Strangership and Social Media: Moral Imaginaries of Gendered Strangers in Rural China

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ABSTRACT "The stranger" has been a recurring figure in anthropology and sociology, often taken to represent the antithesis of kinship and friendship, or as personifying the anomie of contemporary social life. Drawing on participant observation documenting interactions with strangers occurring on social media in a rural Chinese town, I demonstrate how online stranger relations happening therein rework existing boundaries between friends and strangers while also assuming uniquely gendered qualities. This fuels social imaginaries and moral concerns around such interactions, posing an implicit threat to traditional forms of relationships, especially monogamous marriage. Building on this unique instance of stranger relations, I argue for the need to develop an anthropological notion of "strangership" capable of treating such connections as an analytically distinct relational form. Acknowledging the local specificities and potentialities of strangership is, I claim, a necessary first step for unlocking the concept's comparative potential for the anthropological discipline. [*social media, strangers, strangership, gender, China*]

RESUMEN "El extraño" ha sido una figura recurrente en la antropología y la sociología, tomado a menudo para representar la antítesis del parentesco y la amistad, o como personificando la anomia de la vida social contemporánea. Basado en observación participante documentando las interacciones con extraños ocurriendo en redes sociales en un pueblo rural chino, demuestro cómo las relaciones en línea con extraños que suceden allí reelaboran los límites existentes entre amigos y extraños mientras también asumen cualidades de género únicas. Esto alimenta imaginarios sociales y preocupaciones morales alrededor de tales interacciones, suponiendo una amenaza implícita a las formas tradicionales de relaciones, especialmente el matrimonio monógamo. Basándose en esta instancia única de relaciones con extraños, argumento por la necesidad de desarrollar una noción antropológica "extrañerismo" capaz de tratar tales conexiones como una forma relacional analíticamente distinta. Reconocer las especificidades locales y las potencialidades de extrañerismo es, planteo, un primer paso necesario para desentrañar el potencial comparativo del concepto para la disciplina antropológica. [*redes sociales, extraños, extrañerismo, género, China*]

摘要 陌生人一直是人类学和社会学领域反复讨论的一个话题，通常被认为是亲属关系和友情的对立面，或是当代社会道德失范的具体化。本文将通过参与式观察，考察中国山东一个乡镇的居民如何在社交媒体上与陌生人互动，以此来探讨线上的陌生人关系如何重构朋友和陌生人之间原有的边界。其中，性别因素又为线上的交流互动注入了社会想象和道德约束，在"一夫一妻制"下，这种互动可能会对传统的社会关系产生影响。基于这一特别现象，本文认为有需要去建立一个新的人类学概念"陌生人关系"，来理解和分析这一种值得讨论的关系模式。研究"陌生人关系"的本土特殊性和可能性只是必要的第一步，这也为之后在这一人类学领域的比较研究做准备. [社交媒体、陌生人、陌生人关系、性别、中国]

A puzzling contradiction emerged during my ethnographic fieldwork, conducted between 2013 and 2014,[1] into the use and consequences of social media in the rural north Chinese settlement of Anshan Town.[2] Although in initial encounters many participants insisted they "did not speak with strangers," instead confining their interactions to people they already knew, as our relationships deepened they often revealed their engagement in numerous and varied encounters with strangers online. Why, I wondered, had they at first denied the existence of such relationships?

The figure of "the stranger" and how to deal with him/her appear to be issues facing all societies, being described as exactly the kind of "universal problem" that warrants anthropological attention (Skinner 1963, 307). Classic theoretical texts—most notably influenced by Simmel (1950)—have discussed the stranger through notions of externality (or inversion thereof), detailing the social characteristics arising from such distance. Recently, scholars have increasingly explored strangers' role in social imaginaries of large populations—for example, "imagined communities" of nation-states composed of strangers (Anderson 1983) or notional "publics" arising from discourse (Warner 2002). Beyond these theoretical understandings, anthropologists grapple with ethnographic realities: the stranger means different things in different societies, and these meanings often change over time (Skinner 1963).

In this paper, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Anshan Town, a small rural town of around six thousand people with a blend of agriculture and manufacturing industries, to show how emic notions of the stranger circulated by townspeople combine concrete and often intimate interactions amongst unknown others with vivid imaginaries of the potentialities of such relations.[3] I show how understandings of strangers in Anshan Town are becoming inextricably associated with and experienced through social media.

Online stranger interactions appealed to my research participants because they embodied a radical alternative to the idealized notion of "mutual familiarity" existing in the town, whereby residents spuriously claimed that everybody knew each other. Against this fallacy, townspeople's pursuit of dyadic, seemingly egalitarian online relations with strangers precipitated encounters departing from established, hierarchical modes of relations rooted in kinship, friendship, or familiarity.

Online stranger relationships in Anshan Town became morally contentious owing to their defraction through notions of gender. Although such relations also occurred between people of the same gender, those that traversed gender boundaries were considered particularly problematic (especially if one of the interactants happened to be married), stigmatizing stranger relations as a whole. Because relationships with strangers of the opposite gender had a capacity to evolve beyond solely online interactions, townspeople mapped onto these connections powerful imaginaries regarding their inherent potentialities. While some townspeople did, on occasions, act out such imaginaries in offline encounters with strangers they had originally met online, in many situations the latent potential of these relations provided ample room for self-exploration. The radical alterity that other-gendered online strangers represented (whether imagined or realized) makes them distinctive from other kinds of unknown people appearing in Anshan Town (and elsewhere), revealing incongruities with existing narrowly defined theorizations of the stranger that have dominated anthropological knowledge to date.

To address this issue, I call for the adoption of the notion of "strangership," borrowing a concept initially proposed by sociologist Horgan (2012), who attempted to describe stranger interactions in relational terms. Pointing out the limitations of Horgan's concept, I argue that anthropology must develop its own theory of strangership, tailored to the manifold possible forms and imaginings of the stranger as revealed through ethnographic

inquiry. The distinctive way online strangers undermine pretenses of mutual familiarity in Anshan Town illustrates strangership's analytical utility for understanding strangers in their own right, without falling back on existing frameworks of kinship or friendship. Furthermore, the uniquely gendered nature of strangership in Anshan Town powerfully demonstrates why it must be an open-ended concept, capable of accommodating substantial relational permutations.

This paper is divided into several parts. A review of literature on the stranger will be provided, exposing the need for an anthropological concept of strangership. I then consider how the arrival of social media in Anshan Town complicates boundaries between formerly distinct relational categories of friends and strangers, both linguistically and in practice. I subsequently address the challenge of discussing the social imaginaries provoked by online strangers while acknowledging the situatedness of such encounters within wider fields of relations. This involves describing the pervasive social imaginary shared amongst townspeople, which frequently casts online strangers as morally corrupting other-gendered individuals. I examine how the entanglement of strangership with other forms of relations reveals the indeterminacy inherent in these instances. Some concluding comments discuss the value of an anthropological theory of strangership. First, though, I draw on an ethnographic example to illustrate how the stranger is envisaged in Anshan Town.

