The Extension of Chinese Tradition in Digital Age—Taking Red Packets on WeChat as an Example

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Abstract: Since WeChat launched in Chinese mainland, it has rapidly occupied the social life of most Chinese and has become the most popular social media platform in China undoubtedly, with the effect like Facebook in the other regions around the world. Comparing with Facebook or Instagram, WeChat extended its functions from the original one as chatting with friends online and following the interesting accounts to the financial area, for example, WeChat wallet and sending red packets through virtual channel. According to the report from official Xinhua news agency, users of WeChat sent around 46 billion electronic red packets - digital versions of traditional envelopes stuffed with cash - via the Chinese mobile social platform just over the 2017 Lunar New Year period. This statistic demonstrates sending digital red packet via WeChat especially in traditional festival has already become the latest popular trend and attractive entertainment in China. This article focuses on how WeChat red packets inherit and expand the form and function of traditional red packets. As the issues about inheritance and revival of traditional culture has been becoming more important at present time, the article attempts to take WeChat red packets as example so as to discuss whether social media can extend influence of Chinese traditions to the virtual world, and what influence the practice can make.

1. Introduction

More scholars around the world focusing on the media issues have begun researching the digital practice on the new media. With the development of internet technology, its influence has been extended to many fields, including new media platforms. The new media technology made the social media possess the broader space for further growth, and the launch of the WeChat red packets conformed to the trend, changing the part of habit on interpersonal communication and interaction.

As more and more promotions to Chinese traditional culture from the Chinese authority, society and the public, the traditions including long-lasting customs has permeated into different scenes of Chinese people's life such as interpersonal interaction. As the most interactive practice has transferred on the social media platforms in digital age, Chinese traditional culture has to find ways to extend and recreate its contents and forms in the digital world, in order to maintain its vitality.

Sending red packets amid the festivals is one of typical Chinese traditional customs still active among different generations of Chinese people. The article takes the WeChat red packets as example,

exploring the way to extend life of such tradition with profound accumulation by discussing the collective behaviors and incentive mechanism in the virtual community.

2. Collective behavior in the virtual community

Before the internet arose, the research priorities of collective behaviors were set in the physical environment. Scholars set an integrate criterion to define what collective is. Roger Brown has advanced a number of dimensions: a. size, which is important to know whether a group will fit into specific space or scale of participants; b. the frequency of congregation; c. the frequency of polarization of group attention; d. the degree of permanence of the psychological identification of the members. Using these dimensions can identify collective behaviors from other forms of behaviors[1]. Another scholar, Herbert Blumer, also limited the field of collective behavior by his criteria including physical (size), and cultural (relation of the behavior to rules, definitions, or norms) and then distinguished collective behavior with small group behavior and established or culturally defined behaviour[2]. According to Smelser, collective behavior has its own characteristic that it is spontaneous and fickle with strong emotional reactions, which brings difficulties to launch objective research and meanwhile triggers explosion of the scale of participants[3].

According to Smelser, collective behavior is the general term to describe following types of events: a. the panic response; b. the crazy response, including the fashion-cycle, the fad, the financial boom, the bandwagon, and the religious revival; c. the hostile outburst; d. the norm-oriented movement, including the social reform movement; e. the value-oriented movement, including the political and religious revolution, the formation of sects, the nationalist movement, etc. [3]. These types of events with one common ground which is about their scale were also described as "mass phenomenon" by other scholars[1], which demonstrates that the most salient characteristic of collective behaviors is mass scale.

Human activities increasingly take place in online environments, providing novel opportunities for relating individual behaviors to population-level outcomes. Recent advances in interactive web technologies, combined with widespread broadband and mobile device adoption, have made online collective action commonplace. Online collective behaviors can be considered as the new form of traditional ones with developing characteristics as the scale of participants can be broadened in the unimaginable speed through virtual channels.

Virtual community is the setting that online collective behaviors happen and then outburst, which is generally understood as a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose. In other words, virtual communities, or online communities, are used when individuals within a personal or professional group choose to interact with each other via the Internet[4]. It creates a sense of membership through involvement or shared common interests in these virtual communities.

