Ethnography

Chinese elite migrants and formation of new communities in a changing society: An online-offline ethnography

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Abstract

The online-offline distinction is increasingly observed by academics and laypersons. How are the 'virtual' spaces intertwined with the offline physical world? What are locally specific meanings of the online communicative practices? And how do offline contexts shape online activities? Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork among Chinese urban elite migrants, the study explores the ways in which new types of urban communities are formed as an outcome of online-offline dynamics in a rapidly changing society. The research starts as a 'traditional' ethnography focusing on the offline 'natural habitat' of the participants. However, the participants demonstrate that their virtual spaces are as important as their offline physical spaces; the online and offline spaces are growing into one lived reality, and the ethnographer is compelled to take into account the online in order to gain a rounded understanding of the participants' life worlds.

The internet has changed people's communication patterns as well as their ways of organizing their lives. People increasingly depend on online spaces to share opinions, photos, music, or trivial life details with 'friends' as well as potentially unknown others. When we need information we 'Google' it; we 'friend' or

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'unfriend' someone on Facebook and text 'OMG', 'LOL', '555' to mark our emotions. The new media, facilitated by Web 2.0, allow us to participate in the creation, circulation and representation of news events, instead of positioning us at the mere receiving end of news dissemination. Increasingly, more people manage their social networks around the internet and they are likely to experience anxiety and disorientation when the internet fails to work.[1] The internet has become so much part of their life experience that ethnographers are confronted with a fact: if they continue to be ambitious in obtaining a deep and full understanding of their participants' social lives, as they traditionally are, they have to take virtual spaces seriously and to include them in research agendas (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2008, forthcoming; Androutsopoulos and Juffermans, 2014; Leppänen, 2009; Blommaert, 2010, Varis, forthcoming; Du and Kroon, forthcoming; Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2000; Howard, 2002; Rampton et al., 2014). In this article, my arguments are twofold: first, I argue that the ethnographer ought to take on the challenge of the internet and to understand the informants' online practices. Second, which is related to the first one, I argue that the online practices contribute to the formation of new types of communities in the intensively changing Chinese society.[2]

Chinese society has undergone rapid transformation in the past 30 years. Since the launch of economic reform in 1978, China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been growing on an average of 9% per annum[3] (China Economy, 2015). The economic changes have transformed the urban manufacture and services industries and attracted millions of laborers as well as white-collar workers from villages, underdeveloped regions and smaller cities to the urban centers and metropolises such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. The society has been dramatically restructured, so that some social groups are upscaled, others downscaled, while new groups emerge. The massive labor migration, for instance, is an immediate result of the urbanization and industrialization, as many rural laborers leave villages for urban employment. They typically take low-skilled and low-income jobs such as construction workers, waiters, cleaners, domestic workers, shoe menders – jobs that urban citizens tend to avoid (Dong, 2011). An expanding body of literature addresses the labor migration inside China (Fan, 2005; Han, 2001; Henderson and Nadvi, 2011; Lu, 2005; Woronov, 2004; Dong, 2010; Xiang, 2013). However, a different group of migrants – elite migrants – often escape research attention, as the emphases of migration studies are traditionally placed on marginality and inequality characterizing labor migrants.[4] Obtaining an in-depth understanding of elite migrants becomes a pressing issue, as they bring remarkable cultural and linguistic diversity to the metropolis; together with labor migrants, they transform urban China into a new and rapidly diversified modern society (Vertovec, 2006; see also Blommaert, 2011).

I use the term 'elite migrants' to refer to the highly educated people who move to the urban centers and establish themselves in the middle strata of the host societies. The elite migrants are distinguished from labor migrants in many aspects, not only income and social status, but also mobility and identity (Blommaert, 2005; Castells, 2011; Dong, 2013). The annual income of the elite informants typically falls

between US\$30,000 and \$80,000. In term of social status, many elite migrants are able to obtain a local *hukou*, a household registration record that groups people into rural or urban hukou-holders at birth and transgenerationally. Possessing a local hukou means one is entitled to local resources and local welfare services. Although it is very difficult to change a hukou record, elite migrants often are able to obtain a local urban hukou through education and employment (some jobs have a hukou quota attached) in the host societies. Possessing a hukou of the host society, however, does not necessarily mean that one achieves a local identity. Many informants indicate that they feel they are still outsiders in their new city, especially when they do not speak the local dialects (Dong and Blommaert, 2016). Instead of trying to localize themselves into the urban centers, some demonstrate high global (as well as national) mobility, traveling frequently to and eventually emigrating to a western country (Dong, 2016a). The increasing use of the internet adds another layer to the already complex settings around the elite migrants as they are highly mobile within the country, globally and virtually. This study therefore focuses on the elite migrants' online activities, their virtual mobility, as well as their formation of a new type of community.

