Reconstruction and Reconfiguration of Rural Constitutive Communities

—Based on an Investigation of L Village in Chongqing City

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Abstract:

The market economy's loss of traditional rural communities has become more pronounced as rural societies become more mobile and open. In addition to the farmers becoming "atomized" individuals, the subjectivity of rural areas has decreased, and communal identity has also diminished. How to redefine local identity and uphold rural order has emerged as a problem that must be considered for the development of rural communities in the context of rural revitalization efforts. This study examines the function of WeChat groups in recreating familiar social networks in L village, Chongqing City, using constitutive community communication theory and the network ethnography research technique. 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.
Keywords: WeChat groups, constitutive community communication theory, rural community

Introduction:

Since the reform and opening-up, China's urbanization rate has rapidly increased from 17.9% in 1978 to 65.22% in 2022, and the urban resident population has grown from 172 million to 921 million. With the government's strong encouragement, China has seen a substantial shift in population structure, shifting from a "rural-oriented China" to an "urban-oriented China." [1] However, this "urban-centric" strategy for urbanization has, in certain cases, forced farmers, rural communities, and agriculture to make way for urban development. Chinese rural areas, entangled in the modernization process, have also undergone enormous changes. 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. Agriculture, rural areas, and farmer issues are fundamental issues related to national well-being, according to the report of the Communist Party of China's 19th National Congress in 2017 and must always be regarded as a top priority in the Party's work, with the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy. The

"Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Implementing the Rural Revitalization Strategy" were published in 2018, providing a complete deployment of the rural revitalization strategy. In some ways, young people are separating from their familiar social networks in rural areas and impeding the process of rural regeneration as they leave their ancestral villages in search of fresh development prospects in cities. Therefore, solving the development issues of Chinese rural areas is not only necessary for rural revitalization but also an inevitable requirement of the modernization process.

Traditional rural communities have undergone changes because 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 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] Although mobile spaces modify social interactions and structures in rural areas, villagers' everyday lives continue to be regulated by well-established social networks. [6] This research demonstrates that the widespread use of media achieves a "shared presence" despite physical absence, greatly increasing the opportunities and possibilities for individuals or groups to engage in writing, expression, and subsequent practices.

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. [7] Instead, they take a communication-focused strategy to community inclusion. To understand how typical dispersed villages uphold rural order and take part in rural regeneration, more research is needed. Most 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?

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. Tönnies referred to a "Gemeinschaft" (community) as a collection of individuals who were united by kinship, place of residence, familial ties, neighbourhood ties, and friendship and who were primarily driven by or ruled by natural will. [8] 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 special implications. There are hundreds of various meanings of the term since scholars have diverse understandings and manifestations of the concept of community as a result of language and cultural variations. Schiele examined and evaluated 94 distinct definitions of community in the 1960s and noted that while the definitions vary, the core connotations of each concept—territoriality, shared ties, and social interaction—remain constant.[9] Scholars like Dottson and others have come to agree on this point of view. With the changes in social life and the advancement of industrialization, the connotations and extensions of community have expanded. However, the concept of community still comprises several core elements: (1) a certain population: people are the subject of community activities, and communities cannot exist without human activities; (2) a specific geographic space: In physical communities, space serves as the setting for human activities and is a necessary condition for communities to exist; (3) interactive relationships: Member interactions are the cornerstone of community existence; and (4) a sense of belonging and identification, which is the cohesion of communities. In comparison to Western research, China did not introduce Western sociological theories and the concept of community until the early 20th century. [10]Although Chinese scholars still have different expressions for defining community, the majority of scholars agree that a community is essentially a territorial social entity composed of a population involved in variety of social relationships and activities within a specific geographic area, sharing a certain way of life, and having a sense of belonging. This is true even though Chinese scholars still use different expressions to define communities.

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. [11] 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.[12] In her empirical study titled "Media and Community Cohesion" from the 1990s, American academic Sandra Ball-Rokeach presented the "communication infrastructure theory" to explain the connection between community communication and a sense of belonging. It suggests that residents' sense of belonging and identification with a community depend on the communication mechanisms within the community, namely, the structure of anecdotes/stories.[13] Building on this foundation, both domestic and international scholars have performed extensive research on the idea of community, recognizing the integrative role of communication.