LI KANG AND HIS LADIES

Li Kang was born and raised in Anshan Town. He was in his mid-twenties and married, and was eking out a moderately successful living as a salesperson for a local factory. One day, he invited me to accompany him on a short trip to a neighboring town. While in the privacy of his car, he described using social media to connect with young single women from nearby urban centers. The best results, he explained, came from driving to university campuses and

using the location-aware apps while parked outside. He effortlessly removed his smartphone and began showing me several "selfie" photographs he had received from female university students, asking me to rate the attractiveness of each woman. Li also candidly recalled how, sometime previously, his wife had demanded to inspect his handset, suspecting him of using his WeChat account (a popular Chinese social media platform) to meet with women from the nearby city. He had attempted to conceal evidence of these liaisons from his spouse by deleting the entire account and claiming to no longer use the service. He later bought a second, "secret" smartphone, which he stored in his vehicle, enabling him to operate two separate WeChat accounts.

Li's admissions contradicted other parts of his online persona. We were already friends on another social media platform, QZone, where his profile page brimmed with family photos, emotional status updates expressing adoration for his family, and popular memes valorizing love and marriage. His social media use oscillated between these two different forms of interactions: messages and semipublic posting intended for friends and family contrasted against private dyadic exchanges with strangers of the opposite gender.

The gendered dimension of stranger interactions was central to their appeal for Li. He was uninterested in engaging with male strangers online and eagerly demonstrated how to filter men out of search results. However, Li did not consider online strangers to be exclusively female. Several years earlier, when he was working in Beijing, he had been an active member of an online forum serving fellow migrants from the Shandong province who resided in the city. In contrast to the politicized bureaucratic structures of traditional migrants' associations (*huiguan* or *tongxianghui*), these online forums provided Li with opportunities for comparatively informal interaction with strangers of both genders, leading to wholesome offline group meet-ups entailing self-paying dinners or excursions. By contrast, his present-day pursuit of female strangers online represented an altogether different

form of encounter, driven not by desires for group interactions permeated by shared notions of belonging, but rather by desires to elude the marital, family, and occupational obligations imposed upon him since his return to his Anshan Town.

His interactions with female online strangers led to a range of possible encounters. A suitable stranger could potentially become a “girlfriend” (*nü pengyou*),[4] partaking in city outings where Li would pay for banquets, karaoke sessions, and concert tickets. Sometimes other male friends and business associates would also participate, bringing along their own mistresses, too. Strangers implied exciting encounters, urban trips, erotic escapades, and bragging rights that could be shared amongst select male friends. For Li, online strangers comprised a seemingly abundant pool of women through which he could imagine and enact an existence far removed from his ostensibly monogamous marital life in Anshan Town.

Powerful though Li’s interactions with strangers were, they are not representative of all—or even the majority—of stranger relations in Anshan Town. In online spaces, individuals also played games with strangers, ranging from cards and *majiang* (popular amongst older people) to role-playing games and first-person shooters (preferred by younger people). Others browsed hobby forums to share interests, interacted with presenters of live-stream broadcasts, or simply chatted with strangers to pass the time. Of all these forms of interaction with strangers, however, those concerning the opposite gender were regarded as particularly problematic by fellow townspeople. These interactions subverted the expected norms of conduct with strangers and in turn sullied townspeople’s perceptions of both social media and the stranger itself.

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF STRANGERS: FROM EXOTIC OUTSIDERS TO IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Despite anthropologists often finding themselves occupying the role of the stranger within the societies they study (Candea and da Col 2012), the concept of the stranger remains undertheorized within the discipline. Simmel's (1950) influential essay "The Stranger" offers a useful starting point for thinking through strangers, as his stranger represents an inversion of established expectations of social distance. The stranger was not a complete outsider, Simmel claimed, but was semi-incorporated into the host community. Simmel argued that by retaining an element of externality, interactions with strangers became attractive to group members. The stranger, uncommitted to group ideals, can view society objectively and thus "receives the most surprising openness" (404). Li's interactions with female strangers online also derived their appeal from similar qualities of externality: these strangers' separation from existing dense networks of social relations allowed for intimate encounters that were otherwise impermissible within Anshan Town.

However, while Simmel's stranger enters and *remains* in an otherwise homogenous and insular community, Li instead intentionally arranged to meet his online partners in the relatively impersonal environs of nearby cities, aiming to prevent their possible entanglement in his existing friend and family connections. Simmel's claim that the stranger's unique social characteristics and appeal emanate from their externality thus becomes problematic in cases like Li's, where strangers are never admitted into host societies in the first place.

Within the anthropology of China, discussions of the stranger have also often called upon externality as an important guiding notion, albeit in opposition to established categories of relations such as kinship or familiarity. Originally written in the 1940s, Fei Xiaotong's (1992, 44) account of rural China asserted that "the basic methods of human interaction in rural society rest on familiarity," which was rooted in kinship, while also maintaining that

"these methods cannot be used with a stranger." Although Fei claimed rural relationality possessed an expansive dimension, radiating outwards like "the concentric circles formed when a stone is thrown into the lake" to potentially include "countless numbers" of people, his exclusion of strangers from this dynamic suggested clear limits to such encompassment (63). Rural Chinese villagers, Fei claimed, "seldom make contact with the outside world," instead opting to "maintain their own isolated social circle" (63). This stands in contrast to urban cities, which, Fei declared, were composed of strangers.

While Fei's description of mid-twentieth-century rural China as parochial and devoid of strangers understandably struggles to adequately describe contemporary settlements such as Anshan Town, where long-standing exchanges with nearby urban areas are rapidly intensifying (to be described later), it bears mentioning that townspeople nonetheless considered themselves to be essentially rural.[5] Fei's portrayal of rural China can therefore be productively considered to represent the kinds of idealized sociality against which the possibilities of stranger interactions are contrasted and imagined.

Yang's (1994) account of *guanxi* connections in early reform-era Beijing is of note here, echoing Fei's understanding of the stranger as an outsider, while also introducing a clear mechanism for their incorporation based on principles of familiarity operating largely unmoored from the constraints of kinship. Yang describes how encounters between mutual strangers invariably start with both parties attempting to establish whether they share commonalities, such as schooling, place of origin, or employer (*tongxue*, *tongxiang*, and *tongshi*, respectively), so that "no matter how tenuous the social connection asserted, identities have been slightly realigned around a common link and the relationship now begins to assume a different light" (193). This realignment, Yang claims, transforms the "uncooked" or "raw" outsider-stranger (*shengren*) into a "cooked" or "familiar" insider person (*shouren*) toward whom *guanxi*-cultivating practices can be directed (114).

