Traditional Philanthropic Culture and Micro-charity in China

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Abstract. This study explores people’s experience of participation in micro-charity on WeChat. In-depth interviews were used as the method to collect data from 12 college students. Analysis indicates that in micro-charity participants’ empathy was conditioned by relational closeness, their responsibility was undertaken under peer pressure and their reputation was protected by anonymity. These results suggest that people’s participation in micro-charity is primarily guanxi-oriented and replicates and reinforces associated traditional values such as renqing, face and so forth.

Introduction
Traditionally, China has a rich historical culture of philanthropy. This is evidenced by a series of old sayings of those philosopher-sages, such as “A benevolent person loves others” (renzhe airen), “People love people who love people” (airenzhe renheng aizhi). These sayings contribute to be the crucial integral component in Chinese people’s philanthropic minds for over 2,000 years long history. As some authors have noticed, Chinese philanthropy has been originated from its time-honored guanxi culture, which was historically formed under a socio-economic condition of resource scarcity [1]. Chinese guanxi presents as a web-like structure. According to Fei Xiaotong [2], guanxi could be analogically describes it as “circular water ripples” or more precisely, “differential mode of association” which means guanxi is hierarchical and particularistic.

According to Yang [3], guanxi does not simply represent a relationship structure, but rather serves as a moral framework for people’s interaction with each other in everyday life. It is observed that Chinese people’s “moral behaviours vary according to a person’s role, position, and relationship with other role-players in a highly differentiated and hierarchical social nexus” [4]. Within guanxi structure, the close ties are of paramount importance. People are expected to maintain high commitment and obligation to help each other within close ties. It could be considered that the close ties contribute to be the foundation where their charity comes from and goes for. According to Liu [5], Chinese traditional charity is limited to a narrow close group and it is in essence a form of “acquaintances charity”.

In guanxi structure, people’s expression of caring and generosity among “acquaintances” should follow some nuanced and intricate unwritten rules. Renqing among them is the crucial one. Renqing means human feelings and emotions embedded in close ties. These feelings and emotions are regarded as the basement on which ritual - the appropriate conduct of social relationships becomes possible. The empathy rule of renqing implies that people should provide aids for close others in need because their aids may bring some future potential returns. The other important rule is face (mianzi in Chinese) which refers to the social good of reputation. In helping those who are in close ties, one should be generous because this will earn his or her face. On the contrary, if one fails to do so, he or she will lose “face” and this may bring harm to his or her reputation in the close ties.

Lin and Si maintained that the traditional philanthropy in China fostered a kind of social capital that performed well for blood- or clan-based society [6]. However, over the past several decades, it has been ill-matched with the rapid socio-economic development in China which has been accompanied by a huge population migration. More and more people settled themselves down in unfamiliar cities. Recently, the rising of social media heralds new possibilities for people to build up and maintain
connections with each other. These online social ties also provide people with rich social resources. Social media thus turns out to be suitable platforms for the development of charity.

At present, there are a lot of online charity platforms. The author restricts her analysis in the context of WeChat in this study. WeChat could be considered as an ideal platform for people to exercise, replicate and reinforce their guanxi structure online. When a vulnerable individual turns to WeChat to initiate a charitable fundraising, he or she should create a link of web page that is authenticated by Tencent Charity. On this web page, initiator should address some relevant information, mainly including introduction of the initiator, the situation he or she is encountering and an authenticated bank account of the initiator to receive prospective donation. The link of charitable fundraising could be reposted explosively among the “Circles” where the initiator belongs to. When people expose themselves to a link of charitable fundraising for one friend in their “Circle”, they are likely to make small donation and help broadcast these information to their own “Circle(s)”. This often makes the dissemination of the relevant information going viral online. The widely dissemination of the relevant information within multiple “Circles” is romantically called “relay of love” in Chinese. In some sense, “relay of love” in a micro-charity carries the overwhelming power of the traditional philanthropic culture which is in essence guanxi-oriented. That is, people’s perceptions and behaviours toward initiator are mainly determined by the relational closeness. This exploratory study here puts participants’ experience of micro-charity under a framework of traditional philanthropic culture to understand what their views and perceptions with respect are to micro-charity.

Methodology

In-depth interview is regarded as a valid approach to access participants’ subjective knowledge about their experience [7]. In this study, 12 (6 male and 6 female) college students were recruited as the participants. They were recruited through a letter of invitation which was distributed through WeChat. This letter of invitation addressed the goal and procedure of the research, participants’ right and the author’s promise to protect their confidentiality.