The study was undertaken over five years, during which I investigated the formation of an elite migrant group, clustering around a hobbyist blog of Saab cars and reinventing the social meanings of driving this particular kind of car in the Chinese context. The members mostly originated from outside the urban centers, moved to the cities in their 20s and are active in the private sector; they set themselves off against 'ordinary' Chinese citizens by means of elaborate discourses and semiotic enactments, organized around specific luxury commodities (Blommaert and Varis, 2011; Dong, 2016b). The research began as a 'traditional' ethnography in late 2009; it followed the idea that the ethnographer has to immerse herself in the target community so that she understands the participants' logic of social practices. In Burawoy's terms, ethnography is 'the study of people in their own time and space, in their own everyday lives' (Burawoy et al., 1991: 2). During the fieldwork, however, the participants repeatedly directed me, the ethnographer, to the digital spaces which became an organic part in forming a realistic and accurate picture of their life worlds. I picked up this cue as a 'rich point' (Agar, 1995) and followed the participants into their online spaces. The 'adventure' turned out to be crucial for a rounded understanding, as the online data speak to and complete the offline data. In what follows, I trace the online-offline ethnographic journey and present textual data in the context of intensive social and cultural changes. Before that, a sketch of virtual ethnography and the Chinese virtual spaces is in order.

Virtual ethnography

Ethnographic studies on digital data are captured under various names such as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000), 'digital ethnography' (Murthy, 2008), 'discourse-centred online ethnography' (Androutsopoulos, 2008), 'internet

ethnography' (boyd, 2008), 'cyberethnography' (Robinson and Schulz, 2009), and more. The field is highly diverse, partly due to the very different kinds of data and online environments it attempts to investigate; more importantly, however, the diversity is a reflection of the inherent differences in understanding what ethnography is (Varis, forthcoming). Different perceptions of 'ethnography' range from reducing it to a set of data collection techniques, a synonym for description, to seeing it as an approach with peculiar ontological and epistemological substances (Blommaert and Dong, 2010).

Early research on the computer mediated communication, what Androutsopoulos calls the 'first wave' (2008), usually focuses on de-contextualized texts randomly collected from technologically mediated communication such as email and newsgroup. Recent research pays increasing attention to the production and circulation of online texts as socially and contextually bounded practices. While experimental research is an important line of investigation in this phase, ethnographic research gains ground as a 'growing application of naturalistic approaches to online phenomena and the subsequent claiming of the Internet as a cultural context... our knowledge of the internet as a cultural context is intrinsically tied up with the application of ethnography' (Hine, 2013: 7). Ethnographers, particularly those who emphasize 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), aim to produce holistic and situated studies out of the Internet in people's lived reality. Following this tradition, virtual ethnography studies locally specific online actions and tries to understand internet users' situated online practices.

With the increasing possibility that a huge amount of online data can be easily and quickly collected across the globe, it is important to remember that ethnographically informed research entails data understood in its context, and context is always interactively and collaboratively constructed, rather than assumed or predefined. Compared to the traditional way of doing ethnography, virtual ethnography faces particular contextualization challenges. For instance, social network sites bring people together from diverse life domains, such as friends, family, colleagues (who can be boss, co-worker, client), people who have never met face-to-face, and this contextual complexity may lead to different communication patterns. Further, virtual contexts such as Twitter and Facebook appear to be self-explanatory; however, we can hardly take for granted the ways people use them and the meanings they have for the users. Moreover, with the growing use of mobile technology such as smartphones and tablets, people are no longer 'confined' to their desk, but are mobile and are able to produce online texts and images from various offline environments (e.g. from bathroom, classroom, concert, restaurant). Therefore, online activities have to be carefully contextualized and understood in multiple, polycentric and often collaboratively constructed environments which sometimes are beyond what can be observed on the screen.