Both Fei and Yang view the stranger's externality as being synonymous with an absence of relationships, albeit in different ways. While Fei argues rural sociality cannot overcome such an absence, Yang suggests that establishing a basis (however tenuous) for commonality with strangers provides an easily achieved foundation for drawing them into one's own *guanxi* network. Following Yang's reasoning to its logical conclusion, one might question whether strangers really exist at all, or if all unknown people are simply considered *potential* friends.[6] Fei's and Yang's accounts thus clearly differ from Simmel, who asserts that the stranger's appeal stems from the partial inversion of typical relations of "nearness" and "remoteness" they embody. Given that desires to interact with "outsiders" underlie many online stranger relations in Anshan Town, and that converting these strangers into friends is possible, but by no means inevitable (to be discussed later), alternative theories of strangers are needed that avoid equating externality to an absence of relations.

Wolf's (1974) classic essay *Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors* is useful in this sense, adopting an approach that highlights the stranger as contained within Chinese kinship relations. Wolf contrasts rural Taiwanese people's worship of gods against that of ghosts and ancestors. The hierarchical order of gods, he asserts, represents a metaphor for Chinese imperial officialdom that is perceived consistently by all peasants. Spirits, by contrast, can be viewed as either ghosts ("dangerous strangers") or ancestors, depending on an individual's point of view (134).[7] Importantly, such designations are contingent on one's own social position: one person's stranger-ghost is someone else's familiar ancestor. My intention is not to imply that online strangers in Anshan Town are contemporary equivalents of Wolf's stranger-ghosts. However, his description does demonstrate how the stranger can potentially be absorbed into kinship relations while also being central to powerful constitutive alterities informing complex and distinct worldviews.

Several recent anthropological studies point to a growing awareness of the relationships Chinese people are cultivating with strangers, which cannot always be explained through existing notions of externality or kinship. For example, Yan's (2009) study of controversies surrounding "Good Samaritans" helping strangers in China argues that in contrast to their predecessors, young people regard giving assistance to strangers as a moral course of action, despite not intending to form lasting relations with these people. Kleinman et al. (2011) also highlight how individuals in China increasingly find themselves interacting with complete strangers—through online chatting, sharing hobbies, and volunteerism—leading to new types of sociality as individual identities supplant collective ones. While the above authors acknowledge the increasing importance of strangers in contemporary China, these approaches arguably fall short of explicitly theorizing stranger relations with reference to empirical cases involving sustained and ongoing interactions with strangers of the kind witnessed in Anshan Town.

If "the modern social imaginary does not make sense without strangers" (Warner 2002, 57), then how might anthropology theorize the novel mediated experiences involving strangers emerging in rural China's online sphere? Warner's (2002) notion of publics self-organized through discourse or Anderson's (1983) imagined political community of a nation comprised of strangers offer contrasting yet compelling visions of the stranger as central to the lived experience of contemporary societies. However, these approaches also run the risk of reducing the stranger to a recent phenomenon, made possible only through the emergence of large, unknowable, and shifting social groupings that are commonly felt to embody modern life. Clearly, the need exists for a more open-ended way of looking at stranger relations, capable of encompassing the kinds of social imaginaries evoked by Warner's and Anderson's differing visions of the stranger while remaining sensitive to the fact that these

will likely take very distinct forms when they occur as dyadic mediated stranger encounters in small rural communities like Anshan Town.

This literature review has demonstrated how the concept of the stranger has been undertheorized within the anthropology of China as well as the discipline at large. When not representing an absence of relations, it often finds itself subsumed within notions of kinship and friendship or understood as symptomatic of the anomie taken to represent contemporary society. There is a clear need to develop a theoretical understanding of strangers on their own terms—an anthropology of strangership—that acknowledges the meaningful and diverse relations people are both imagining and forming with regard to strangers. I borrow the term strangership from sociologist Horgan (2012), who proposes the concept to foreground the relational aspect of stranger interactions as an alternative to sociological tendencies that, building on Simmel, have increasingly sought to establish typologies of strangers based on their social characteristics.

Horgan (2012, 614) proposes three "basic conditions" required for the establishment and maintenance of strangership: spatial and temporal copresence, upkeep of mutually agreed social distance, and social, symbolic, and spatial mobility. While Horgan's call to consider the stranger in relational terms is certainly a welcome one, his universalizing criteria limit the concept's usefulness for appreciating the vast range of possibilities that strangership might encompass. Can such narrow qualifying requirements for strangership really help in understanding how the stranger is perceived by those interacting with them, how strangers might be imagined, or the social consequences of such processes of envisaging? The comparative and cross-cultural potentials of ethnography are why anthropology must stake claim to the study of strangership, informed by the diversity of stranger practices existing throughout human societies, rather than formulaic modes of sociological classification. Anshan Town provides a site from which to commence such a process, as understanding

online stranger relationships here necessarily involves carefully defining how strangership is distinctive from other modes of relations, such as kinship and friendship.

STRANGERS, NET FRIENDS, AND FRIENDS (AND KEEPING THEM APART FROM EACH OTHER)

Charting where strangers lie within the array of different social relations experienced by people in Anshan Town first requires acknowledging that such designations operate against a pretense of mutual familiarity. Townspeople often commented that in Anshan Town "everybody knows each other" (*dajia dou huxiang renshi*), despite such claims clearly being an impossibility: the central town area—where most of my fieldwork took place[8]—had a population of around six thousand people. The extended township, including outlying rural villages, occupied a large geographical area capturing some thirty-one thousand individuals, many of whom frequented the central town. Catching sight of, or interacting with, strangers was thus an everyday occurrence.

Furthermore, Anshan Town had long-standing exchanges with nearby urban areas, which were intensifying thanks to improved roads that shortened journey times, along with the normalization of short- and long-term migration to urban destinations for work and post-middle-school study. In the last decade, several small factories within the town itself have become significant sources of employment for adult male townspeople, leaving spouses and elderly relatives increasingly responsible for agricultural labor. These factories nonetheless acknowledge their place in the community—for example, by ramping down production during busy harvest seasons so that employees can help their families with farming.

Despite these transformations, participants' continued identification with rurality and the mutual familiarity they felt stemmed from it means one cannot assume that their willingness to reach out to strangers online was simply a self-fulfilling desire to become

urban themselves.[9] Instead, townspeople often enthusiastically explored online relationships while also clinging to their own identification of rurality.

