Connections And Connectivity And In China; Guanxi And The Explosion Of Instant Messaging - The Marriage Of Relational Diads, Group Membership, And Web Based Communications

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the reasons behind the phenomenal growth in the use of instant messaging (IM) in China. The paper proposes that one explanation might lie in the high collectivism, high context communication and the cultural practice of guanxi in China. On the one hand, current cross cultural research related to China on mobile telephony seems to provide a strong basis for this contention. On the other hand, the discussion within the literature examining IM within Chinese society appears to be much less robust. However, one could argue that IM provides a unique vehicle for communication within guanxiwang which deserves consideration, especially considering its huge popularity in China. A cursory examination of initial evidence suggests that instant messaging provides the possibility of high context communication and efficient information gathering which facilitates relationship building and maintenance within the relational dyads as well as group characteristics of a guanxiwang. One could argue that instant messaging is perfectly suited to the communication needs of these particularistic and personal hyper-social networks in China.

Keywords: Guanxi, social networking, technology, instant messaging, internet, China, culture, collectivism

INTRODUCTION

China is a country to which superlatives are easily attached. It is by far the largest country in the world by population. It is currently the second largest consumer of oil, electricity, and coal (EIA, 2008). It has eclipsed the United States in terms of consumption of both wheat and rice, trailing only in corn. No wonder the news is rife with reports of Chinese companies forging farming deals and taking land concessions in countries in Southeast Asia and Africa (IPS, 2008). China currently uses more than twice the amount of steel as the US and, as it continues to urbanize and develop at breakneck speed, is monopolizing world supplies of building materials including concrete, aluminum, and copper (EPI, 2005). China's economy grew at staggering pace of 11.4 percent in 2007, although forecasts are that this trend will cool to a still sizzling 8-10 percent in 2008 (USCBC, 2008). China is forecasted to, within ten years, take the throne as largest world economy in terms of GDP per capita.

In terms of technological development and telecommunications, China is once again exceptional. China currently has more mobile phone users than any country in the world. In fact, if one were to give every man, woman and child in the United States and Canada a mobile phone, China's current population of mobile phone users would still be greater. The Chinese government has been building and vastly improving infrastructure necessary for state of the art information and communication technology. For example, in mid 2000, China Telecom began

construction of a new high capacity 911-kilometer fiber optic transmission backbone ring connecting Nanjing and Wujan (Banfe/Woods, 2004) . Since that time the government has continued to bring on-line new projects to bring China into the 21st century. China has effectively leapfrogged traditional land-line communications and has moved almost directly into mobile phone technology. And computer use and internet access is skyrocketing. Total "net citizens" grew from 87.0 million as of the July 2004 statistical survey issued by the Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) to 210 million in December 2007 numbers reported in the January 2008 survey. China is second in the world in terms of Internet users, trailing the United States by only a slim margin.

Therefore, Internet users in China are increasing at a phenomenal rate, adopting these new technologies with an astounding vigor. One might argue that the use of the Internet in China is both changing social streams of consciousness and ways of perceiving the world as well as is being changed by the power of Chinese culture. Certainly one could argue that the power of Apparatgeist has been mediated through the rich cultural filter of the Middle Kingdom (Katz, Aakhus, 2002, Katz, 2003, Katz, Aakhus, Kim & Turner, 2003). This research explores the reasons behind the phenomenal growth in the use of one of these Internet technologies in China, instant messaging (IM). It hopes to shed some light on the question of why this medium of internet based electronic communication been adopted so quickly and with such enthusiasm in China.

The paper proposes that one explanation might lie in China as a high context and highly collectivist country, as well as the cultural practice of guanxi resident there. On the one hand, current cross cultural research related to China on mobile telephony seems to provide a strong basis for this contention. On the other hand, the discussion within the literature examining IM within Chinese society appears to be much less robust. However, one could argue that IM provides a unique vehicle for communication within guanxiwang which deserves consideration, especially considering its huge popularity there. A cursory examination of initial evidence suggests that instant messaging provides the possibility of high context communication and efficient information gathering which facilitates relationship building and maintenance within the relational dyads as well as group characteristics of a guanxiwang. One could argue that instant messaging is perfectly suited to the communication needs of these particularistic and personal hyper-social networks in China.