The author then conducted series of semi-structured interviews with participants. The pre-set open questions aimed to grasp college students’ experience of their participation in charitable fundraising on WeChat. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviews were digitally-recorded. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants to check and edit. Some slight alternations were made to the verbatim transcripts for grammar and clarity of expression. Then the author read and re-read the data in order to gain a general understanding. After that, the author followed Strauss and Corbin [8] to undertake an open coding phrase. In so doing, the utterances about participants’ viewpoints of micro-charity were identified and then coded based on the properties of examples of words and expressions. After the initial coding process has been finished, similar codes were combined and these related codes were grouped together under a broader theme.

Findings and Discussion

College student participants’ experience on charitable fundraising was largely clustered around the following three themes: (1) empathy was conditioned by relational closeness; (2) responsibility was undertaken under peer pressure; (3) reputation was protected by anonymity.

1. Empathy was conditioned by relational closeness

Each participant expressed that they would like to help others in need. However, they also agreed that their empathy was not unconditional to everyone. For Jindong, she emphasized that it was unfair for her to take responsibility for everyone. She said: “I’m not God. What I can do is to take care of my friends and family. As a popular saying goes, ‘to treasure you loved ones’.” Participants mentioned that there were constraints for them to offer support for others. For example, Zhen stated:
There is too much fundraising information on WeChat. To be honest, it has drained my enthusiasm and compassion. But if this was initiated by my close friends or relatives, I am sure I would take some actions to help. Maybe I am too mean, too cool-blooded. However, I have to make decision based on my relational closeness with the initiator in a charitable fundraising.

These viewpoints reflected that their empathy to others was largely conditioned by the relationship closeness. This result is in line with that of previous study on helping behaviours or altruism [9]. Yet, it is worth noting that participants in this study held significant different attitude towards “us”, the strong or close ties, and “others”, the weak or distant ties. For those belonging to their concept of “us”, people tend to perform a high level of commitment. Yun shared her story:

Lili is one of my roommates. Her mother got breast cancer. The treatment needs 200,000 RMB. She had no choice but to put this onto WeChat and to appeal others’ aids. … The dormitory is the family! On the first day of the fundraising, my other roommates and I donated all of our spare money for her. Moreover, we repeatedly reposted the link of fundraising and broadcasted it to other prospective donors. In fact, we almost cried for others’ help on WeChat…. We did everything we could. I admitted we have never achieved solidarity among us like this.

Living in the same dormitory, Yun and her roommates have construct among themselves a concrete concept of “us”, as illustrated in her words: “The dormitory is the family!” Yun and her other roommates easily infused their selves with Lili’s emotion and perception on her mother’s tragic situation and thus “all wept and sobbed inconsolably for a long time”. While at the same time, Yun and her other roommates also enthusiastically engaged in the charitable fundraising on WeChat. This echoed Hwang’s [10] view that the strong and close ties among the Chinese are mainly driven by affective motives.

2. Responsibility was undertaken under peer pressure

Not surprisingly, all participants in this study emphasized that their giving behaviours were originated from a strong sense of responsibility to help their friends. Most of participants agreed that they tended to ignore fundraising information initiated by those in weak or distant ties. In some cases, however, they also made some donations for these strangers and this was mainly due to the social pressure from their circles. Chen stated: “My friends once displayed their enthusiasm on WeChat in helping one of their classmates. I thought it was inappropriate to keep myself at a distance. Although I have never met him (the initiator) in my life, but I still donated some money to him.”

Chen’s idea reflects that WeChat, as strong-ties based community, provides a framework of reference in people’s decision making. In a charitable fundraising, the link of the initiator’s heart-rending story is often transmitted in an explosive speed and constructs a powerful digital environment online, which in turn, drives people’s engagement, Bekkers and Wiepking maintained that “Social pressure is especially strong when a strong tie makes a request for a donation” [11]. This is evidenced in Le’s experience.

My WeChat was occupied by the link of this charitable fundraising. Some of my friends were talking about her (initiator) situation. Yes, she is my friends’ friend, not mine. However, she turned out to be our concern that day. It was inappropriate for me to stand by. To be honest, her story had haunted my mind and made me feel uneasy for quite a while. Finally, I relieved myself as I donated 5 RMB to her.

Le’s sense of responsibility was not derived from her inherent altruism. Charitable giving based on altruism would bring happiness to donors [12]. Yet, Le was just “relieved” from her charitable giving. This suggests that the explosive fundraising information on moments in effect implicitly imposed Le the responsibility to help a person in weak or distant ties. The responsibility could be unloaded only by her subsequent donation.