Because encountering unknown people in the course of daily life was an inevitability, people have developed a lexicon of terms for describing such figures. The phrase *moshengren* is arguably the most verbatim Chinese translation of the English "stranger" (my use of the English term in the remainder of the article refers to this assignation). While the term can potentially be used to describe anybody one does not know, townsfolk almost always used other forms of address, such as "unknown person" (*burenshi de ren*) for strangers that they physically encountered in the town, or "outsider" (*waidi* or *wailai*) in cases where it was obvious an individual hailed from elsewhere.

The term stranger (*moshengren*) carried a tacit insinuation of untrustworthiness. This accords with the findings of other scholars (Lee 2014; Yan 2009) who have noted a profound mistrust of strangers in contemporary China, especially in urban face-to-face encounters. However, in Anshan Town the term more commonly referred to mediated communications, such as "phone calls/messages from strangers" (*moshengren de dianhua/xinxi*), to the extent that it is now implicitly associated with such indirect exchanges. For example, one female in her early twenties who worked as a clerk in the town's small post office insisted that she "wouldn't talk to strangers" (*buhui he moshengren liaotian*) despite often amicably chatting for extended periods with anyone who called into the otherwise quiet local branch, regardless of whether they were townspeople or outsiders.

If the term stranger increasingly implies mediated interactions, this change has also bought subtle shifts in how townspeople considered the stranger as distinct from other classes of relations. In offline encounters, a "stranger" clearly indicated somebody with whom no social connection existed. As such, it was considered impossible for a "friend" (*pengyou*) or a "relative" (*qinqi*) to also be a stranger. However, online communications have muddied this

distinction, introducing a further category of relations in the shape of the "net friend" (*wangyou*), bridging what had previously been two mutually exclusive social categories. While only some of the strangers that participants had encountered online had become their net friends, they nevertheless maintained that these net friends were still strangers. Furthermore, it was felt possible that a net friend could eventually become a bona fide friend, at which point they would no longer be regarded as a stranger. Thus, while in this instance strangership is not entirely excluded from existing forms of friendship, this nomenclature foregrounds the need to treat strangership as an analytically distinct form of relation, as has been argued friendship should be in relation to kinship (Desai and Killick 2010). This requires looking beyond naming conventions to understand the practices constituting each of these relations, and the pathways for people to move between them.

Although a stranger encountered online could potentially become a net friend, and a net friend might also turn into a friend, achieving either of these transitions was not inevitable. Criteria for transitioning from stranger to net friend were somewhat broad: while a degree of sustained interaction was typically considered necessary, other factors may include shared mutual interests (hobbies, online games, and music being common examples), appreciation for the style of the other's postings, or (particularly in cases where photos were shared) a feeling of mutual attraction. Also, the sending of voice (as opposed to text) messages was generally seen as being more "intimate" (*qinmi*), and thus appeared more frequently in messages with friends and family than with net friends.[10] Some also expressed that net friends could act as a confidant with whom to share everyday frustrations best kept from friends and family. As a form of "intimate stranger" (Sun 2009, 13), such online strangers are permitted access to the personal space constituted by private messaging, while nonetheless being expected to acknowledge and maintain certain boundaries (for example, avoiding commenting on a user's profile page, where such posts are viewable by friends and family).[11]

These transitions were partly facilitated by the overlap between the terms stranger and net friend, which allowed individuals to present these relationships in a given light, depending on context. For instance, against the pretense of mutual familiarity that pervaded Anshan Town, saying one was "chatting to a net friend" (*he wangyou liaotian*) sounded more respectable than "chatting to a stranger" (*he moshengren liaotian*). Conversely, insisting that "he/she is only a stranger" (*ta zhishi yige moshengren*) was useful in situations where individuals sought to downplay the significance of interactions with others. Transforming a net friend into a friend was generally understood to entail meeting in person, and while some individuals (such as Li Kang) actively sought to achieve such transitions, for many others, relations with net friends never developed in this way. However, the perceived capacity of stranger relationships to move toward friendship imbued them with an element of potentiality onto which participants furnished their own visions—both positive and negative—of what such relationships might be.

The tension between the desire to partake in online stranger relationships and the need to preserve ambiguity around such interactions became especially pronounced owing to the varying levels of access to social media townspeople enjoyed, chiefly influenced by factors such as gender, age, and affluence. Accessing the internet and social media had become increasingly common, most often through low-cost, domestically produced smartphones. An exploratory survey of 111 adults conducted at the start of fieldwork revealed around seven out of every ten respondents claimed to own a smartphone.[12] Around three-quarters of all males surveyed claimed ownership, compared with around two-thirds of all females. The remainder possessed feature phones, except for one male respondent who claimed not to own any cell phone. Smartphone use was generally concentrated amongst those in their late teens to late forties.

The town's school-aged population and elderly people were far less likely to own smartphones. Parents of schoolchildren believed smartphones would negatively impact their studies (McDonald 2016a). Elderly people felt little need for the extended capabilities of smartphones. Both of these groups relied on family members for spending money, and handsets and mobile data plans were often prohibitively expensive. As a result, young people, in particular, borrowed parents' or friends' smartphones to access social media, implicitly undermining the "pervasively personal" qualities of such devices (Ito, Okabe, and Matsuda 2005, 14).

Home broadband connections were also becoming more common, with the sharing of connections also prevalent here. Around one-third of the township's 8,300 households had home broadband, although connections were rarer in poorer outlying villages. In homes that possessed broadband, computers were often situated in the main living room. Those who lacked access—particularly young people—often visited the homes of relatives or friends in order to avail themselves of others' home broadband connections. Not only were computers typically spatially located in semipublic settings, but multiple family members also usually shared a single computer using the same login. QQ, the most popular social networking application amongst townspeople, had even been designed so that multiple accounts could be simultaneously logged in from the same computer. These factors resulted in many participants finding themselves trying to fulfill desires for relatively concealed interactions with strangers through access methods and platforms that veered between being both private and communal in nature.

Although rural participants' sharing of internet-access devices engendered oversight of private conversations online, the two most popular social media platforms used by townspeople—QQ and WeChat—incorporated features enabling users to interact with their own friends and relatives, but also with complete strangers, while respecting users' desires

for online stranger interactions to remain largely separate from those with friends or family. [13] In practice, this meant that stranger interactions predominantly took place via private one-to-one text or voice messaging, whereas discussion with known friends occurred through direct messaging and postings on users' own profile pages, where such comments were visible to their other online contacts.[14] Much of the anxiety around relationships with strangers on social media in Anshan Town arose from maintaining these delicate boundaries separating strangers from friends and family.

