

Reconstruction and Reconfiguration of Rural Constitutive Communities—Based on an Investigation of L Village in Chongqing City

Liyuan Xu^{1,a}, Min Xu^{1,b,*}

¹College of Humanities of DHU, Donghua University, Shanghai, China

^a2212346@mail.dhu.edu.cn, ^bxumin.rice@foxmail.com

*Corresponding author

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Abstract: Traditional rural communities have been profoundly damaged by rising mobility and openness in rural society, changing farmers into "atomized" entities, and communal identity has become illusive. We performed an in-depth analysis in Village L, Chongqing, using the constitutive community communication theory and the research methodology of cyber-ethnography, to evaluate the function of WeChat groups in altering local identity and sustaining rural order. According to the study, L village residents who are gone from their hometowns can establish a "virtual presence" by joining WeChat. The social relationships and structures of the rural community are reorganized in the "public space" created by WeChat groups, thereby realizing the reconstruction of the rural community.

1. Introduction

China's urbanization rate has risen significantly since reform and opening up, from 17.9% in 1978 to 65.22% in 2022. China has undergone a significant shift in population structure, transitioning from a "rural-oriented China" to an "urban-oriented China" with the government's strong encouragement. ^[1] Rural areas in China have changed dramatically as a result of the modernization process. The large movement of excess rural labor has resulted in the severe rupture, hollowing, and scattering of rural social networks, resulting in the loss of many villages during the modernization process.

Traditional rural communities have undergone changes as a result of the rapid modernization process, which has resulted in significant village dispersal and a loss of inter-village social linkages. The once-familiar social structure, in which earlier generations shared a temporal and spatial environment and supported one another, has been dismantled. As a result, rural governance has grown to be extremely difficult. In pre-modern societies, social actions were more tightly linked to particular places, and physical presence gave social life a geographical dimension. The fundamental tenet of modernity is that time and place are no longer constraints on social behavior, and that the separation of location and space has resulted in a lack of presence. The physical presence of individuals is no longer a necessary requirement. ^[2] New media, represented by platforms like

Weibo and WeChat, which are examples of new media, have freed content production from geographical boundaries and allowed for the "presence" of individuals and events that are not physically present in the "here and now."^[3] This inclusion of larger and more distant spaces into a synchronous context has provided technological feasibility for active participation in rural governance, reshaping public spaces and rebuilding rural communities. WeChat groups, as a form of social media, have developed into open forums for the community. The integration of varied players into a "shared space" through online contacts, discourse exchanges, and group actions enables villagers to establish a virtual presence and reconstitute a "border-crossing community."^[4] Social media is used by villagers to actively participate in the village's many ceremonial events, allowing them to reconnect with their rural roots and declare their "presence." This fosters a new "hierarchical pattern," aids in the reconstruction of fractured social networks, and makes it easier to create virtual community identities.^[5]

These studies break the binary asymmetric relationship between "community before communication" and "community as an end, communication as a means", freeing us from the conventional view of communities as physical and static entities.^[6] To understand how typical dispersed villages uphold rural order and take part in rural regeneration, more research is needed. The majority of the research, however, has been on urban communities and ethnic minority villages. As the media intervenes in rural areas, traditional rural communities have embraced the internet. Therefore, what significance does new media, represented by WeChat and Weibo, have for rural communities? What kind of virtual "presence" can they use to keep rural peace?

2. Literature Review

The term "community" is crucial to the study of social integration, and Ferdinand Tönnies is credited with starting sociologists' research on communities. Tönnies developed the idea of community in his influential book "Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft" (Community and Society), which was published in 1887. Despite the fact that Tönnies did not directly define community, he gave the idea of "Gemeinschaft" the meaning of "community" as it was later understood by scholars by endowing it with particular special implications. There has long been curiosity among academics in the connection between communication and community. The relationship between communication and community was noticed by Robert Park, a researcher who introduced the idea of community into the field of communication studies and linked it to locality. Inferring that communication generates society, he saw communication as a crucial element of social integration. In 1916, John Dewey noted that society not only relies on transmission and communication to thrive but also exists within them. People gather into communities due to commonalities and share a sense of community through mutual communication.^[7] Scholars contend that communication and community are two sides of the same coin, building on the natural relationship between community and communication. As a result, communication academics have always been interested in how communication and community are formed and organized. Communities, shaped by geographical spaces, play significant roles in social interaction, information dissemination, and other aspects. The essence of communication lies in fostering interaction, cohesion, and integration among groups, thereby achieving genuine community. Through communication networks, interactions, communication, and even negotiations between individuals and groups form stable community communication networks and negotiation spaces, leading to community consensus and cohesion.^[8]