Online-offline combined ethnography therefore is more at ease with contextualization than ethnographic studies that merely have access to digital data through screen observation. It offers a way of not only observing the online 'end products'

but also situating them in physical offline environments in which the online activities occur. Recent research on online-offline ethnography demonstrates that the online environments are an integral part of people's life worlds in which some communication practices begin online and move offline, while others move from offline to online (e.g. Hallett and Barber, 2014; Madsen and Stæhr, 2014; Stæhr, 2014). Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and Taylor (2012) present ethnographic methods and provide examples of online-offline ethnography to study social interactions in virtual spaces as part of people's everyday lives. The book stresses that we should 'cross' the border between the online and offline settings and study the virtual worlds as valid venues for cultural practices embedded in the 'real world' (p. 1). Ethnographers in this trend therefore take into account what appears to be relevant and focus on creating a comprehensive and precise picture. In addition, online-offline ethnography has important methodological and analytical implications. While watching behind the screen, for instance, reduces the 'observer's effects' as the ethnographer is 'invisible' to the researched, it creates problems of whether this can be counted as ethnographic observation and what ethical boundaries online ethnography should function within. Another methodological issue relating to the use of the screen, as discussed above, is that the ethnographer may have to 'go beyond the screen' to find out 'real' and locally specific meanings of online data which may not be straightforward despite making sense on the screen (Dong and Blommaert, 2016; also see Varis, forthcoming, for an elaborated review of digital ethnography).

The Chinese online spaces

Chinese netizens (*wangmin*) reached 618 million by the end of 2013 (CNNIC, 2014). It is reported that the Chinese internet is the world's largest digital network, hosting 329 million active blog sites, in comparison with the 133 million English language blog sites (Winn, 2009). Mobile communication has increased sharply, from 5 million users in 1995 to 1.2 billion in 2014, and 67% of the mobile users access the internet from their mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets (MIIT, 2014). Research written in English on the Chinese internet largely falls into two categories: first, the internet's ability to liberate its users and, second, the information control practices of the state and its contracting institutions. The first strand of research emphasizes the unprecedented speed and volume of information circulating on the internet and predicts its potential, overtly or covertly, in socially 'revolutionizing' Chinese society (e.g. Yang, 2009; Zheng, 2007; Zhou, 2009; Tai, 2006; Xiao, 2011; Yu, 2007; Wang and Hong, 2009; Yang et al., 2014). The second strand describes the censorship of the Chinese internet and claims that it is a huge 'intranet' because of the firewalls that block access to various global websites (Deibert, 2002; Tsui, 2003; Lagerkvist, 2006; MacKinnon, 2008, 2009; Jiang, 2010; Qiu, 2000).[5] While the two lines of research are both influential and well developed, the simple dichotomy of digital activism versus surveillance may hide the true complexity of the Chinese internet

(Leibold, 2011) and may leave important phenomena unstudied. Consequently, this paper looks beyond the thought-control/liberation dichotomy to examine the nuanced online practices of the Chinese netizens in order to gain insights into the internet and the changing patterns of communication.

The internet is entrenched in the social lives of urban Chinese. On average urban Chinese, especially young professionals, spend 45% of their off-work time on the internet (Leibold, 2011). The internet reorganizes people's social networks and socializing patterns. Instead of meeting friends in person, people depend on SNSs (Social Networking Software) to track down long-lost friends and to keep in touch with acquaintances. They make new friends in digital spaces, and increasingly more people look for dating partners in virtual environments (CNNIC, 2014). In contrast to the predictions that the internet would be a place for discussing social and political issues, survey data reveal that 82% of the Chinese netizens use the internet for searching, 79% for downloading music, 77% for instant messaging and 67% for gaming (CNNIC, 2011: 31). In the more interactive spaces, such as BBSs and blogosphere, 84% use the spaces to record their feelings and emotions and 37% to 'express one's opinions' (CNNIC, 2009: 27). Consequently, it is argued that the Chinese internet, like its counterparts around the globe, is a place of 'playful self-expression and identity exhibition' (Leibold, 2011: 1026). It is dominated by soft infotainment and it functions more like an 'entertainment highway' than an 'information superhighway' (Guo, 2007: 36).

The virtual space studied in this research is a hobbyist BBS. BBSs (Bulletin Boards Systems, *luntan*) are community-based webpages with user-generated content, typically organized around thematic issues such as sports, music, hobbies, education, arts. BBSs have system operators (sysops) who run the spaces and reinforce forum policies. BBS users sometime manipulate their wording to avoid sysop filtering and they typically practice 'self-policing' to observe the (often unspoken) norms of the online spaces (Leppänen, 2009; Blommaert, 2010). I will return to this point in data analysis.