This dilemma was partly resolved through normative practices that favored the use of unidentifiable avatars and net aliases on users' personal profiles. Although townspeople were increasingly being asked to provide identity documents when registering for cell phone or broadband services, the avatars and aliases users chose for their social media profiles concealed their "real" identities from strangers with whom they were interacting.[15] This differs from many popular non-Chinese social media platforms, where using one's own photograph and name on profile pages remains more commonplace. The practice of self-concealment on social media was so widespread that only around one in five research participants' QQ accounts and one in four WeChat accounts featured photos of the actual user as their profile image. Instead, users chose images of unknown individuals or cartoon characters as their avatars. Veering from these norms could result in criticism by others. I experienced this when I elected to use my own name and photograph on my social media profiles, guided by my well-intentioned desire to ensure participants could be confident they were communicating with me. One participant joked that my profile contravened the bounds of modesty, playfully accusing me of being "too narcissistic" (*tai zilian*).

While the use of avatars and usernames often helped safeguard anonymity, such measures were not intended to completely sever the link between the "online" user profile and one's "offline" self, which needed to be kept in place for maintaining ongoing

connections with friends and family. Against a sea of “collectively constant yet individually shifting” (Sun 2009, 13) strangers and their avatars, one young male participant maintained that his genuine offline friends would be able to ascertain his identity solely through viewing his avatar and username, believing they captured his own “character” (*xingge*).[16] Equally, users often inferred the gender of the online strangers through gender information and personal photographs displayed on profile pages, or even through the gender of a cartoon avatar. Many participants, especially females, also “locked” albums on their QZone profiles containing photographs of themselves via a function requiring visitors to input the correct answer to a personal question (e.g., “What is my [real] name?”) in order to view the images contained within. Because only existing friends and family were likely to know the answer, such questions provided ways to differentiate between friends and strangers without recourse to complex privacy settings.

Observing similar “acts of opacity” amongst Japanese internet users, Nozawa (2012) warns against assuming such practices merely signify desire for anonymity, arguing they instead indicate the radically different ideologies of communication governing these spaces, through which users generate their own online agency. In Anshan Town, similar ideologies of communication perceive avatars as useful for testing the nature of the relation between the person the avatar represents and their interactants, in addition to concealing the user’s identity.

Deleuze’s (1992) work charting the transition from disciplinary societies to societies of control is of relevance here. In disciplinary societies, individuals are designated by “signatures,” which denote a person’s position within a population and allow power to seamlessly individualize while also massing together. In societies of control, however, these signatures are replaced by “codes,” which act as passwords denoting access to information that is controlled by a numerical language. In essence, Deleuze argues that the logic of power

has shifted from purposively singling out individuals deemed to require disciplining, to instead rely on mechanisms for differentiating between individuals on the basis of external criteria, applicable across broad and shifting populations. Participants' use of avatars, nicknames, and passwords clearly operate in this sense, drawing on external criteria (users' knowledge of their interlocutor) to differentiate amongst often as-yet-unencountered users and control access accordingly.[17]

This section has demonstrated how the proliferation of internet and social media technologies has contributed to transformations in the concept of the stranger through the introduction of the category of net friend as an intermediary stage between strangership and friendship. Blurring the boundaries regulating friends and strangers, such technologies have opened up new avenues for the moral judgment of stranger relationships by others. Both platforms and norms of use have responded with adaptations aimed at maintaining certain relational separations. While these shifting relational boundaries, technological affordances, and social conventions have worked to shape the limits of strangership in Anshan Town, it is the operation of concepts of gender *within* strangership that makes its occurrence a morally charged issue for townspeople.

THE MORALITY OF GENDERED STRANGERS

Connecting with strangers on social media started from an early age, with elementary and middle school students predominantly engaging in such interactions through QQ, which could be accessed on either computers or smartphones (unlike WeChat, which enforced mandatory smartphone login). Locating strangers on QQ usually occurred through use of a search tool, whereby users specified certain criteria (gender, age, district/region), returning a list of usernames and profile pictures accordingly. Users simply sent friend requests to strangers that appealed to them. If such requests were accepted, they followed up with

conversation. Some students' interactions with strangers also occurred through online games (and their associated in-game text/audio chat) before subsequently migrating to QQ. In common with other groups, students would also refer to these individuals as strangers and/or net friends.

School students often indiscriminately "friended" large numbers of strangers—of both genders—through the practice of searching online, which they referred to as "messily adding" (*luanjia*). This meant that stranger interactions were especially common amongst this group, with over two-thirds of middle school students surveyed claiming to have strangers amongst their online contacts.[18] The character for "messily" (*luan*) can also mean disorderly, in confusion, chaotic, and may even explicitly denote sexual impropriety. Messily adding strangers thus implies the potentially transgressive nature of such relations. Furthermore, the phrase does not always imply the stranger-interlocutor as the ultimate source of disorder, instead leaving scope for the speaker (in cases where they are instigating such encounters) to refer to themselves as giving rise to this relational chaos.

Several students described their own messily adding of strangers as an antidote to boredom arising from everyday life, school, and family. For this group, who endured prolonged school days, being able to tap into an always-available crowd of strangers—whether for conversing or playing games together—offered great convenience in finding people with whom to share fleeting moments of leisure. Despite the insinuation of chaos, parents and teachers largely considered such online encounters to be innocuous, given that students lacked the time, internet access, and resources to have much hope of cultivating online relations beyond the stage of net friends.

Young, unmarried adults in the town were more likely than their juniors to pursue in-person meetings with opposite-gendered individuals online. For example, Du Xiaojun was a seventeen-year-old unemployed male who had abandoned formal education after graduating

from middle school. His parents were self-employed laborers who made window frames for newly constructed houses in the township. He spent most days at home playing Opportunity Cards (*qiao'ou ka*), a game-like function built into QQ, which dealt players a hand of cards prefiltered by gender and location from which selected cards could be turned over to reveal random strangers. His messaging conversations with these strangers were extremely direct. He immediately asked whether they had come online to find a boyfriend and, if so, upon sending them a photo of himself, whether he might assume the role. Du recounted having met many partners through the platform, detailing how he would travel by bus to the nearby large county town to meet these females, usually in a public park. Despite actively pursuing these encounters, Du viewed his generation's online dating habits skeptically, commenting that "post-1990s generation love, it's unbelievable. It is full of cheaters and the cheated. They are either using sex to make love or they are using love to make sex." Aside from unmarried people like Du, young people from Anshan Town attending university in nearby urban areas also experimented more openly with similar stranger-finding services (to be discussed later).