Numerous academics have also acknowledged the contribution of media or communication to community revitalization and social integration. The majority of academics, however, view community as an established fact and examine communication practices or media within the community, putting particular emphasis on issues like community identity.^[9] Few academics take a

constitutive stance on the topic, connecting communication and community while taking into account how communication forms the community as a network. According to Jing Xie, a true theory of community communication should link communication to the structure of the community as a whole. A community is a network of space and people, while communication is the fundamental process and mechanism that constitute this network. It occupies a central position in the formation of the community, enabling cultural sharing and promoting the sense of belonging and collective identity formation within the community. Based on this perspective, the three stages of network building that make up the "constitutive theory of community communication" are actor networks, networks of meaning, and interpersonal networks. This study, which was motivated by Jing Xie's research, explores how WeChat groups, a new type of community, enable villagers to build interpersonal relationship networks through dialogue and interaction. It investigates how this new community creates an "imagined community" at the level of meaning networks. The actor network examines how relationships and meanings are realized through spatial media, as well as how communication connects the locations of human and non-human actors. Hence, this study regards WeChat groups as a community formed through villagers' interactive communication.

3. Material and Method

The research topic for this paper is L Village in Chongqing City. With easy access to transit, L Village is situated at the intersection of DJ County, FD County, and Z County. L Village, a village at the crossroads, has not given up on its rural property and continues to exhibit many rural features while aligning with the urban growth. The population of L Village is currently above 350, although only 100 people live outside of it, and the majority of them are young people and the elderly. The migration of young adults to the cities has led to the phenomenon of "hollowness" and "dispersion" in the rural society. On the one hand, it has caused a serious depletion of rural communities; on the other hand, villagers find it difficult to find a sense of belonging and identity in the city. As marginalized individuals in the city, they hope to establish a connection with their rural roots through access to new media. Young adults have become "atoms" as a result of their inability to establish a sense of identity and belonging in the city and their estrangement from their homeland. Therefore, a key concern in rural administration is how young adults may get involved in rural issues and create rural order.

This study uses an online form of ethnographic research. On January 1, 2021, the author joined the "L Village Information Group," and for the next two years, she observed. The author investigates how communication helps to rebuild rural communities by watching and comprehending their discourse practices in WeChat groups.

4. Reconstruction of Rural Communities

4.1 Communication and Interaction: Communication Constructs Relationship Networks

According to Jing Xie, the community is a dynamic process that emerges over time; it is not an object or an a priori truth, nor does it necessarily exist; rather, it is a network that requires actors to cooperate and actively construct, a process that cannot be halted.^[10] And "relationship" is the core concept of the study of the community. Under the incubation of the information technology revolution, "people-to-people connection" has replaced "people-to-content connection" as the key to relationship building. As a result, the first meaning of the theory of community communication is that people can only create a relational network through engagement and communication. An extraordinary amount of attention has been given to relevant news since the COVID-19 pandemic breakout. The peasants in the group were concerned about whether they would be allowed to return

home for the holidays and what preparations needed to be done in January 2021, which was close to the Chinese New Year. On January 28th, a villager named XCY shared an article from a public account in Chongqing titled "Press Conference | Strict Measures for Inbound Travel | Clarification of Requirements for the Five Categories of People Returning to or Entering Chongqing." After the article was shared, the group leader DXJ also posted clear requirements for returning to Chongqing in the group. The peasants in the group then enquired as to the particular conditions for returning to Chongqing, including whether a nucleic acid test result was required when returning from the county or within the city limits. When the villagers asked questions, group members actively helped answer them. Moreover, the issue of returning home for the Spring Festival was not only of concern to villagers living away from their hometowns but also to those living in the villages, who frequently shared information from various sources such as Baidu within the group. Through WeChat groups, a new community was created, and the topic of going back to one's hometown was turned from an individual concern of those living away from home to a shared interest of villager residents living both at home and abroad.