Elite migrants and formation of new social communities: An online-offline ethnography

The data were drawn from my ethnographic fieldwork between 2009 and 2014 among young urban professionals who shared the common feature of being Saab cars drivers in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Shenzhen. The ethnography was therefore multi-sited by its nature (Marcus, 1995; Xiang, 2013) and the participants were scattered over various cities because they were initially brought together by an online forum (xcar.com.cn) in which they exchanged technical information on Saab cars, their driving experiences, as well as their passion for Saab. Their interactions gradually became offline around 2009 when they discovered more similarities among themselves than just their shared preference for the brand. For instance, many of them played golf, they travelled abroad frequently, they mostly relocated to the urban centers for employment and the majority of

them held foreign academic diplomas. Another factor that led the participants to form a group was that Saab car dealers lowered their prices in the Chinese market around 2009 and, as a result, Saab cars became more affordable to those who were 'not exactly the same type of people'.[6] Interestingly, it seemed that when Saab became more democratically available, the group – the earlier generation of Saab fans – created new exclusivity by adding more features of distinction such as global experience and golf. In other words, it was no longer enough just to be a Saab fan; one needed to demonstrate and to perform more features of distinction in ordered ways to establish in-group membership.

My earlier ethnography sought to understand the social and geographic mobility of the elite migrants (Dong, 2013). It started as an offline ethnography which showed that the Saab fans modeled their social identities on consumption patterns, converting consumption acts into class-identity acts. They produced taste related discourses which pointed to an emerging Chinese middle class identity. The middle class debates were heated in China; the questions were centered on whether a middle class did exist and, if so, what criteria qualified one as a member of the middle class in a rapidly transforming society. Choice of automobile is known as an indicator of status display around the globe; however, car brands might signify different meanings in the Chinese context from their meaning in western societies. For instance, Mercedes and BMW often were stereotypically labelled as cars for '*tuhao*' or the nouveau riche[7] in China, an identity label that the educated middle class tended to avoid. In contrast, Saab was less used as an overt marker of one's fortune, although it usually fell in a similar price range as Mercedes and BMW in the Chinese automobile market. Therefore, Saab might serve as a more accurate pointer of the middle class identity than Mercedes and BMW.

As I reflected on the early ethnography studies, however, I was confronted with the fact that the online elements always had been an integral part of the group: the group started from the online hobbyist forum; they maintained frequent online communication while they met offline; the informants repetitively directed me to their online forum and suggested that it could help me with a better understanding of their group. The online space became an organic part of the informants' life worlds and it was clear that the internet was not to be ignored if I was ever to try to study the group in a truly ethnographic way.

Therefore, I started an online ethnography to investigate the elite migrants' virtual mobility by joining the BBS in May 2011 (and later I became a 'friend' on Weibo, a Chinese hybrid of Twitter and Facebook). Between mid 2011 and late 2014, on average I checked the BBS and Weibo once a day, observed the online activities of the informants and interacted with them by asking questions about and commenting on their posts. The means of online data collection included textual and visual document collection (written texts, still and moving images; 1304 pieces), participant observation (1912 hours, accompanied by field notes and screen prints) and asynchronous text-based interview (297 entries). Whenever necessary, I approached the informants through offline means (text messaging, phone conversations, face-to-face discussion) for further explanation and elaboration on their

online practices. Therefore the informants' online discursive practices were contextualized in their offline environments. In what follows, I present and analyze two extracts: (1) online interactions at the initial stage of community formation; and (2) online interactions that call for offline activities. The two extracts instantiate the way in which online activities lead to the formation of new types of communities in the rapidly changing Chinese society.

Policing, self-regulation and humor as a form of implicit criticism

The studied BBS is located in a section of an automobile website which offers latest car information. It claims to be 'the most used automobile BBS' in China and (questionably) in the world, given the size of the country's population.[8] The BBS is organized around car brands; a popular brand attracts as many as one million posts accumulatively; the Saab space attracts fewer but still an impressive amount of attention (416,750 posts[9]). The forum contents are open for browsing, while only registered users have access to creating, editing, uploading and responding to posts. The forum is managed by sysops (system operators) and *banzhu* (or co-sysops). Sysops are paid staff who have the authority to issue warnings, to delete posts and to ban users from uploading posts. In contrast to sysops, banzhu are volunteer users who are granted privileges to help validate users and monitor discussions. There are written behavioral guides for the forum users and sysops are responsible to update the guide. The actions of the forum users can be regulated by the banzhu on a day-to-day basis and by the sysops if there are serious transgressions, although sysops and banzhu infrequently practice such authority. It is usually the tacit norms, rather than the explicit rules, that are enacted, negotiated and observed. In addition, there are strangers, such as potential car buyers and car dealers, besides the car owners in this forum.