This guarded permissiveness toward stranger relations all but disappeared amongst married individuals, owing to fears that such relations may lead to conjugal infidelity. Final-year male university student Wang Gaoshan explained how the continued use of social media following marriage was often perceived to be problematic: "Before you get married, you can chat [online] with many women. But after you get married, it has to be only you and her. If you don't delete them all, then your woman will delete them for you. Including your QQ password, she has to know this. You have to put everything you own in her hands." Several married men described practices of "mobile phone inspection" (*shouji jiancha*), involving their spouses examining their social media chat records with the aim of ascertaining possible involvement in romantic interactions with strangers online. These fears were not always unfounded: over the course of fieldwork, several married men described to me their use of

stranger-finding services on social media platforms—often combined with trips to nearby urban areas—to arrange intimate encounters with people they had met online. How commonplace liaisons like these are is difficult to discern. Only a few men openly discussed engaging in such offline encounters. However, the perception that these instances were widespread and damaging surfaced in numerous conversations with both women and men, demonstrating the prominent position of this issue in townspeople's social imaginaries.

Osburg's (2013) ethnography on the role of gender in *guanxi*-cultivation practices among businessmen in the Chinese city of Chengdu helps make sense of the strongly gendered dimensions of stranger relations seen amongst adults in Anshan Town. Osburg observed his participants enacting forms of masculinity centered on ritualized consumption at banquets and karaoke parlors, combined with mutual introductions of female partners to satisfy their friends' desires. Osburg claims this shared experience creates a strong "homosocial intimacy" amongst men (26), which acts as the basis of subsequent business connections. Although Osburg's account neatly explains some of the motivations behind the pursuit of female strangers online by people such as Li Kang, my own ethnography complements this by pointing to how such (ostensibly urban) practices of elite male bonding become visible from rural peripheries, where ideals of conjugal devotion as vital to maintaining social order (Evans 1992) and the pretense of mutual familiarity remain especially strong forces. Against these ideologies, the stranger becomes an anchor upon which desires (or, equally, concerns) surrounding extramarital liaisons are imagined and enacted.[19]

Some instances of online strangership engaged in by married people did, however, manage to avoid becoming moral quandaries. For instance, one male shopkeeper, who was married and in his late forties, used photography forums to solicit feedback from strangers to improve his technical skills. Numerous individuals happily wiled away hours playing card

games with strangers online. Du Xiaojun once described how his parents, both in their mid-forties, had become net friends with a similarly aged married couple from a nearby town, eventually inviting them to Anshan Town for dinner in their home. The rule seemed to be that interactions were tacitly permitted, providing that they remained organized around designated activities or topics.

Generally, though, attitudes toward online strangers differed by gender. While men were more likely to interact with strangers online (and attempt to keep such interactions hidden from others in the town), women—and married women, in particular—experienced comparatively greater pressures to regulate their own social media use by avoiding contact with unknown people online. This perhaps reflected the continuing importance attributed to "women's responsibility as the protagonist of monogamy" in conjugal relations (Evans 1992). For example, several women explained how, upon getting married, they felt compelled to delete strangers (many of whom they had "messily added" during their teenage years) from their social media profiles. Others claimed to have stopped using social media platforms altogether. Those who remained often took the precaution of restricting access to their online photo collections by "locking" albums with a question.

Numerous adult females sought to avoid potential difficulties by steering clear of stranger-finding functions on social media platforms. This was most clearly evidenced through examining "People Nearby" (*fujin de ren*), a location-based function for connecting with strangers that was built into WeChat. When using this feature while located in the town, almost all the users listed in the immediate proximity were male. By contrast, using the same feature in nearby urban centers returned results with roughly equal gender balance. The apparent lack of female users in Anshan Town likely reflected reluctance toward using stranger-finding services that several female participants had expressed to me verbally, while

also revealing concerns regarding how the visibility that using such features bought might open one up to judgment by others.

The disinclination of women—and married women, in particular—toward engaging with online strangers also coincided with notably different levels of mobility afforded to adult males and females. Patterns of transport use amongst townspeople were also clearly gendered: women generally rode low-cost electric bikes, while men typically drove cars or motorcycles. The limited traveling distance of electric bikes constrained women's independent travel to Anshan Town and its surrounding villages, while cars granted men with comparatively easy access to nearby urban areas. These gendered inequalities were reinforced by a cultural expectation (often recounted by both men and women) that trips away from home ought to be a feature in a successful man's life. When social media use combined with these differing patterns of mobility, it served to amplify concerns over the potential for stranger interactions to result in extramarital liaisons.

Wallis's (2013, 6) notion of "technomobility," emerging from her ethnography of communicative practices amongst female rural migrant workers in Beijing, as "a material socio-techno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical and structural boundaries" is of particular relevance here. In addition to showing that mobility acts across different domains, the concept also foregrounds how technologies can reinforce social constraints. When applied to online stranger interactions in Anshan Town, technomobility highlights how women's diminished physical mobility and their apprehension toward engaging in stranger relations mutually reinforce each other. The attitude of Wang Miao, a thirty-year-old married female pharmacist who worked in the town's small hospital dispensing traditional Chinese medicine, encapsulates such fears: "I always refuse strangers' [friend requests]. . . . Let's say I am online every day, then in one month I will receive between fifty and sixty friend requests. Most of them are all cheats, or people who are idle and have nothing to do." Perceptions of

other-gendered strangers as morally dubious characters also extended to the town's absentee university student population, who by virtue of their outward migration were comparatively freer to engage in stranger relations than others remaining in the town. On their return to Anshan Town during university holidays, students often recounted to me their experiences of meeting and interacting with strangers online. In contrast to their memories of high school, where prohibitions on engaging in romantic relations (and also using social media) were a constant feature, at university they found it easier to engage in relationships with strangers online. This was further aided by the concentration of universities in out-of-town campus clusters, meaning the surrounding area was almost exclusively populated by fellow students (this is also what attracted Li Kang to search for his "girlfriends" in the same area).

Despite these loosening restrictions, participants nonetheless remained anxious regarding the possible complexities of such encounters, especially if the expectations of fellowship that students felt ought to stem from shared classmate status might not apply. University student Wang Gaoshan shared a vivid warning about the possible repercussions of such encounters:

> With falling in love online, it is really easy to be cheated. Female students can get cheated really easily . . . in fact, male students can get cheated really easily too. When you are taken to a particular place, then you're blackmailed! For example, let's say you've both had good conversation, she invites you to come to [her town]. After you arrive, the two of you hold hands lightly, suddenly out of nowhere comes a bunch of people, and one asks, "What are you doing with my girlfriend?!" They take out a knife to scare you. How are you going to solve this problem? You give 5,000 RMB ($806), or 10,000 RMB ($1,612), and the problem will go away.[20] Otherwise nobody is leaving. . . . So, on QQ

female students are cheated out of sex, and male students are cheated out of money.

