largest SNS in China). It is common for taxi drivers to use the same QQ username and password among family members; this is also popular in their hometown. For example, Wen’s cousin shared his QQ username with one of his relatives; two of Wen’s friends both share their QQ ID with their families. Moreover, as for mobile phone

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5 Few taxi drivers keep their social relations in mobile phone contact lists, some of them have notebooks, and the most familiar relatives and close friends ofen been keep in their memories in case of the lost of mobile phones or the notebooks.
usage, couples usually share the same phone number. This phenomenon indicates that they have not yet developed the concept of personal privacy. According to the China's most distinguished sociologist and anthropologist Fei Hsiao-tung (1998), lack of privacy is one of the main characteristics of China’s rural society with super stability.

Wen Nansheng has 129 net friends. On his QQ contact list, quite a number of his relatives are using their true name as the username to be shown online. It is one of China’s long-time traditions that one should never change his or her name in any circumstances. According to Wen, cyberspace is a society of acquaintance in the first place, and chatting online is no different with dropping in to someone’s house and chatting with them. The only difference is, as Wen put it, to make sure who on the other side online, either the owner of the username himself or one of his close ones. It means even if it’s not the right one, it must be one of his family members or relatives, and thus he still has a few words with them. The drivers of You County made such an analogy that QQ chatting is just like a free long-distance call with more emotional communication rather than instrumental one which is undertook mainly by the phone call.

As for the rest of Wen’s web friends are strangers that Wen only knew by their QQ usernames, he preferred to chat with those who had special ones. For example, one named “I am tired” and another named “Shenzhen is a battlefield” had left a deep impression on him, “I feel that we must have similar experience and thus I want to talk to them.” While such online relationships did not allow for in-depth conversations, as Wen said: “It’s just hello, how are you, and all those beat around the bush stuff.” When Wen assumed that it was a girl who he was talking to, he would ask for a video chatting, but never succeeded because “Girls think that I am cheating on them or something bad.” Thus, such interpersonal communication was limited.

It is devastating for married taxi drivers to have affairs online and the divorce case is extremely rare in the community. The families of taxi drivers have close relationship between the couples in which the husbands are busy making money and the wives perform all domestic chores including money management. They still live in a traditional community of acquaintance and the gossip travels quickly. Also the insecurity feeling of the online strangers make the marriage-based kin relationship remains stable.

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6 Two of them are the authors of this article.
3.3 The core circle of relationship: the transformation of the mobile hearth

The in-car CB radio system has gradually been replaced by digital mobile communication terminals which connected with GPS since 2002.

Due to technical reasons, the new mobile communication terminal is equipped with a computer system, the network of the new system cannot be set up on drivers themselves, at least not as easily as they did on CB radio. The managers of the taxi companies snapped at the chance to construct networks by the whole membership of the company.

In fact, the improved technology made the company managers feel released from the potential threaten of collective actions might taken by drivers through “one-to-all” CB radio. The relationship between the managers and the taxi drivers has been tense because of the complicated labour-management conflicts. By the way of constructing the new network with colleagues from across the country, managers could control information among drivers for they have to speak mandarin and the control center can monitor the conversations. But, the taxi drivers gradually abandoned the function of group calling function of the new communication system and it is reduced only for one-to-one calling mode, just like a normal mobile phone.

From the perspective of modern management, this new network will make the communication within the company more efficiently. This improvement on technology also provides the drivers an opportunity to transform their identity from a kin and geo-based farmer worker to a modern worker with an formal occupational organization.

However, it is not the case. Drivers from You County didn’t seize this opportunity. Instead, they choose a commercial service promoted by China Mobile Company which only costs 5 Yuan for each month to join a clustered network and it provides the mobile call service for no limits. Thus, the taxi drivers from You County began to reconstruct their own “community of the air” for the second time. Nearly all interviewees had registered this service till the end of 2008.

The present “community of the air” of the You County drivers has been transformed from “one-to-all” mode to “one-to-one” mode. Meanwhile their social interactive circle has also been narrowed by “core circle of relationship” which only consists of relatives and closer fellow friends, this is a much smaller mobile hearth compared with the era of CB radio system. Such kind of relationship circle is neither formed according to their colleagues, even
nor by their fellow relationship in general, but by indexes such as whether they chat and visit often, play cards together, or have debts to each other. All these indexes are related to the present living patterns in Shixia village or the past living patterns back in their hometown.