The post analyzed here is produced by my contact person X, through whom I gained access to the Saab group. X is in his early 40s, a lawyer and partner of a law firm in Beijing. He has been a Saab driver since late 2007. I select his post because it allows me to consult him in subsequent data analysis and to have him comment on my interpretation of the data.

The post was published on 8 November 2007. All responses and commentary entries were posted on the same day. The respondents are alphabetically identified with A, B, C, D, E, F; the same letter is used when the respondent 'speaks' again. All user IDs are kept anonymous. In what follows, I present the translated transcripts in English.

Extract 1 presents a case in which an online community is forming as people negotiate group norms and insider identities. The data include one post and nine commentary entries. The post attracts 35 commentary entries in total; 26 entries are excluded from the analysis, as they are technical discussions, comparisons of car prices, or repetitions of what has been shown in the nine selected entries. The selected entries mostly are related to an argument between B and C. The data can be divided into three parts: Part 1 – X's initiation of the discussion and A's

Extract 1. BBS argument[10]

No. Time line	The posts
1 13:20 08 Nov.2007	X: Will the price of Mercedes C Class have some impact on Saab? (Could) you guys (help me) figure it out, (I) personally think they are two different kinds of cars. But still (I) hope Saab 9-3 can be cheaper
2 13:42	A: Don't buy a Mercedes just because it is a little cheaper. The services of Mercedes, haha, I would be hesitant spending 300,000 RMB on a Mercedes, the Chinese (Mercedes) service offers nothing!!!
3 14:59	B: (I) wish you good luck ~~~
4 15:24	C: {cited Entry 3} I have no idea what you mean here. Are you sincere? Or. . . This is a harmonious space, car dealers don't come here to mess it up. Buyers and sellers are always on the opposite sides. This is a buyer's forum. (It) welcomes sellers but does not welcome (sellers who) come here to mess it up.

In between a number of responses explain why Saab is worth buying, even if it is as expensive as a low end Mercedes.

8 17:08	B: {cited Entry 4} Buddy are you OK????? My ID suits you better {B's ID means 'mess it up'}.
10 17:31	C: {cited Entry 8; changed to a bigger font and red color} don't behave like being stung whenever we talk about car price. (You) jump out and say 'good luck~~~' In a buyer's forum it is impossible to avoid the price topic. Everyone knows what you mean by that. We talk about price and you are sarcastic. Why do you boo here. I am saying what I think. (The forum) here doesn't welcome you! You ask everyone (here who use the forum whether it) is me or you who mess things up!

In between several rounds of quarrelling, plus some technical discussions

20 18:03	D: Sigh. . . you two ruin (X's) post. . . really hate this kind of (online) behavior.
24 19:39	E: Quarrel quarrel makes (the space) healthier!!!!! Haven't seen (forum users) quarrel for some time!!
26 19:51	F: River crab, river crab society

response (Turn 1 and 2); Part 2 – the argument between B and C (Turn 3, 4, 8, 10 and 12); Part 3 – the involvement of D, E and F (Turn 20, 24, 26).

In Part 1, X initiates the discussion and A responds in 20 minutes. This post is one of X's earliest attempts to 'speak' in the BBS, when he is considering buying a Saab car. Compared to X's later posts, this one is carefully formulated in a polite tone, showing his willingness to learn from peer forum users who are thought to be more knowledgeable than he is in regard to Saab cars. Moreover, he tries not to offend the BBS users when he mentions that Mercedes C-Class is a potential

competitor in the same price range because he knows that many Chinese Saab owners, at least those who are active in the BBS, hold strong feelings toward their Saab cars. Elsewhere I argue that the Chinese Saab fans reinvent the social meanings of Saab and relate it to their identities: they describe the car as well as themselves as '*mensao* (闷骚)', a Chinese term referring to those (the car as well as its owner) who appear to be calm and inconspicuous on the surface but deep down inside they are extremely passionate and ready to 'explode' into performance if required. This is the kind of 'cool' highly valued among the Saab enthusiasts (Dong, 2013). This low-key style is in sharp contrast to the showoff image usually signaled by Mercedes in the Chinese context. X senses the tacit meaning and mitigates his potentially unpleasant topic by acknowledging '(I) personally think they are two different kinds of cars' (Turn 1). He nevertheless makes his point 'But still (I) hope Saab 9-3 can be cheaper'. This post is X's only time 'speaking' in the subsequent discussions. He does not respond to any commentary entry in the interactions. In a follow-up interview, he explains that the tense argument silences him; he is busy learning the unspoken norms of the virtual space, for instance, what is appropriate to say and how he should say it. At this stage, X's access to the 'right' communication resources, such as the insiders' jargon, style or code, is limited and he feels the urge to learn the rules so as to be part of the community, to achieve an insider's identity and to act more comfortably.