THE INTERNET IN CHINA

Our case analysis includes both a static analysis of the most current CNNIC 21st survey dated January 2008 as well as a temporal comparison of that year to the CNNIC 17th survey dated January 2006 as well as some statistics from the 2000.7 survey (CNNIC 2000.7, CNNIC, 2006, CNNIC, 2008). These are used to create a picture of the Chinese net citizen as a foundation for exploring the explosion in the use of one Internet technology, instant messaging.

In just the two years between 2006 and 2008, total internet users in China increased by close to 90% from 111 to 210 million users. As related in the previous section, as of the end of 2007 China ranks second, only slightly behind the United States in terms of Internet users. Internet penetration at the end of the 2007 year was still only 16%, well below the 71.2% registered by its Asian neighbor South Korea and the 71.7% of the United States. In addition, this is still below the world average of 20% (Internet World Stats, 2008). However, this is a dramatic increase over the 10% penetration rate of just one year earlier. Rogers argues that between 10-20% diffusion will speed up rapidly. Assuming Rogers theory is accurate and applicable to China, this puts China in the rapid growth stage for internet users. And from the data it is clear that, as one might expect, the greatest penetration rates are concentrated in urban areas, with Beijing and Shanghai leading the pack. Internet penetration in newly developing areas, such as the Guangdong province, is growing at the fastest pace.

As of the latest report, Internet users still exhibit a gender skewing, with the majority, 57.2% being male, and 42.8% female. However, this is an improvement over two years before when males accounted for 58.7% and females 41.3%. And the annual trend has been one of improvement year to year. For example, this can be contrasted with the 2000.7 CNNIC survey in which 75% of the internet population was male. And some of the differentiation is clearly explained by other demographic variables, including the markedly lower attained education

level of females, as well as the higher percentage of males in the population. There is also a much higher current imbalance in the rural population, in which 63% of internet users are male.

In terms of age, as of the January 2008 survey results, people between the ages of 0-30 account for nearly 70% of all users, whereas people over the age of 50 account for only 4.1%. Although there were some minor changes, this is fairly comparable to the age breakdown for 2006 survey. The largest subsection of the population by far is in the 18-24 range, accounting for 31.8% of the population.

The educational base of users has changed quite a bit between the two survey dates. Certainly, people with a higher educational background still predominate in the population of users. However, the educational level of Internet users is dramatically diffusing. For example, whereas in 2006 total users with an education of high school or above were almost 84%, just two years later, the total was 72%.   And this is in stark contrast with the figures 2000.7 CNNIC semiannual report in which almost 98% of the population has an educational of high school or above. Finally, with usage rates still high compared to the average per capita income in China, and the fact that those with higher education can normally get jobs with higher average wages, the net population is skewed toward those with high per capita incomes.

Therefore, although this is changing rapidly, the current Internet population in China could be accurately characterized as one still dominated by urban, educated males with fairly high per capita incomes. However, one can only claim this with the caveat that this is changing rapidly. Although certainly germane to our research, what is of far more direct relevance to this study is the current state and trends in application preference behavior of the online population in China.   Although we will compare between applications and by year, our main focus of doing so will be to highlight the magnitude and trends in our dependent variable, instant messaging.

In the 2006 survey the top four services used by internet citizens in terms of application rate of use included in order from greatest to least were: News (67.9%), search engines (65.7%), email (64.7%), instant messaging (41.9%). Online communities, bulletin boards and blogs registered fifth at 41.6%. Users used the Internet for information harvesting on a variety of subjects about 39.8% of the time. Entertainment scored 7th through tenth places, with music listening and use at 38.3%, video at 37.1% and gaming at 37.2%. However, this changed quite dramatically in between the two year period between the two surveys. Not only did the order of preference change in some very interesting ways, but the magnitude changed radically. Online music downloading became the preferred use of the Internet, jumping from the 38.3% logged in the 2006 survey to an astounding 86.6%. And other entertainment uses also skyrocketed as video downloading increased to 76.9%. Also, online gaming has become a very popular use for the Internet which one might argue could be related to the increased time online between the 2006 and 2008 surveys. Certainly it has become a concern of the government of the PRC.