Numerous academics have also acknowledged the contribution of media or communication to community revitalization and social integration. Most 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. [14] Few academics take a constitutive stance on the topic, connecting communication and community while considering 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, a community cannot be regarded as a precondition or an existing entity, nor can it be seen as merely a strategy or tool. Instead, it should be viewed as a network constituted by communication. 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 a "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.[15] Hence, this study regards WeChat groups as a community formed through villagers' interactive communication.

Methods

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 most 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 separated "atoms" because 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. The online reconstruction of the "village community" is made possible by the integration of new media, which brings together the villagers living in various places into a new kind of community. After several years of growth, the L Village information group has developed into a crucial tool for villagers to take part in rural administration and preserve social ties, and communication in WeChat groups has become an essential element of their everyday lives.

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.

Reconstruction of Rural Communities

With the "hollowness" and "dispersion" of traditional rural communities, people have become isolated individuals, and traditional acquaintance-based social networks are disappearing. The integration of rural order is gradually becoming difficult. However, with the development of Internet technology and changes in the media environment, WeChat breaks the limitations of time and space. Through smartphone access, villagers from various regions can join the "L Village Information Group," establishing a "virtual presence" and building relationships and meaning networks through conversations and exchanges in the village's WeChat group. The reintegration of rural communities is finally achieved thanks to the smooth offline actions made possible by this.

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. [16] 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 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. The dependency of the villagers on rural community resources determines the level of community cohesion. Villagers are eager to obtain various information related to epidemic prevention and control through different channels. This dependency makes them more actively engaged in disseminating interpersonal networks. Additionally, as they have access to numerous policies and can leverage their own resources to create the conditions for their engagement in local affairs and the construction of relationship networks, villagers transform into "information hubs" within the group.

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.[17] 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 because 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. In other words, after the introduction of media into rural society, villagers' "absence" gradually gives way to "shared presence". 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." With the continuous loss of rural subjectivity, traditional public spaces are disappearing. For example, traditional public spaces such as wells, courtyards, and riverbanks, which used to serve as the sites for information dissemination and consensus-building through discussions, are gradually vanishing. As traditional public spaces decline, these functions are also diminishing. Villagers have fewer places to exchange information and engage in discussions, and each villager becomes an isolated individual. As a result, communication and discussion are made more difficult, which makes villagers less interested in the advancement of their community and participation in politics. This makes rural administration even more difficult. 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 because 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 a "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."[18] Scholar Jing Xie believes that not only nations and ethnic groups need to form an "imagined community," but small communities also need to imagine and form a community. To create a "imagined community," the L Village WeChat group also sets group regulations as one of its ground rules. After the establishment of the Village Affairs WeChat group, there was a period when the group was flooded with advertisements, mini-programs, and

links. Many of the villagers in the group voiced their displeasure with this situation and thought they were harming the community's "image." Subsequently, the group administrator, DXJ, posted an announcement in the group, hoping that everyone would voluntarily abide by the rules and maintain the image of their hometown. Many of the villagers in the group voiced their displeasure with this situation and thought they were harming the community's "image." DXJ, the group administrator, then published a notice in the group in the hopes that everyone would voluntarily follow the guidelines and uphold the reputation of their community. The villagers unanimously applauded this announcement. We all know each other in the group, therefore posting such content is inappropriate, as villager QTJ noted. Some of these are unmistakably fraudulent texts. Posting them there would be detrimental to our own people. The group now seldom ever sees advertising, mini-programs, or similar content thanks to ongoing development and improvement. As villager QTJ said, "We all know each other in the group, so it is not appropriate to post such content. Some of them are obviously scam messages. Posting them in the group would harm our own people." Through continuous improvement and development, the group now rarely sees advertisements, mini-programs, or similar content. 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. As Manuel Castells said, identity is the source of people's meaning and experience. 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 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, 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. [19] 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 collectively 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.

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. he 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. For example, villagers from L Village actively filter the messages in the WeChat group and play a gatekeeping role. 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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