B responds '(I) wish you good luck ∼∼∼' in Turn 3 and marks the beginning of an online argument (Part 2). 'I wish you good luck' is a sarcastic comment implying 'one needs to have much luck if he buys a Saab car'. The sign '∼∼∼' in online discourses usually resembles a floating, joyful tone and sometimes is used to mitigate potentially offensive texts. C is offended and responds in an argumentative tone. C accuses B of being a car dealer and implies that B's utterance 'wish you good luck' is ironic (Turn 4). The BBS space is reserved for car owner discussion and therefore car dealers are particularly unwelcome. Car dealers usually keep silent or fake a Saab fan identity in the forum, but B's utterances 'betray' him and are seen as a transgression that must be 'self-policed' by fellow BBS users. 'Self-policing' is a form of self-regulation, a process in which community members voluntarily monitor the forum users' adherence to the behavioral norms. It is practiced in most online environments because without visual aids such as facial expressions and body signals, online users have to rely on linguistic, textual and stylistic features displayed on the screen to negotiate meanings. Here we see that by invoking covert group norms, C identifies B as an outsider who should not be part of the forum, and by exercising self-policing practices C reinforces the group coherence and positions the Saab group in relation to other social groups such as car dealers.

In the third part, D, E and F are involved in the discussion and their involvement ends the argument. D says, 'Sigh... you two ruin (X's) post... really hate this kind of (online) behavior' (Turn 20). In this entry, D uses emotionally charged expressions such as 'hate'. In contrast to D's serious tone, E's criticism is given in a more fun way. His 'Quarrel quarrel makes (the space) healthier (*chao chao geng jian*

kang)' is a joking reproduction of a known feminine wash advertisement line (wash wash makes ((people)) healthier *xi xi geng jian kang*). E does not suggest that quarrelling would benefit the BBS; his entry points to the often joked-about TV advertisement and, by doing this, he triggers comic effects of the advertisement, defusing the situation and implying that B and C's argument is more of fuzzy babbles.

In Turn 26, F posts 'River crab, river crab society (*héxiè, hexie shehui*)'. Héxiè (river crab 河蟹) is the homophone (but with different tone on the character '*xie*') of the Chinese word 'harmony'. Harmony (héxié 和谐) is a propaganda ideal in China state discourses, usually appearing in the socialist slogan 'Build a Harmonious Society (*goujian hexie shehui*)'. The notion of harmony or being harmonious in the public discourse is appropriated by the Chinese netizens and becomes a verb, 'be harmonized (*beihexie*)', which means a voice different from the mainstream values has to be silenced in order to keep the society 'harmonious', or consensual. Héxiè (river crab) is an online parody of héxié (harmony), playfully expressing netizens' critical attitudes toward the 'harmonization' practices in the public sphere. This online jargon is rarely used in offline media. In Turn 26, F uses this play on words to show his disapproval of B and C's argument, claiming that their argument makes the BBS a quarrelsome place. By using the word héxiè (river crab) as a form of implicit criticism, F borrows the public sphere discourse and suggests that B and C should be silenced. Here online practices appear as a kind of alignment with a particular contextual frame – a frame contextualized at a public and state discourse level – and this in turn can be seen as a feature of emerging community in which the forum users are moving toward different orders of group norms so as to negotiate group identities.

This extract shows the early stage when the Saab members interact online and when they have not established offline connections. In this extract, several norm negotiations are subject to interpretation and explanation. First, X knows that his command of community norms and insider's code is inadequate and therefore he voices his questions carefully. It is through the capacity of reproducing the normative discourses that one demonstrates his or her alignment with the community and establishes an insider's identity. Second, C's 'self-policing' practice reinforces the emerging community norms and defines the community boundaries, albeit somewhat clumsily. Third, online parodies are presented as an instance of implicit criticism and as a way of showing how the virtual group community can be controlled. The BBS users appropriate public discourses (a commercial advertisement and a state slogan) to express their disapproval of the argument between B and C, and the parodies end the undesired online behavior. In all three parts, the participants create, negotiate and establish different orders of norms; they are forced to employ a different set of strategies in order to move toward the shared community norms; and they create new identities in relation to the emerging community: newcomer to the space, someone who is more familiar with the space and hence is more authoritative, insiders, outsiders such as the car dealer.