Xiaotong Fei believed that the countryside is a relatively stable society, where villagers live in a "me-first" social environment. Being "present" is considered natural in this context.^[11] However, under the pressure of survival, rural entities have had to leave the countryside and move towards cities, leading to the increasing problem of "hollowing out" traditional rural areas. Traditional rural life is slowly vanishing as a result of the loss of rural entities. However, WeChat groups have created a networked "shared space" where villagers from the local village and those from other places gather in a virtual community. This eliminates the physical distance as a hindrance, allowing villagers to interact in a "shared presence" manner, thereby reorganizing weak social relationships. Furthermore, although the access to new media has formed new online communities, the construction of these communities is still based on real-life relationships such as geographical, ethnic, and kinship ties. As a result, WeChat groups serve as a bridge for villagers to build emotional ties as well as tools for encouraging information distribution. WeChat groups bring together people from different places and those residing in the local area, achieving a "shared presence" in the absence of physical presence. Interactions and communication within this space connect individuals who would otherwise be separated, allowing each person to weave their own interpersonal relationship network in this new community, thereby reintegrating the fragmented social relationship network that existed before.

4.2 "Imagined Community": Constructing a Network of Meaning through Communication

According to constitutive community communication theory, identification is the first step in the creation of a community's network of meaning. Therefore, community construction involves nurturing individuals' sense of belonging and attachment to the community. Paul Knox and Steven Pinch argue that values identification and emotional attachment play important roles in community development. Emotional bonds are a significant manifestation of community consciousness, and emotional resonance strengthens the meaning of "community." Traditional public spaces have gradually dwindled as rural agency has decreased, leading in fewer locations for people to engage and talk with one another. Each villager has been "atomized," making information sharing and conversation extremely difficult. As a result, villagers have become increasingly disinterested in the development of their community and participation in public affairs, exacerbating the issues associated with rural government. However, new media platforms such as WeChat groups allow everyone to join this new form of community, making the dissemination of information and discussions more convenient and providing villagers with new modes of existence. The creation of the "L Village Information Group" for the villagers creates a new "chatting" community. The

villagers' sense of rural identity has deteriorated as a result of the ongoing loss of rural subjectivity and the growing influx of villagers into cities, making it more difficult for them to participate in rural governance activities. However, with the establishment of the WeChat group, the villagers' "absence" can be eliminated, community cohesion can be enhanced, and the villagers' sense of community can be strengthened. GLY mentioned that she rarely pays attention to group messages on her phone during work hours, but after work, she goes home and checks what others have been talking about in the group. The function of message retention provided by WeChat breaks the myth of time urgency and provides villagers with a new sense of co-presence. This sense of co-presence not only increases the possibility of villagers' participation but also brings everyone together in one space, allowing for greater participation in the process of rural development. As a result, the creation of WeChat groups opens up new opportunities for the creation of an "imagined community," which stands for a distinctive method of community formation. Anderson introduced the concept of an "imagined community." He stated, "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. What makes the imagined community different from an actual community is the way it is imagined."^[12] In an effort to create an "imagined community," the L Village WeChat group also sets group regulations as one of its ground rules. Everyone in the "L Village Information Group" envisions their mode of interaction and adheres to the shared guidelines, creating a sense of identification and community within this new kind of group. The relationships in this new community have been weaved by the villagers' interactions and communications inside the group, providing the community's basic framework. The primary components in creating the community's network of meaning, however, are individuals' identification with and sense of belonging to the group. Members of the group adjust their behaviors to conform to group rules, shaping a unified entity. In addition to the establishment of group rules, language itself implies a certain degree of virtuality and imagination. It is also a way to construct an "imagined community." Members of the group perceive the newly created "L Village Information Group" as a new space. Within this space, members adjust their interactive behaviors by paying attention to and following group rules and imagining interactions with other members. Villagers' language expressions and the use of relevant emojis within the group involve adjusting their own behavior to gain the recognition of the majority. Within the new community created by WeChat, identification is reinforced and the sense of "ours" within the group is strengthened. This transforms individual imagination into collective imagination, thereby constructing an "imagined community."