After the explosive development of the Internet, scholars have transferred their attention to virtual world to research about online collective behaviors. Recent advances in interactive web technologies, combined with widespread broadband adoption, have made online collective action commonplace[5]. "No one but a utopian would have predicted how readily people will work for free. Were cheaper than hardware – a good thing considering how hard we are to duplicate." [6]. Internet technology made impossibility possible, including online collective behaviors. What is significant bout collective action, researchers have noted, is that it is prevalent at all[5]. Online collective behaviors can take place more easily and more prevalently because of convenient conditions provided by the Internet which reduces the transaction and coordination costs of massive collaboration.

"When digital information goods from many different sources are collectively transmitted over a computer network so that they can be accessed by groups of individuals, they create an information

pool. In these systems, individual contributions of digital information combine to produce information products for public, club, or private consumption." [7]. The large scale and access provided by the internet allows digital information to benefit "an unlimited number of people," [8] and in the meantime, it gives the chance to an unlimited number of people to take actions in the virtual platform together.

WeChat red bags are also utilized in daily life as a form of incentive by leaders to improve employees' motivation. Incentive is a manifestation of human nature with its application to persons engaged in one form of occupation[9]. Red packets belong to cash incentive and WeChat red packets as a virtual money exchange activity play a different role in the incentive mechanism compared with traditional physical red bags.

3. Red packets: digital extension of Chinese traditions

In 2014 Chinese New Year, WeChat launched the red bags activity and then it swept all around the Chinese society evolving into a national red-bag carnival in 2015 Lunar New Year[10]. On the eve of 2015 Lunar New Year, the total number of sending and receiving red packets on WeChat surpassed 400 million and the 2015 Spring Festival Gala produced by China Central Television sent over 120 million virtual red packets, refreshing the memory about Chinese Lunar New Year connected to red packets[11].

WeChat red packet is described as an extension of Chinese tradition, "where the Red Packet money exchange has been adapted into digital format"[12]. In China, it is a traditional ritual with a long history that elderlies or parents would give their kids pocket money in red envelope during Lunar New Year looking forward to bring the good fortune in a new year for these children and protect them far away from evil spirits or diseases. This tradition has been retained for thousands of years but recently it has changed dramatically extending to the virtual space, in other words, having the digital form: WeChat red packets.

Traditional red packet or red envelope practice in China have two manifestations: one happens in the special festival mainly referring to Chinese New Year and the other is the general daily behavior in order to achieve some specific purpose.

Red packet in Lunar New Year originated from the concept " New Year Money" or "Lucky Money," which expresses the blessing from elders to the youth in family. Traditional New Year red bags have two characteristics, respectively unipolarity which means the direction of sending and receiving red bags is single from elders to the younger generation and consanguinity referring to giving and receiving red packets mainly happen in the family, one kind of primary group[13]. Besides these features, it is also tradition that the younger generation should bow or even kowtow to the seniority to convey their New Year blessing before receiving red bags, which demonstrates hierarchy order and ethnic views in the traditional feudal family. And original red bags practice requires face-to-face communication model with the space and time limit.

WeChat as representative of social media with advanced internet technology transferred this person-to-person, centuried practice to online collective behaviors. WeChat breaking time-and-space limit provided the chance to the public to participate in the grabbing WeChat red packets together, leading to the population-level scale of activity participants.

WeChat Red Bags use is described as a potential extension or adaptation of tradition that underpins 'local' culture, where "...the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values"[14]. WeChat red packets reveal engagement with traditional values including symbolism of red bags and meanings of lucky money and New Year's wishes in novel and new technological ways, which has been regarded as a perfect integration of traditional cultural customs and new media technology. As a kind of mobile internet product,

WeChat red packet combines Chinese culture and traditional festivals, and labels itself with a series of related concepts such as celebration, festival and folk custom.

To meet demands of users when celebrating the Chinese traditional festivals, the setting to appearance of WeChat red packets follows the style of Chinese old-school red packets, using many auspicious symbols, including blooming flowers, colorful lanterns and dragon or phoenix, as the main elements for design. Users can also add blessings on the cover of WeChat red packets to simulate the real situation of giving New Year greetings during the Spring Festival. For example, in 2021, the Year of OX in Chinese zodiac, the cover of WeChat red packets was decorated with pattern of golden ox horn, closely connected with the traditional zodiac culture passing down for thousands of years. The design well caters to the original impression of users on red packets, and improves the public acceptance of the digital practice.