Online-offline mobility and globalization at the ground level

The second extract shows how the online community gains ground and can be taken offline and how the new kind of community not only connects people from different parts of China and of the world but also creates new elite identities which are both local and global, both online and offline. Saab went through turbulent years and eventually had to file for bankruptcy in early 2012. Chinese Saab fans had a high psychological involvement with their cars and reacted strongly to the bankruptcy. In late 2011 and early 2012, the Saab BBS was overwhelmed with posts expressing the BBS users' passion for their cars and their cries for Saab's survival. Many long posts discussed the merger and acquisition Saab had been going through and the factors that led to its fading fortunes. The Chinese Saab owners, in response to the global call 'We are many, we are Saab' to support Saab, launched a campaign on the BBS in January 2012.

    This extract includes a post entry calling for an offline gathering and three responses to the call. The post attracted 135 commentary entries in total and

Extract 2. The offline campaign[11]
The post attracted 8630 views and received 135 response entries. It was posted on 11 January 2012.

No.	The posts in English translation
1 9:38 11 Jan 2012	G: We are many, we are Saab
	14 January 2012, a crucial day for Saab!! Because the Sweden government and related parties will have a final talk to decide the future of Saab…therefore we at the Saab China club have decided to launch a campaign to support Saab. The campaign echoes that in Sweden and similar campaigns in more than 40 countries and 108 regions, all on the same days: 14 and 15 January…the car stickers are on their way from Sweden to China, waiting.
	……
4 11:16	H: Anyone in Hangzhou could organize (a campaign) here
7 11:52	J: I am in California, I also join the campaign on the 14th, our campaign is in LA. 9:00AM local time. Haha, so the campaign is truly global
105 23:27 15 Jan 2012	G: the newest information:
	First, up to now, we have 21 Saab cars taking part in the entire campaign. About 24–25 cars were in the parade.
	Second, although it was raining, as expected, I kept to the original plan and orderly!
	Third,… Saab cars drove in good order! Demonstrating the Saab spirit.
	Fourth,…the video of our campaign will be sent to the Sweden headquarters, to demonstrate Chinese Saab supporters' faith (in Saab)! Let's join the global Saab enthusiasts and remember this special day

most of them express the Saab owners' support for the campaign. This extract shows that the actions at a ground level may have an impact on the course of a major commercial event across the globe by means of digital communication. In Turn 1, G publishes a post which is topped with a Saab slogan in English 'We are many, we are Saab'. The post emphasizes that the Chinese Saab owners' campaign is part of a global action and Saab fans across the globe will get together and share their passion and support for the brand. The global nature of the event is remarkable ('The campaign echoes that in Sweden') and people from 'more than 40 countries and 108 regions' join the campaign on the same day. His post creates a sense of global community for the Chinese Saab owners and, through digital communication, they are mobilized with those who share the same passion across the world.

In this global virtual community, English is an important linguistic resource. The Saab slogan 'We are many, we are Saab' is not and does not have to be translated into Chinese (also 'Saab', 'California' and 'LA' in Turn 1, 7 and 105). A Chinese translation would reduce the global nature of the campaign; furthermore, most Chinese Saab owners are proficient in English. The Saab members are highly educated people who have moved to the country's metropolitan centers and established themselves in the middle strata of the host urban societies. In their geographical and social moves, linguistic and educational resources are crucial factors: professional credentials 'purchase' them a 'ticket' to the city, while English qualifies them as modern urban citizens and offers them global mobility. As a rare and expensive linguistic resource, English not only offers access to white-collar jobs, but also signals a cool and sophisticated new middle class identity. With English at their disposal, the Saab members are able to model their identities on a globally circulated middle class identity script composed of lifestyle markers such as an automobile (Bourdieu, 1984; Dong, 2013).