In terms of communications methods, there was a revolution between the two years, as instant messaging apparently began to replace email as the choice of the new generation of Internet users. Certainly this might be attributed partially to the increase in instant messaging services entering China and the applications and utilities available for instant messaging itself.   Instant messaging has dramatically risen from 41.9% of the internet population listing it as an application of preference to 81.4%, a significant increase.   And email dropped significantly from its 2006 base of 64.7% to 56.5%. The order for the top four in the January 2008 survey changed correspondingly to online music, followed closely by instant messaging, online video, and online news.

In conclusion, in terms of applications of choice for the Internet, instant messaging is the second most popular. In addition the two year period registered a significant shift upward in the popularly of IM compared to other applications. Thirdly, the preference for the Internet communication medium of choice appears to be shifting radically away from email and toward the richer, faster and easier to use IM protocol (How Stuff Works, 2008).

In China currently over 170 million users use IM. When inquiring what net citizens do first online, 39.7% indicate that IM is their choice, their first point of entry and interest when logging on. And a cross cultural comparison yields some surprising insights. As of late 2006 the IM application rate in the United States was only 39%. And that for South Korea was only 47.7%. Finally, it is notable that close to 100% (96.3%) of younger users

between 18-24 years of age in China use instant messaging. The question remains as to what explains the apparent popularity of virtual communications via IM in China.

CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS IN CHINA

Katz and Aakhus (2002) suggest that in personal communication technologies the "spirit of the machine" will influence the design of the technology as well as the significance attached to it by users. They identified similarities in the use of mobile phone technology across cultures, arguing that despite the variation in cultures, "the use and folk understanding of the mobile phone seem to be pressing toward uniformity" (ibid, 313-14).   Although they do identify how Apparatgeist leads to conformity, they also admit that particular uses of these communications technologies will vary from culture to culture. Others argue that the cultural fit is extremely important, and that one needs to examine cultural fit as technology in itself does not inherently make sense in a particular culture (Barley 1986, 1990, Widman, Jasko, & Pilotta, 1988, Leonardi, 2003). For example, Smoreda and Thomas (2001) found that the characteristics of social networks shaped the use of mobile telephony in the nine European countries under study.

While the author assumes that culture does affect how technology is perceived and the utility with which it is endowed, it is this author's hope that the results of this discussion and empirical analysis might also bolster the foundation of that assumption with clear arguments supporting that contention.   The analysis will begin by laying out a foundation understanding of three critical interrelated aspects of Chinese culture relevant to the exploration into the popularity of IM there. These include collectivism, guanxi and the high context communication style of China.

In his seminal study of 116,000 individuals Hofstede identified four dimensions of national culture which assist in defining and differentiating cultures.   One of those dimensions included individualism/collectivism (Hofstede, 1980, 1984). This is one of the most widely discussed cultural variables across disciplines (Hofstede 1980, Hui and Triandis, 1995, Triandis, 1995, Ronen, Shenkar 1985, Tropenaar, 1993). In a collectivist society, members find self identity as members of the social system as opposed to from the individual. Emphasis is place on belonging to subgroups and maintaining ones primary allegiance to the collective. The sub-groups to which one belongs define ones identity and has impact on ones private life. Trust is placed not in individual initiative or decisions, but in the group decisions and consensus.

However, Schwartz (1990) proposes to us the caveat that collectivism does have different variants within and across cultures. Triandis, Chen and Chan (1998) distinguish between horizontal and vertical collectivists. Horizontal collectivists, while merging with the in group, do not subordinate. However, vertical collectivists will conform to group norms. For example, Chinese vertical collectivists supported the "marketizing" reforms issued by the Communist party, whereas horizontal collectivists resisted them (Wong, 2001). And as Chew and Putti (1995) note, the collectivist nature of the Chinese is expressed in loyalty to the family, whereas in Japan collectivism is reflected in a higher allegiance in the workplace.