The traditional physical ritual is embodied in the sending and grabbing process which is more like a game or entertainment activity. In this process, competing for WeChat Red Bags consists of a race among users in a Red Bags group "to receive varying, random distributions of lucky money represented by the image of a red bag"[12].

Apart from the aspect of form change, there is also the social relationship transformation in WeChat red packets exchange. Most of social relationships in China can be considered as the A—B structure meaning A is subordinate to B which constructs a society of human relationship[10]. The traditional mode of red-bag present, one kind of social society in this social structure, must obey a clear position in the family hierarchy, which means that gift relationship of red packets is unidirectional from elderlies to younger generations to show the care and blessing of elders but simultaneously demonstrate the subordinate family relationship and distinct family status.

However, the gift relationship of WeChat red bags is completely different. Because one family group on WeChat contains both younger generations and elders but everyone in the group has equal opportunities to become the givers and receivers of red packets. The individual status and characters in this structure are more equal, significant and diversity and subordinate relationship is transformed as a kind of game process.

4. The positive and negative effect of digital practice on inheriting and spreading traditions

Digital practice is one of kinds of media-related practice appearing in the era that digital media (new media) becoming mainstream communicative method. Media-related practices are people's action sequences, and need not be, but often are habits: "habitual repetition is one way actions get stabilized as practices."[15]. The habits are not isolated which are associated and influenced by the outside context, including social and cultural background.

As the digital practice filling in the daily life, the public reliance on the new media, especially social media, has been more serious. The digital practice related to red packets on WeChat is one of typical examples changing the public communication habits on Chinese tradition, and the change has had both positive and negative sides.

WeChat can represent social media platform mainly aiming at close relations or whom attempting to build closer relations, and on such social media platform, the practice related to red packets can break ice and simulate the communication, increasing interaction frequency even if there are limitations from time and space.

Some ancient Chinese traditions have gradually been fading as the younger generation lost interest in the old-school ritual that might request much to them. At the situation dominated by traditional red packets, those who are qualified to give others red bags are often elders with higher seniority, and they have stronger power on making decisions, so the face-to-face practice of giving and receiving red packets has some degree of coerciveness, and makes the younger have sense of oppression.

WeChat red packets deconstructs the traditional interactive mode of sending red packets, referring that users can decide whether and when to receive the red packets by clicking the button, thus weakening the mandatory part of the traditional ritual.

The change has positive effect on the revival of Chinese tradition among the younger generation as they can inherit and follow the improved ritual more easily. The Chinese tradition of celebrating the Spring Festival by red packets has extended its life again in the digital world.

The original goal of using WeChat red packets is to passing on traditional customs by utilizing the new media technology to break limitations from time and space, but at some situations, the function of WeChat red packets has been off the track, transforming from interaction tool to one of ways to showoff and judging the close relations, which leads to deviation or even alienation of interpersonal relations.

Meanwhile, scrambling for red packets in the chatting groups on WeChat has often been seen as a kind of game or even carnival with strong sense of entertainment during the interaction. The entertainment part can cover and disrupt the cultural meaning of the WeChat red packets, harming the inheritance of real and valuable traditional Chinese culture related to red packets.

5. Conclusions

As an extension of the traditional red packets, the digital practice of red packet on WeChat update the scope of Chinese Spring Festival culture, both inheriting and innovating the traditional red packet in terms of form and function.

WeChat Red Packets practice is set on the diverse types of virtual communities and belongs to online collective behaviors compared with traditional festival red bags, a person-to person model. It influences social relationship especially family hierarchy order because of its multi-directional interaction property, inclusion of every member and finally extension to mass participants.

WeChat Red Packet has arisen rapidly since 2014 and becomes a popular trend for the public in China that sending and receiving or grabbing red packets on WeChat especially in Lunar New Year.

In daily life, WeChat red bags are usually utilized to stimulate group members to make communication more smooth and help managers strengthen their discourse power among the whole team more instantly. In special days like Spring Festival, WeChat Red Packet is considered as the digital extension of traditional value and ritual to change sending and receiving red bags process from physical ritual to virtual and novel activity. Moreover, it is the miniature of structural and relational transformation of Chinese society from tradition to modern times.

The convenience, entertainment and sociability of WeChat red packets enrich the form and content of interpersonal communication, and at the same time, the positive functions increase acceptability of the younger generation to traditions, extending the traditional culture to the virtual world. However, the pitfalls in the digital practice of red packets should also be realized and improved.

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