In response to the online call for gathering, Chinese Saab owners from various parts of the country (Turn 4) and beyond (Turn 7) join the offline event to voice their support. After the gathering, G returns to the BBS and reports on the event and says that '... the video of our campaign will be sent to the Sweden headquarters, to demonstrate Chinese Saab supporters' faith (in Saab)! Let's join the global Saab enthusiasts and remember this special day' (Turn 105). The utterance shows a flow of images across online-offline environments and across national borders: the photos are taken at the offline gatherings in various Chinese locations, uploaded to the digital spaces and travel instantly to the headquarters of the car manufacturer on the other side of the globe. This flow of images, what Appadurai (1996, 2006) would call 'mediascape', involves a number of spaces on various scales: virtual spaces, physical spaces of specific locales, global space of the headquarters, etc. (Blommaert, 2006; Dong and Blommaert, 2009).

Spaces are not neutral but are meaningful in relation to other spaces; they are ordered and organized hierarchically on scales – vertical continuums from local to global, from momentary to timeless, from personal to impersonal, from situated to general, with intermediary levels between the two poles (Blommaert, 2006). A

vertical move from one scale to another entails access to particular resources (economic, cultural, semiotic, etc.), and such access is often subject to inequality. The Saab members' access to the linguistic, cultural and digital resources facilitates their scale-jumping move from local to translocal, from physical to virtual, and affords them a new urban elite identity which is characterized with high global, social and virtual mobility. It is not only that the global influence 'penetrates' to the local uptake; it is also and, perhaps more importantly, situated practices upscaling to the global level and may have an impact on the decision-making process of a major commercial activity.

    In this extract, we identify a trajectory between the online and the offline environments: the Saab members 'met' each other online, they developed to an offline group while maintaining online interactions. They used the online space to organize offline activities and reported the activity results back online. They exercised virtual power to influence a business event in the physical world that might change the course of the commercial development. Here we observe globalization at ground level, a globalization in which the local action exercises its agency to have an impact on the global through virtual means. In this globalizing process, the forum users create a new type of community which not only connects the members from different localities but also produces new elite identities: the forum users are local in the situated campaign and yet they are global in their use of English and in their capacity of transcontinental communication; they not only are elites in urban China, but also are elites globally as they are able to engage in and to reproduce normative discourses about a less known international luxury commodity; they are highly geographical as well as virtually mobile; all this identity work happens in their daily lives, in and out of online settings.

Conclusion

In this paper I demonstrate an online-offline combined ethnography in an investigation of virtual communication as part of social transformation in contemporary Chinese society. At the beginning of the paper, I proposed two arguments: a methodological argument and an empirical argument. Methodologically, I argue that an ethnography of contemporary social lives entails an important component of virtual spaces and, whether people use the internet or not, their social lives and modes of interaction are changed by the internet (or, as scholars argue, by the absence of the internet) in their communication. I support this argument with my fieldwork trajectories which start as a conventional ethnography; I am confronted with the internet and convinced that if a holistic and in-depth understanding is still the research goal, the ethnographer has to take virtual spaces seriously and to use the internet as a frame of reference in investigating people's actual life experiences.

    The empirical argument is that the internet contributes to the formation of new types of communities in China and this in turn leads to a new stratified and diversified society. The diversity of the Chinese virtual community, arguably the world's largest, requires nuanced empirical research to reveal the impact of the

internet on society as well as on individuals. This is evident in the extracts which point to the complexity and diversity of the Chinese internet and remind us that there is still much we have yet to understand when it comes to virtual spaces. I present two extracts to illustrate the process in which an online community is emerging and its participants negotiate group norms as well as group membership (Extract 1), and how the online community gains ground and can be taken offline (Extract 2). I observe that new members carefully enact an insider's identity upon entering the virtual community, that the community members self-police the space and negotiate group norms and that online parodies are used as implicit criticisms in Extract 1. Extract 2 demonstrates a complex trajectory of transnational flow in terms of information (the message of the gathering coming from Sweden to Shanghai and to other international or national locales), goods (car stickers from Sweden to China), images (video from China to Sweden and to the global online circulation) and the sense of community (the Chinese Saab owners being part of the global Saab community). The emergence of the online communities not only connects the members from different parts of China but also creates new identities which are both local and global, both online and offline. The extracts demonstrate two cases of online group dynamics; analogous online communities are observed across the online spaces: new types of communities are formed at a remarkable speed and scale. The minute online textual interactions point to social changes at a macro and societal level. Meanwhile, it is important to remember that this virtual mobility potential is still quite an exclusive commodity in contemporary China. The rapid expansion of the virtual community should not obscure that many Chinese are not in a position to entertain a realistic idea of being part of a global community.

Acknowledgement

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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