The Chinese culture ranks very low on individualism, lower than any other Asian country (ITIM, 2008). They also score very high on collectivism. Many researchers within the literature confirm this finding (Hofstede, 1984, Lockett, 1988, Leung and Bond, 1984, Nevis 1983). Although some argue that the forces of modernization and globalization are cultivating a new spirit of individualism, albeit with a Chinese flavor (Ralston, 1995, Birnbaum-More, 1995, Yu, Chan, & Ireland, 2007).   On the other hand Gannon (2001) argues that a better characterization of Chinese culture would be neither individualist nor collectivist, but relational. Li (2000) refers to the Chinese variant of collectivism as family-oriented collectivism. Within the Chinese culture, relationships are taken very seriously. Nevis (1983) suggests that the culture of Chinese societies (PRC, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore) fit within the collectivist framework, scoring low on individualism. He re-examined Maslow's hierarchy in relation to China. In his reformulation of Maslow, Nevis made some critical changes to the top and the bottom of the hierarchy of human needs. First, belonging became the most primitive goal within those collectivist societies. And at the top of the hierarchy, in reference to those goals which would become priority once lower level

goals were met, he replaced individual self actualization with self actualization in terms of service to society for Asian cultures.

Therefore, we will assume that Chinese culture ranks low on individualism and places a high value on collective goals. Certainly this goes a long way to explaining the hyper social environment in China. And there is support for the contention that this reflects itself in the existence of relational webs which privileges in group familial relations in China.   This web of relations in China is known as a guanxi. The word "guan" in Chinese can in one sense be translated as referring to a "juncture", a "conjunctive point which connects otherwise separate entities" (Chen, Chen, 2004). "Xi", on the other hand, in common usage means to tie up. Guanxi, therefore, as a noun implies a state in which things such as human beings are connected. Guanxi can be defined at many different levels from many different perspectives (Hammond, Glen, 2004, Chen and Chen, 2004). However, Chen and Chen propose a fairly good definition of guanxi as "an informal particularistic, personal connection between two individuals who are bounded by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norms of guanxi" (Chen, Chen, 2004). The norms include self-disclosure, dynamic reciprocity, and the long-term equity principle.

Probably one of the best ways to understand guanxi is to explore its origin, the design of the structure/fundamental units, and the basis for guanxi in China. The literature outlines two different sources of origin for guanxi, one being the prime and the other the supportive. Much of the literature refers to the influence of the teachings of Confucius on Chinese collective culture and guanxi in particular (Confucius, 1915, Redding, Wong, 1986, King, 1991).   Although Confucius does not expressly use the term guanxi, the term "lun" is somewhat synonymous in its use in Confucian philosophy. Wu-lun refers to the fundamental tenet of Confucian teaching, that humans live in relationship to others.   The five cardinal relationships of Confucianism include ruler/subject, father/son, husband/wife, elder brother/younger brother, and friend/friend (Chen, Chen, 2004). The second meaning of the term lun refers to social order, that order requires differentiation both hierarchically and horizontally. In the hierarchical relations relationships are characterized by unequal rights, obligations to those in higher positions within the hierarchy.   The horizontal refers to those relationships differentiated not as much by unequal rights, but by increasing or decreasing closeness to self, with family blood ties predominating (Ibid).   The final use of the term lun in Confucian philosophy refers to moral principles regarding interpersonal behavior. As Cheng (1990) proposes, Chinese traditions originating from Confucianism provide specific rules for each of the cardinal relationships and act as a glue to adhere society. As he suggests, Confucianism leads predictably to the tradition of honoring those closest to you.

One might argue that the Maoist revolution, paradoxically, exerted a supporting influence on the basis for relationships underpinning guanxi within China. Gold 1985 argues that although the goal of the Chinese communist party was to snuff out personal and particularistic relational bases, and to substitute universal comradeship in their stead, it failed miserably. In fact in some ways it only enhanced the relational bases, as relations became extremely useful in an economy of scarcity. Yu, Chan and Ireland (2007) discuss how guanxi helped in procuring vital access to scarce goods and services.   Although the basis for relations under Communism became somewhat less commoditized, nonetheless one could argue that the experience of Communism did not successfully destroy traditional particularistic personal relations but only reduce the commoditization of those relations to a degree. For example, non-material favors helped to navigate the highly unresponsive bureaucratic maze to "pull strings" and get things done under Communism.   But, as Gold further relates, with the expanding role of the market and entrepreneurship in both the urban and rural areas, rising wages, increased production of consumer goods, and a new consumerist philosophy, the material basis for these traditional relationships has returned in force.

