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### Affecting relations: domesticating the internet in a south-western Chinese town

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## **Affecting relations: domesticating the internet in a south-western Chinese town**

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Drawing on data gathered during ethnographic fieldwork in a south-western Chinese town, this paper examines a detailed case study of a single family, and how their internet use transformed over an 18-month period following the introduction of home broadband to their house. Despite initial intentions that the connection would resolve the problem of errant offspring accessing the internet outside the home, the subsequent effects that home internet brought upon domestic life were largely unforeseen. The detailed narrative presented herein highlights how different family members' perceptions and actual use of the internet generated multiple contradictions over the fieldwork period. This paper argues that Silverstone, R., Hirsch, E., & Morley, D.'s (1992). *Information and communication technologies and the moral economy of the household*. In R. Silverstone & E. Hirsch (Eds.), *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces* (pp. 15–31). London: Routledge] theory of domestication provides the most suitable model for understanding the introduction of information and communication technologies into the home, owing to its capacity to take into account how attitudes towards the internet are renegotiated over time. The paper proposes further refinements be made to the theory by challenging the assumption that users aspire to 'incorporate' the technology into the household. Instead, the ethnographic data indicate that the main drivers of the domestication process are family members' desires to use the internet as a way to transform relationships within the household. More broadly, by foregrounding participants' concerns regarding internet use as focusing chiefly on family life and education, this paper also provides an important alternative to prevailing scholarly trends that generally understand the Chinese internet through themes of politics, censorship and democracy.

**Keywords:** China; communication studies; domestication of ICTs; young people; ethnography; internet

He got expelled by our year head. Everyday he was acting truant to play on the computer ... One night, just as I had gone out, I said to him 'where are you going?' ... I had bumped into him ... He said he wanted to go home, and he asked where I was going ... I said, 'I'm going on the internet for a second, and then I'm going home'. He said 'Ok, let's go together'. I said, 'OK, you wait at the bottom [of the hill]'. After waiting till the time I went into the internet cafe, I saw he had followed me in. I said: 'Don't you want to go home?' He said: 'Here *is* my home!'

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Zhang Wei<sup>1</sup> is a typical 18-year-old high-school student in Red Mountain Town, a county-town in south-west China. He recounts how his former classmate literally ‘made the internet café into his home’, resulting in his eventual expulsion from the school. Although Zhang Wei found the mix-up over the actual location of his friend’s home to be humorous, the situation is common enough. Many parents perceive internet cafes to be dangerous, rather than respectable places to be seen in and would prefer their children stayed at home. They have taken the strategy of installing home broadband internet connections<sup>2</sup> in the hopes that their children would remain in the safety and comfort of their own homes.

Yet, as this paper demonstrates, introducing an internet connection to the home as an attempt to deter children and young adults from visiting internet cafes is only the beginning of the transformation that occurs when internet connectivity is also introduced to the ‘web’ that is nuclear family relationships. This paper examines the complex effects of the insertion of such information and communication technologies (ICTs) into the domestic sphere. This paper draws on ethnographic evidence to document the intricate biography of an internet connection over attempts to incorporate it into the everyday life of a household unit. This paper privileges what Miller (1987, p. 85) refers to as ‘the humility of objects’ by describing the way in which apparently innocuous everyday objects are actually central to people’s social relationships. Through this approach, this paper counterposes parents’ overt motivations for installing home internet connections with the diverse ways by which the introduction of such technologies into the home – both intentionally and unexpectedly – disrupted the daily practices within the domestic sphere. Furthermore, the paper emphasises that the adoption of new technologies into the home necessitates a continual process of familiarisation and re-evaluation of actors’ own attitudes towards these technologies.

The data presented in this paper are analysed against a number of existing theoretical models. In common with other anthropological studies on the effects of home internet connections (Hynes, 2009; Miller & Slater, 2000), this paper avoids highly deterministic models (Davis, 1989; Rogers, 1995) in favour of concepts that emphasise individuals’ own agency in the adoption of ICTs. In particular, the theory of domestication (Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone & Haddon, 1996; Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1992; Silverstone, Morley, Dahlberg, & Livingstone, 1989) is found to be a particularly appropriate model for explaining these data, owing to its focus on the home and capacity to account for the renegotiation of informants’ values towards the internet observed over the fieldwork period. In this paper, domestication theory particularly clearly foregrounds how these values impact upon relationships within the family.