The building in which Mr. Yi Donghai lives has seven floors. All the people living in floor three to seven are drivers from You County. These drivers usually chat after dinner and play basketball every Wednesday. This is not only their way of killing time, but also the way of exchanging information and sharing ideas. Three people out of Yi Donghai’s mobile phone contact list are the drivers living in the same building, and they formed a core friends circle. None of them works for the same taxi company. Nowadays, basically among taxi drivers from You County, the main factors that affect interaction and intimacy of them are living patterns and social activities in the community. Moreover, the degree of intimacy can be reflected on the way of handling emergency.

For instance, talking about these three close friends living in the same building, Yi Donghai said: “Their mobile phone numbers are in my phone. We often meet, so we do not have to chat on the phone, but if there is an emergency, I would call them other than relatives…” Being asked the reason why he did not call the fellow drivers in his company, he replied: “they are not reliable. We do not live in the same place and who knows what kind of person they are now.”

Yi’s understanding of the relationship among neighbors and fellow villagers and townspeople is rooted in his long-time rural life experience. In the rural areas, neighbors meet each other very often and they know who is reliable and trustworthy, and this results in a close relationship. Owing to the lack of safety and anxiety when coming to Shenzhen, they follow the old habits and prefer to get in touch with their neighbors and also avoid taking risks in other kinds of interpersonal interactions. In fact, the social relationship of You County taxi drivers has a clear boundary from close to distant, which is based on kin and neighborhood relationship. The basic structure of social relationship of the drivers is just as the same as what Fei Hsiao-tung argued that Chinese social relations work through social networks of personal relations with the self at the center and decreasing closeness as one moves out.(Fei Hsiao-tung, 1998)

Debit and credit is another index of the intimacy of You County taxi drivers’ relationship. Debit and credit is very common among members within a core relationship because taxi business in Shenzhen is comparatively profitable which decreases the credit risks. In Mr. Yi Donghai’s contact list, up to 16 people owe him money; most of them are his relatives and the rest are all his core relationships. Mr. Yi said: “Generally it’s just a small sum of money to
bail them out. I lend money to relatives, my close friends, and those who I know much. As for those gamblers, never.” The social relationships among You County taxi drivers are based on kin and geo-relations, rooted in daily encounters and emotional interaction, taking safety and trust as the primary principle. Such social relationships determine people’s behaviors within the group.

**Conclusion**

Technologically speaking, the use of new media offers a possibility of expanding new social relationships in this group of people; however, the actual purpose of the new technology usage is primarily how to preserve and maintain their pre-existing social networks based on rural culture and habits. And once they are in unfamiliar and unreliable situation, they would prefer the traditional kin and geo-based social relationships. A good example to illustrate this point is how people reduced their social network to the core relationship when the in-car CB radio system was replaced by the advanced digital in-car terminal. As for Internet use, while it has been more popular among taxi drivers of You County, most of them treated it merely as a free long-distance call to their family members and relatives rather than a new method for heterogeneous interpersonal communication.

It is no doubt that taxi drivers go to many places and encounter many kinds of people in their daily work, however they still keep a distance psychologically with city residents, and there is a clear boundary between ingroups and outgroups. If sociology categorizes the social-interaction into exchange, cooperation, conflict, competition and enforcement (see David Popenoe, *Sociology* 10th Edition, Chinese version P131-134,P188), then obviously taxi drivers in Shixia are more related to conflicts, competition and enforcement in terms of their relationships with the world of strangers in the city. And at the same time, they exchange ideas and cooperate within their ingroups hoping to reduce their occupational risks, help each other economically and support each other emotionally. Such a social relationship is always highly kin and geo-based and has nothing to do with any organizations and institutions.

Our purpose of this case study is not only about how migrant workers use ICTs and what the impact of ICTs on Chinese low-class people, but also try to reflect the state quo and the difficulties of their identity transformation under the deficiency of government policy and the conflicts between labour and management - in China, taxi drivers have no labour union. The taxi drivers from You county are still strangers in Shenzhen even though they have been sacrificing their youth, health and family union to the city.
References