As Chen and Chen (2004) contend, the fundamental units of a guanxiwang, are the individual dyads of relationship within the group, and not necessarily the group entity itself. They go on to relate that these dyadic sentiments and obligations comprise the internal cohesion for guanxi. Guanxi relationships can be categorized by three levels of "closeness" or intimacy: family/kinship, familiar persons and strangers. Hwang (1987) delineates guanxi units based on whether they are socio-affective, mixed or purely instrumental. As Chen and Chen relates, it could be argued that these two rubrics are very consistent as relationships between family members are socio-affective while those with familiar persons are mixed, and those with strangers instrumental.

The basis for guanxi capital is highly particularistic and personal. The foundation basis for guanxi is a series interactions in which favors and information are exchanged over time, enmeshing individuals within networks of reciprocal obligation. Guanxi is not obvious nor easily identified and can only be perceived through interaction. Clearly, one of the bases for guanxi is the assumption of reciprocity, related to "bao" or social investment in others (Gold, 1985).   "Xing", literally "trustworthiness" also plays a related and pivotal part in the assumption of reciprocity. It is based on two components, sincerity and ability. First and foremost trust develops when a party to a relationship is perceived as sincere in their intention to honor a guanxi obligation. Here relational proximity, whether an insider or outsider, plays an important part in the perception of trust. Only secondarily is trust based upon the perceived ability to perform (Chen, Chen 2004). On the one hand one gains status and guanxi capital by demonstrating that one can get things done. Such instrumental bases for relationship are more pivotal with strangers (wa ren) (Hammond, Glen, 2004) than with family or acquaintances. On the other hand, relationships and obligations to insiders (zi ji ren), including a web of related parties by blood or friendship, transcend purely instrumental factors and embrace relational factors (Yang 1993).   Trust under guanxi is a mix of instrumentalism and particularism, in which both trust and ability to perform reciprocal favors plays a part (Chen, Chen, 2004). As Gold (1985) states, add to this a heady mix of "renqing", or human feelings and empathy, and you end up with a complex concoction which tightly binds individuals within relational units.

Therefore, China is a collective society which is characterized by a tight knit web of particularistic and instrumental relationships based on traditional Chinese social organizing principles and cemented in by mutual exchange of favors, gifts and information. It is no wonder that in China, family, friendship and a circle of associates plays such an important role in society. A number of authors focus in on the on the informational transfer function of a guanxiwang (Ting-Toomey, 1988, Hammond, Glen, 2004). Certainly this is a salient characteristic when considering the popularity of IM in what one might consider the virtual extension of guanxi networks onto the Internet.

Finally, in terms of communications, the Chinese culture is considered, as with other Asian cultures, to be high context (Hall, 1976, Gannon, 2001, Xia, 2006). In a high context culture, most information is implicit. Meanings are to be inferred and less often articulated explicitly. In high context cultures the meanings are embedded within the context. Therefore, the Chinese engage in indirect modes of communication in which where, how and by whom something is said is often even more important than the content of the message itself. People infer meanings from messages in light of their knowledge of the person and the surroundings. It follows then that within these cultures close personal relationships are very important and extensive informational networks play an important part in the communication and interpretation of messages. The importance of this will become quite apparent in the following discussion regarding the consistency of IM with the collectivist, high context culture of China in which guanxiwang form the basic constructs for social relationships.

CONTEXT, COLLECTIVISM, CONFUCIANISM, AND CONNECTIVITY – HOW THEY RELATE

As related earlier in this paper, the notion of Apparatgeist or "the spirit of the machine" maintains that technologies exert a powerful influence on "both designs of the technology as well as the initial and subsequest significance accorded them by users, non-users, and anti-users (Katz, Aakhus, 2002, pg. 305). They attempt to escape the criticism of determinism by stating that "Apparatgeist is not a term that requires (underline added for emphasis) technological determinism" (ibid., pg. 307) and go on to explain that technology only serves as a constraint on the possibilities of what people can do. However, later they propose that uses of technology are socially developed, based on functional and social needs, perceived values and status considerations, and peoples decision of which technologies to use and where to use them. Several studies support the contention that media use varies between cultures (Massey, 2001, Setlock, 2004, Choi, 2005 Kayan, Fussell, & Setlock, 2006).