4.3 The Connection between Individuals and Space: Extension of the Network of Meaning

The third layer of the constitutive community communication theory is the actor network. This paper mainly explores the non-human actor, which is the space that connects individuals who were originally separate, forming a new community and weaving a tightly-knit network of relationships through WeChat, thus reconstructing new community relationships. As a new space, the 'L Village Information Group' has nurtured the fading rural identity and strengthened fragmented social relationships. Through this place, the network of connections and the network of meanings are also realized. WeChat groups also develop offline social networks in addition to replicating offline social networks online. WeChat groups, which serve as a "field of action" for villagers to express their presence, play a mobilizing role in media communication by enticing them to actively engage in online public affairs discussions and carry their enthusiasm for offline online participation to offline settings, thereby raising villagers' public awareness. Previously, it was difficult to gather villagers to participate in activities such as cleaning the rural environment in the village. Everyone had a disregard for the cleanliness of public areas and was unwilling to endure hardship. They believed that those who voluntarily cleaned were "foolish," resulting in very low completion rates

for village sanitation activities. However, after the establishment of the 'L Village Information Group,' villagers started discussing the cleaning issues of the village health room in the group, and everyone felt that this issue should be taken seriously. The villagers came to the agreement that each home in the village should donate at least one quota in order to take part in this activity through internal debates and talks. If any villagers had a willingness to actively participate, they could also join the activity. The WeChat group created collective pressure on the present villagers. Therefore, in order to maintain their own social relationships and image, villagers are more inclined to participate in actions to alleviate the restrictions imposed on them by their presence. Additionally, assisting customs also exhibit the extension of meaning. According to the study of scholar Shuai Man, traditional assisting practices include a trust paradigm derived from local practices.^[13] However, with the impact of the market economy and the loss of rural agency, people's helping customs are gradually disappearing. However, the establishment of the 'L Village Information Group' has brought villagers back to a community where they are 'collectively present,' achieving the villagers' 'digital survival' and reinforcing their emotional and rural identity in this new community. Therefore, in the construction of a new community, the construction of a collectivity is moving from 'imagination' to 'participation' and 'interaction.' Moreover, in life ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and birthday celebrations, villagers can not only chat but also deepen their emotional connection with the local area and each other. This ceremony serves the purpose of integrating the community in accordance with Kerry's theory of rituals from "Communication as Culture," which also notes the importance of rituals in maintaining societies over time. Previously, unless they had a very close relationship, villagers from L Village who assisted with banquets would not specifically return to the village from the city. However, after the establishment of the new community, people's social relationships became closer, and they were willing to return to their hometown voluntarily to help organize banquets. Villager XXQ wrote a message in the group on March 10th asking for help planning a banquet, and group members replied that they would unquestionably return to assist. The network of relationships inside the community was built and sustained through the agreements regarding time and place. Villager SQS said, 'We are so familiar with each other in the group. We have revived the closeness that was once estranged. Our feelings are strengthened through helping our fellow villagers and communicating with one another. The helping custom reflects a social connection, and its return is an extension of the network of relationships and meanings in space, thus forming community integration and maintaining rural order. This relationship also extends from online to offline. Because WeChat groups are constantly being developed and improved, villagers have gotten to know one another better and the traditional "acquaintance society" has discovered new forms of expression.'

5. Conclusion

This paper, based on the perspective of 'communication constituting community,' surpasses the traditional concept of community as a physical entity and views community integration from the perspective of communication. In the newly established new-type community, migrants away from their hometowns and land use media to achieve a virtual presence. They actively weave interpersonal relationship networks and networks of meanings, thereby realizing social integration and maintaining rural order in the spatial medium. Rural disorder is largely caused by fractured social ties, a loss of ties between villagers and rural places, and a loss of subjectivity. However, WeChat groups transcend the limitations of physical space, allowing villagers to achieve a collective virtual presence. This new mode of existence shifts villagers from the 'private domain' to the 'public domain,' helping them regain agency in rural governance and realizing the reconstruction of online communities. WeChat has helped peasants reconnect to the "acquaintance society" by

enabling them to share information, forge emotional bonds, and actively participate in offline rural government activities in public settings. This is an important reason for maintaining rural order. The reintroduction of the "acquaintance society" also makes it possible to control the presence and actions of the villagers through the offline acquaintance society's rules. In a sense, the interactions and exchanges within the WeChat group in L Village are not only the migration of real-life social relationships but also the integration of fragmented social relationships. By strengthening emotional bonds and rural identities, it represents the transition from offline to online communities and aids in the rehabilitation of rural communities.

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