Wang's description of blackmail reveals how stranger relationships may be regarded as risky for young men as well as women. Fears of contact with strangers being interpreted as transgressive public behavior illuminates the discrepancy between strongly felt desires for intimacy held by young rural people and the limited means they often encounter for enacting such yearnings (see also Sun 2016). Although those from modest backgrounds still managed to engage in offline encounters with strangers (as seen in the case of Du Xiaojun), their situation sharply contrasts with moneyed people (like Li Kang), who are able to mobilize private spaces of cars, urban restaurants, and karaoke parlors to facilitate such meetings.

The above examples have demonstrated how the stranger frequently occupies a potent position in townspeople's moral imaginaries. Notably, this acts in different ways depending on gender. Men (especially those who are affluent and highly mobile) tend to have a positive view of strangers, whereas women generally regard strangers problematically. Useful in understanding this tension is Yan's (2009) discussion of attitudes toward strangers in cases of extortion of "Good Samaritans" in China by the very people they are trying to help. Yan argues that (typically elderly) extortionists invoked traditional ethics to reason that they held few moral responsibilities toward the strangers helping them. By contrast, Good Samaritans (who were generally younger people) held more universalistic values and thus generally trusted strangers needing help. Yan reasons that these conflicting understandings of strangers reveal China's changing moral landscape. In the case of Anshan Town, attitudes toward online strangership become strongly differentiated by gender, rather than generational divide. Although not all online stranger relations occur between individuals of opposing genders, such heterogeneous relations nonetheless dominate social imaginaries associated with the

stranger, giving rise to drastically different attitudes toward stranger interactions dependent upon gender.

This section has fleshed out the powerful ideals these dyadic stranger relations embody for Anshan Town's social media users: capable of possessing intimacy normally afforded to kin or friends, while also escaping the hierarchical connections that previously constrained the conduct of such relations. However, fully understanding the implications of such forms of strangership requires looking beyond the conduct of stranger relations to consider how they also interact with other relational forms, sometimes leading to spectacular breakdowns of strangership.

STRANGERSHIP GONE ASTRAY

The fact that relations between online strangers were generally dyadic in nature but could never be entirely excised from each party's wider social connections generated constant ambiguity surrounding the degree to which the person with whom one was interacting—and also, for that matter, oneself—could be considered a stranger. Relations had the potential to suddenly transform in their composition, often undermining participants' own assumptions around *who* occupied the role of the stranger in a particular interaction. This is most clearly exemplified through the case of Zhang Lili, a thirty-year-old married mother who unexpectedly found herself accused of being a troublesome outsider-stranger following a series of what initially appeared to be innocent exchanges with an unknown individual online. Although many married women avoided such interactions, Zhang saw herself as especially cosmopolitan: she ran the town's only beauty salon, and her husband was a successful businessman whose work meant he often traveled throughout China. Social media allowed her to maintain contact with him while keeping up-to-date with celebrity beauty

trends. She also conversed with strangers online, largely to ease the boredom of watching over her store, which was typically devoid of customers.

On one occasion, a male stranger with whom she had been amicably chatting with over several months sent her an abrupt and confusing message, which read, "I have changed my QQ number, add my new QQ number."[21] Perturbed, Zhang asked why he had a new account number. After a short while, she received the response, "because *his* wife knows [about their relationship]." Zhang was shocked to discover that she was now apparently conversing with the man's wife, despite him never previously having mentioned being married. She recalled her anger at the confrontational tone of the message, as she had never met the man in person and felt she had committed no wrongdoing. Zhang reported replying, "I have no special connections with you, what does it matter if your wife knows?" Eventually, she decided to block this user's account, which prevented him from sending her further messages or re-adding her account.

Despite her effort to stymie interactions with this individual, the matter refused to disappear. Through word-of-mouth, Zhang later became aware that this stranger actually lived nearby Anshan Town. What was supposed to have been a private, lighthearted conversation between two mutual strangers online soon threatened to entangle her in a complex network of connections uncomfortably close to home. The matter almost became a "big thing," with Zhang blaming the man's gossiping wife for spreading rumors damaging to her own reputation. This incident, along with Wang Gaoshan's description of blackmail of university students included above, are notable in that initial encounters are pervaded by an assumption that interactions occur in a state of mutual anonymity and solely involve the stranger. This grants stranger encounters with a sense of openness, but also intimacy. When such presumptions subsequently flounder, participants may discover the stranger's attendant social network includes others who treat the existence of stranger relationships with hostility.

Because of this incident, Zhang now exercises considerable caution when speaking to strangers online. She removed all images of herself from her QQ and WeChat profiles and locked her QZone photo albums so that only people who she already knows offline are able to access them. Zhang also set her username to a pseudonym and changed her WeChat avatar from a photograph of herself to an image, taken from the internet, of an unnamed woman holding a gun. In addition, she set the gender of both her QQ and WeChat profiles to male, which reduced the number of men attempting to add her as a friend through the networks.

Zhang's case reveals some of the perils of strangership as they unfold in Anshan Town. For Zhang, her relationship with strangers online clearly allowed her to enact the kind of cosmopolitanism she desired in her own life. Her interactions with men online remained unproblematic—even though she viewed them as purely platonic anyway—so long as they stayed confined to online spaces and avoided the awareness of others. Problems only emerged when her relationship with an online stranger surfaced in a different context, involving family members and the wider community. Worse still, in Zhang's case, the sudden presence of an enraged wife threatened to embroil Zhang in a scandal where *she* might be cast as the immoral, outsider-stranger accused of potentially corrupting another woman's husband.

This failure of strangership shows the significant ambiguity and indeterminacy of online relationships with strangers as experienced within rural Chinese society. While such ambiguity allows for stranger relations between opposite-gendered individuals to take place, these may collapse when traditional rural social hierarchies, with their dogmatic gendered expectations, are bought to bear on them. [22] However, this threat also works in the other direction, with the stranger's presence in a community (or within relationships between community members) causing those sharing traditional connections "to question their own closeness to each other" (Chio 2014, 184). In such instances, strangership becomes an

especially useful notion because its distinctiveness from kinship and friendship forces consideration of how stranger interactions provoke people to reevaluate these latter two concepts.

Given the risks inherent in the pursuit of strangership, the persistent efforts by social media users in Anshan Town to maintain a kind of "recombinant" relational self (Kipnis 2016, 16), which synthesizes traditional graded networks of family and friends with free-associative, emergent, and often unstable gendered stranger relations, speaks to social media's capacity for allowing users to navigate such distinctions. In this way, the instantiations of strangership described above also illuminate the oppositions at play in the workings (and reworking) of the conflicting moral frameworks present in contemporary rural Chinese society.

TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF STRANGERSHIP

This paper has explored the conceptual value of strangership through the ethnographic case of Anshan Town in rural China. I have highlighted how townspeople's encounters with strangers on social media are permeated by overarching concerns questioning the morality of such interactions. These anxieties arise owing to the centrality of gender in local understandings and imaginaries of the stranger. Against this backdrop, I have demonstrated the utility of strangership as a concept that acknowledges how strangers encompass different meanings both across and within cultures while also encouraging a practical focus on how these meanings emerge out of the specific organizing principles of stranger relations at play in any given locale.

The above ethnographic cases have provided a starting point from which to begin to build an understanding of strangership cross-culturally. While social concerns in Anshan Town chiefly center on a specific form of strangership, arising from the conjunction of social

media with existing rural moral frameworks that render social life through a series of gendered oppositions, these may conceivably be expressed differently (or subverted altogether) in other locales. For instance, certain Euro-American societies have witnessed the growth of numerous online dating sites targeted toward facilitating same-sex relationships (many of which happen to be blocked in China, where recognition of such relations remains curtailed). In another example, Boellstorff (2008) documented romantic relationships—replete with sex and marriage—occurring exclusively within the "virtual world" of Second Life, without those involved ever necessarily meeting offline or indeed knowing the other's "real" identity. Such instances point to how mediated experiences of strangership are reworking the possibilities of romantic passion in diverse and often unexpected ways.

Achieving a cross-cultural understanding of strangership must, however, involve acknowledging that the multivalent nature of stranger relations reaches far beyond issues of romance alone. This is evidenced in the stranger's role in expansive ideals, such as those of nations or publics. Equally, as anthropologists are often treated as strangers in the societies they study, they are uniquely poised to explore strangership's reflexive aspects. The proposal of an anthropology of strangership also occurs during a unique contemporary moment. As potent imaginaries of the stranger increasingly dominate political and popular discourse around issues such as immigration and terrorism, having appropriate frameworks for understanding societies where notions of strangership appear to form the foundation—rather than the antithesis—of sociality will be of crucial importance in shaping discussions around how strangers should be treated in our own societies.[23]

With new communication technologies continuing to reshape societies in which anthropologists find themselves working, stranger relationships stand to increase in both their prevalence and variety. By foregrounding the dynamic potentialities of stranger interactions, which precipitate continual redefinitions of the kinship and friendship relations that they

appear alongside, an anthropological understanding of strangership as both embodying and sparking the conditions for social transformation is crucial for making sense of relationships in the contemporary digitized world.

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NOTES

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[1] My ethnographic fieldwork took place in Anshan Town over fifteen months, spread between April 2013 and August 2014, during which time I lived in a village on the edge of the town. The ethnography contributed to a larger cross-cultural comparative project on social media (Miller et al. 2016).

[2] All personal and place names have been anonymized to protect the privacy of participants.

[3] I have discussed the methodological issues pertaining to this study in detail elsewhere (McDonald 2016b, 29–33).

[4] Among married men, the term "girlfriend" is often a euphemism for "mistress" (*xiaosan*).

[5] Townspeople's rurality was also officially affirmed by the state, which continued to assign residents with "rural" household registration permits (*hukou*).

[6] Oxfeld's (2010) discussion of having a "virtuous heart/mind" (*liangxin*) as a key component of rural relationality asserts the potential for this concept to be applied within stranger relations, somewhat evoking the open-endedness of Yang's approach. Once an interaction with a stranger has occurred, Oxfeld argues, relationships begin to entail memory and obligation (of which *liangxin* is composed), turning a stranger into a nonstranger.

[7] One of Wolf's grounds for asserting ghosts to be strangers was his participant's description of ghosts as "strange" (*kuai,* pinyin: *guai*). This is distinctive from *moshengren*, used to describe strangers in this essay, which more specifically denotes people.

[8] This positioning had a bearing on participant selection. Poorer people from outlying villages, who tended to place a greater reliance on agriculture for their income and were less likely to regularly access the internet, featured less heavily in my ethnography. Thus, although my town-based participants cannot be said to represent all of rural China, this should not detract from their own identification as being rural.

[9] As may be the risk, given tendencies of dominant discourses to equate urban China with modernity and the countryside with "backwardness".

[10] Barker's (2008, 128) discussion of the key role voice plays in an Indonesian analogue chat network, which "straddles the divide between a local and an imagined community" is also of interest in this regard.

[11] Sun's (2009, 13) "intimate stranger" described Chinese domestic workers serving in their employers' households. I find this concept useful for describing how strangers are admitted into online social media spaces otherwise constituted by familiar relations.

[12] In total, 111 people completed the questionnaire (52 females, 59 males). Respondents' ages ranged from 16 to 65 years, with a mean age of 32 years (for further details, see McDonald 2016b, 187–88).

[13] QQ and WeChat are also the two largest social networks in China by active monthly users.

[14] To this end, the town's social media users shunned other more public microblogging platforms such as Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo which by default make a user's status updates and social interactions visible to the entire internet.

[15] This system of monitoring and surveillance has become increasingly pervasive in the years following fieldwork. Real name registration has now expanded to many social media platforms, facilitated by built-in online payment platforms linked to individual's bankcards, which are increasingly central to daily life. A new government-proposed system of rating citizen's "social credit" is also currently under development. Thus, while Chinese internet users may still deploy strangership in relation to their fellow netizens, such a stance is increasingly forbidden in one's online relationship with the state.

[16] Boellstorff's (2008, 112) description of how online avatars achieve a form of "presence without immersion" by acting in online spaces, even when their owners are offline, provides anthropological precedent for some of the functions of the avatar discussed here.

[17] Participants' active manipulation of such "codes" for distinguishing between friends and strangers online arguably challenges Deleuze's (1992) assertion that codes represent transformable data possessed by organizations, solely serving the interest of their shareholders.

[18] I have detailed the methodology employed in this middle school questionnaire elsewhere (McDonald 2016b, 189).

[19] This somewhat resembles the kinds of duplicity and complicity Chio (2014) described taking place in "ethnicized" tourism encounters in China's rural south-west, where the pretense of ethnic minority women seeking marriage as a way to escape poverty becomes something both parties invoke in working to create an idealized "ethnic encounter".

[20] On the first day of conducting fieldwork (April 1, 2013), US$1 was equal to 6.2 RMB.

[21] A "QQ number" serves as an account username.

[22] The tendency towards collapse seen here suggests that strangership relations also possess varying temporal dimensions to both friendship and kinship. Consideration of their differing chronotopic qualities (see Rutherford 2015) could provide a further dimension for comparison, although this lies beyond the scope of the current essay.

[23] Viveiros de Castro's (2001, 23) discussion of Amazonian sociality, in which "the Other is first and foremost an affine," is especially illuminating in this regard.

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