Certainly the results of this research support the critical influence of culture on the meanings that people attach to technology and their choice and use thereof (Kayan, Fussell, & Setlock, 2006). The focus of this research is the technology of instant messaging. Instant messaging is an Internet communication technology that facilitates near real-time communication between two or more participants over a network. It begins with downloading instant messaging software. One then opens the client, which tries to connect to a server.   Once the client is connected to

the server, you can enter a name and password. The server creates a temporary file that has the connection information for you and the list of your contacts. It then checks to see if any of your contacts are logged in. If it determines that any are, then it sends a message back to the client on your computer and the contact is listed as "logged in". Because your client has the IP, the unique internet identity of your computer, the address and port number for the computers of your contacts, you are able to communicate directly between yours and your contacts' clients (HowStuffWorks, 2008) as if you were present in the same time and space. Therefore your message is "instantly" received and can be immediately, in near real-time, responded to.

IM capabilities have greatly expanded in recent years to include a number of new embellishments and bells and whistles that allow rich contextualization of the communication environment. For example, photos of contacts can be downloaded to your contact lists. Photos can be shared and dragged to the chat window where they appear immediately on ones friend's chat window. Personalization capabilities have exploded with customized icons, greetings, and screen interfaces. Contacts can use direct internet based phone services in IM environments and talk exactly as one would over a telephone. Video chat is another capability. Music and videos can be shared/streamed and downloaded to the chat windows. Plans for the future presage almost limitless options for multimedia collaboration and high context communication through IM environments.

The popularity of IM in China has exploded to the point where it is almost an obsession (International Herald Tribune, 2007. As related earlier in the paper there has been a revolution in online IM communications in China. Over 170 million internet citizens are currently hooked up and hooked into IM networks in China. In fact, IM has become the dominant medium of virtual communications, replacing email, with 81% of the overall population and almost 100% of those between the ages of 18-24. And a cross cultural comparison indicates that China is an outlier in terms of the application rate of IM. For example, the application rate of IM in the United States and South Korea is 39% and 48% respectively. One very successful variant in China is the QQ mobile IM package created by Tencent (International Herald Tribune, 2007).   In the article the writer shares a story of a fairly common experience in which one 21 year old college student spends 5 hours a day on the QQ network. As Yu, Chan and Ireland (2007) point out, modern technology has made expanding personal networks "simple and inexpensive for most urbanites", particularly the young with access to mobile phones and PC's. In terms of guanxi, the extended personal networks facilitated by IM provide efficient ways to reach out to friends separated by vast distances, as well as to people in countries outside China and exchange information and ideas that can influence youth culture there.

It seems that IM is a perfect fit for this high context, collectivist culture, characterized by rich social networks. One might argue that IM "supercharges" their ability to plant, grow and harvest of social relationships within this hyper-social environment. For example, lianxi, or routine contact, is a critical process of cultivating relationships in guanxi (Xia, 2006). IM, with its almost real-time social environment is wonderfully suited for this task, creating perpetual social spaces for tending your guanxiwang. Email, on the other hand, only informs and does not engage the sender and receiver in any meaningful immediate dialogue, nor does it allow for reading subtle contextual clues so paramount in a high context culture. Also, the communication in email is reduced to a one way diad with no feedback loop. A 2006 study of cross cultural differences in the use of instant messaging found that 73% of Asians use multi-party chat environments whereas only 5% of Americans do (Kayan, Fussell, & Setlock, 2006). These results appear very consistent with the fact that China is a highly collectivist society and the United States at the other end of the spectrum as one of the most highly individualistic societies.

