Virtually family: an anthropological

The explosion of the broadband internet is allowing anthropologists to carry out research into virtual, as well as real communities. Xiaoxiao Yan, based in the Department of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, has a longstanding interest in the relationship between culture and technology and has been investigating the impact of broadband technology since 2002.

As part of Xiaoxiao Yan's PhD study, she went back to Beijing during 2004-5 and did fieldwork on China's first online community, which at the time had a history of 10 years and 300,000 users. Her findings, which take the form both of a series of papers and a film, have aroused considerable interest within the British broadband industry.

Xiaoxiao is interested in how communities are constructed in a different cultural context. The rise of broadband, still at an early stage in terms of its across-the-board availability, makes it ripe for examining the growth of virtual communities, in this case in China.

Here, Xiaoxiao found that Chinese users access broadband to develop close social relationships as more traditional means of forming bonds in that country are breaking down. Tools such as the instant messenger, bulletin board, forum, blog or online game are becoming increasingly important to many people in this respect.

One manifestation of this is that while bulletin boards and online forums in Europe or the United States are often small and specialised, the Chinese versions are often giant in scale, attracting millions of registered participants to varied topics covering all aspects of life. This, Xiaoxiao argues, suggests they provide users with a "society of familiars" and a ritualised routine which helps form a sense of belonging.

A feeling of such belonging is important to Chinese people. It is also less and less available in modern-day China. The country is undergoing rapid urbanisation, with 10 – 15 million people moving to towns and cities every

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knowledge of the broadband internet

year. The old village or clan communities on which social relationships once relied are breaking down. Meanwhile, the introduction of a market economy since 1978 has put an end to the situation in which state-owned work units took charge of people's private and public life, thereby creating a community around one central point of reference and organisation. The one-child policy in China is also breaking down traditionally large families.

In other words, China is changing from a society of *familiars* into a society of *strangers*. As this happens, the broadband internet is increasingly providing an alternative society of familiars in a virtual setting. People feel almost compelled to reclaim a sense of belonging via a low-cost, knowledge-intensive,

efficient approach, which the internet offers them.

Xiaoxiao's film, *The Story of SKS – on community construction, trust and entrepreneurship* takes the argument a step further by following a young couple, both active internet users, as they build a second-hand laptop business. By developing trusted relationships with their customers, they are able to fulfil an ambition of entrepreneurship – a dream shared by many young Chinese people today.

British Telecom has been able to use this in particular as an insight into customer relationship-building in the Chinese service industry. From a business perspective, the virtual society of familiars enables people to experience what makes people in China tick without actually being

in China. "Understanding how to construct communities and build trust is key to any future service we might provide," Jeff Patmore, head of strategic university Research at BT, says. "The unique insight this research provides allows us to make far better business decisions."

Anthropologists have long been reflecting how anthropological knowledge and ethnographic data can be evaluated and become evidence outside the discipline, not least because often it takes the form of subjective experience rather than "scientific" fact. Xiaoxiao's film provides a perfect example of how such evidence reaches beyond the bounds of academia.

For further information contact Xiaoxiao Yan xy215@cam.ac.uk