In addition, participants’ responsibility comes not only from the compelling environment on moments, but also from the empathic rule of renqing. Renqing is “the expression of affective feelings toward others and fulfillment of obligatory requirements” [13]. It also implies an intricate form of social pressure in Chinese people’s social life. Liu put it this way:
Last time, I donated a small amount of money, 50 RMBs, to a strange. She is my best friend’s friend… [later] I was wondering whether my giving was due to my generosity or just to my best friend’s renqing… It matters, doesn’t it? Now, I prefer to thinking that I’m not as generous as whom I performed…. Anyway, I hope my money could contribute a little to help her (the initiator).

Liu’s experience reflects that given the affordance of connectivity, the obligation inherent in renqing could reach to the one who originally has little or even none relation to the initiator. When Liu was informed by his best friend about the initiator’s story, he was also expected to do something in a way according to the rule of renqing. Liu did not demand some reward or return from his best friends, however, he felt he had to perform his obligation as the best friend. Seen in this way, participants’ sense of responsibility is, at least partly, mediated by the rule of renqing.

3. Reputation was protected by anonymity

Some participants also mentioned the role of anonymity in their decision-making in a micro-charity. Authors from western countries tend to agree that people’s giving in charity will increase if anonymity is removed. However, in this study, anonymity is a facilitator for people’s giving in a micro-charity and this is mainly because that anonymity contributes to protect their “face” or reputation. This is vividly illustrated in Tian’s experience:

When I was a middle school student, I was sometimes encouraged to donate red pocket money to those in need. I was a good student and eager to become an example. I donated all the money in my piggy bank. …In the end, there was a list of donation by each student posted in front of the classroom. … WOW! The top number was over 10 times of what I had donated. This list made me quite frustrated! By comparison, it is a kind of anonymous donation in the [WeChat] platform. Basically, my privacy is well protected. It makes me comfortable to give an appropriate amount of money.

In Tian’s memory of her experience in a traditional charitable fundraising, it is not her privacy, but her “face” being violated, which made her frustrated. This indicates that people’s charitable decision often involves a self-interested motivation of earning or protecting “face”. For Tian, such an implicit motivation extended to her participation in online charitable fundraising. Fortunately, the socio-technological affordance of WeChat allowed her to donate in an anonymous way and hence well protect her privacy and “face”.

Tian’s statements suggest that participants’ motivation for their giving in the charity was not simply a purified altruism. They navigated through a dilemma between responsibility and reputation or between favor and “face”. They deliberately made decision about whether or not to donate and how much they should donate. The anonymity, to some extent, has removed such a difficult dilemma. It allows people to make decision based on their own willingness and resources. This could be considered as one of the key mechanism that facilitates the flourishing of micro-charity on WeChat. Therefore, anonymity helps participants become “masked heroes”. Precisely what anonymity masks is not only participants’ empathy and commitment, but also their intention to protect their “face”.

Conclusion

This study indicates that Chinese people’s experience of participation in micro-charity is, at least partly, mediated by the power of traditional culture, especially the guanxi-oriented moral framework. Firstly, participants’ empathy is largely conditioned by the closeness of their relation to those in need. Their caring and commitment are mainly for friends in close ties. Secondly, participants’ sense of responsibility mainly results from the social pressure in a charitable fundraising on WeChat. Particularly, in helping those who are in weak or distant ties, their decision-making is often impacted by the underlying rule of renqing. Thirdly, in micro-charity, donors’ decision making often involves a balance between helping those in need and protecting their own reputation or face. The affordance of WeChat on anonymity has well protection of donors’ privacy. To recap, this study indicates that the subjective experience of college student participants in charitable fundraising on WeChat carries the time-honoured traditional culture. This study reveals that the flourishing of micro-charity on WeChat
does not necessarily mean that people’s participation would promise a more modernized or Western-style philanthropic culture. Rather, people’s charitable giving in micro-charity is primarily rooted itself in a Chinese-style guanxi-oriented culture and, to some extent, replicates and reinforces certain traditional values such as renqing, face and so forth.

As an exploratory study, however, there are some limitations. First, this study limited to the small sample size. Their experiences might be biased so that the findings may not be generalizable. Second, this study also limited to the specific platform. People’s experience of micro-charity on WeChat, the semi-close platform, might be shaped by the affordance of the underlying media technology. These limitations suggest that future studies should be conduct to collect additional data for us to get a better understanding of people’s subjective experience of micro-charity.

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References