Studies of mobile phone telephony indicate that phone calls are an efficient way to schedule face to face communication (Xia, 2006). On the other hand, one might argue that mobile phones alone do not fit the requirement for the high context communications necessary in China. However, mobile IM, in comparison, with its possibilities for rich contextual communication, one could argue could even be a substitute for face to face communications. In fact, IM creates possibilities for maintaining face (mianzi) in ways not possible with even face to face communications. For example, IM empowers one to create a façade that conforms with what the inner self wants to express, where in face to face communications, one is somewhat limited by ones physical appearance. It is very popular in China to create a virtual image and participate, with vigor, in living virtual online lives. The Chinese enthusiastically personalize their IM spaces to create rich contextual environments through which subtle, and not so

subtle, clues to meaning can be attached. For example, one study discovered that a greater percentage of Asians (100%) than North Americans (72%) use emoticons (Kayan, Fussell, & Setlock, 2006). And the study also found that Internet users within the collectivist cultures of Asia use audio and video chat on IM with a much greater degree of frequency than North Americans.

In conclusion, one might argue that IM is perfectly suited to China with its collectivist, high context culture, characterized by hyper sociality and guanxi networks. It facilitates the creation of high context environments not possible with either email or mobile phones without IM capability. And a few interesting results seem to stand out in the analysis. For one, not only is IM suited to the Chinese culture, it supercharges the preparation, planting, growing and harvesting guanxi networks. One can be eternally connected to ones guanxiwang and relational dyads with mobile IM. It becomes a new reality. It offers additional tools to manipulate contextual cues which dwarf the capabilities in solely face to face contexts. Streaming videos, photos, file sharing, and the myriad of personalization options empower the use to subtly arrange their virtual self and communicate and collaborate much more efficiently, effectively and with greater frequency. Also, one could argue that in a number of ways IM facilitates the protection of ones mianzi by empowering the user to carefully express the prearranged, pre-planned image facade created in the IM environment to conform to what the inner self wants to express. In some ways these frees the user from being limited to the constraints of personal physical appearance and other physical constraints and allows one to create a new self.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to explore the reasons behind the phenomenal growth in the use of instant messaging (IM) in China. China is country of superlatives, and will have a critical impact in the 21st century. The Internet in China is growing at a phenomenal pace in terms of users. And the population of users, although currently dominated by urbane, educated, high income males, is rapidly diffusing outside the cities, down the social economic chain, across regions, and genders. China currently has the second largest Internet population and will certainly have a profound impact on future Internet technologies.

The paper proposed that one important variable to explain the enthusiastic embrace of this technology is indeed the unique culture of China. As the analysis clearly indicates, consistent with the "spirit of the machine" how the Internet is perceived and how it is used in China is being filtered through a unique culture which is highly contextual, collectivist and characterized by unique social networks referred to as guanxiwang. A review of the empirical data indicates that the use of IM has exploded in the last few years in China and become one of the, if not the dominate medium of communication and social networking. And it also uncovered that China is somewhat of an outlier in the application rate of IM.

IM offers a unique environment rich in tools for contextual modeling that one could argue is extraordinarily well suited to the China with its collectivist, high context culture, characterized by hyper sociality and guanxi networks. It offers the possibility of creating a rich, high context environment not possible with either email or mobile phones without IM capability. Clearly the research, discussion and analysis presented in this paper do not approach the rigorous empirical research necessary to support the hypothesis in anything but a tentative way. But this author hopes that the discussion did add to the discussion of how Apparatgeist and culture interact in general, and more specifically in the case of IM in China.

Our research also uncovered two interesting propositions for consideration for future research. First that IM not only facilitates but supercharges the preparation, planting, growing and harvesting guanxi networks. One might even argue that mobile IM breaks down some of the time and space constraints which were characteristic guanxi cultivating in the past. One can be continuously hooked up to ones relational networks with guanxi. The effect of this supercharging of guanxi creation and maintenance is an interesting subject for further research.

Also, by allowing users to carefully craft virtual selves, users can manipulate the expression of self in ways not possible in a solely face to face environment. In some ways the IM environment frees the user from being limited to the constraints of physical appearance as well as other physical contextual variables and allows one to

create a new virtual self. How this affects and will affect mianzi and guanxi and self expression in China is another interesting prospect for further research.

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