However, elements of the ethnographic evidence presented in this paper are not fully accounted for by domestication theory, and this paper will address these limitations by suggesting the following two further refinements be made to the concept. The first refinement relates to the tendency for domestication theory to be understood in a way that sees the internet as *the thing* that needs to be successfully incorporated. The findings in this paper stress the capacity of internet connections to transform both the self and other, and become most visible when examined in the context of family relationships. The ethnography suggests that rather than individuals being motivated by getting ICTs to ‘fit in’ to the household, individuals instead seem preoccupied with how to align other family members to these technologies in a particular way. Although the two are not contradictory, this subtle shift of focus emphasises how domestication theory can be especially helpful for understanding the role of the internet in mediating relationships between family members.

The second refinement to Silverstone et al.’s (1992) theory of domestication concerns the nature of ‘successfully domesticated’ things becoming ‘invisible’. The ethnography presented in this paper highlights the importance of considering how technology interacts with household practices that existed before the introduction of these ICTs into the home, and comparing this to both immediate and much longer-term consequences that follow the installation of an ICT. Such an approach to domestication emphasises its continual iterations, involving multiple stages often

months or years in duration (for similar longer-term studies, see Haddon & Silverstone, 1993, 1995). Significantly, in the case of the family to be described in this paper, it is demonstrated that successfully domesticating new technologies hinged upon these technologies being used to conduct practices that were already familiar to family members and thought to be conducive to family life.

In addition to offering refinements to domestication theory, this paper also demonstrates wider implications for our understanding of the internet's effects on society. I further argue that researching how the internet is domesticated unveils a series of mundane but pressing concerns held by participants relating to the influence of the internet over family life, education and their offspring's well-being. These interests are markedly different from the priorities that dominate the activities of many internet researchers and communication studies scholars (particularly those based in western institutions), whose literature on 'the Chinese internet' has displayed a tendency to focus on topics such as censorship, politics, society and democracy (Herold, 2013, pp. 8–10; Qiu & Bu, 2013). Finally, this paper argues that ethnographic approaches privileging long-term, everyday contact with informants enable researchers to get closer to the *actual* concerns and practices of Chinese internet users, which in turn provides alternative understandings of the impact of the internet on Chinese society in general.

### Methodology

The data in this paper emerge from a wider ethnographic study into social practices of hosting within Red Mountain Town, a county-town in China's Yunnan province, conducted over an 18-month period from December 2009 to June 2011 (McDonald, 2013). This larger research project drew its main participants from 16 households, comparing between how people hosted guests in their homes with other commercial venues.

This ethnographic research employed a methodology best described by Clifford (1997, p. 56) as 'deep hanging out'. Rather than being guided by predetermined research questions, surveys or interviews that aimed to solicit responses to specific topics, the emphasis was to instead spend the maximum possible time in the company of research participants, involving oneself as much as was permitted to in their home, work and social lives. One of the advantages of this form of long-term participant observation is that, after an initial period of adaptation, people are less likely to alter their behaviour in the presence of the ethnographer (Bernard, 2006, p. 424). Also, similar to Empson's (2011, p. 37) description, I found that by engaging in activities with my informants, I gradually become a person to them, as opposed to a researcher obtaining knowledge.

This 'ethnographic closeness' was especially applicable to my relations with the Li family, who are discussed in this paper. I had chosen to live in one of the town's poorest and most densely populated 'urban village' (*chengzhongcun*) areas (Figure 1),<sup>3</sup> where former peasants had constructed their own homes in order to partially rent rooms out to migrants from the surrounding countryside. Through a friend's introduction, I located a small, sparse single room on the top floor of the Li family's home. The rent for my room was 120 RMB (approximately \$20 USD) per month, which is typical for the village. I used the room for sleeping and writing only, which had the effect of forcing me to spend as much time as possible in the company of my participants. As such, I saw the Li family on a daily basis, calling on them at least once every day on returning from conducting research in other parts of the town. I regularly took meals, watched television and observed the computer use of the family, in addition to occasionally helping with household chores.

I made brief jottings in a pocket notebook either during or immediately after each of these interactions, and would then expand these into more detailed typed field notes during the follow morning. These field notes documented each phenomenon more fully and began to



Figure 1. The urban village where the Li family lived.

speculate on the theoretical implications of these observed behaviours. The field notes were also coded with keywords relating to their content, aiding analysis by helping reveal sometimes unexpected links between different domains (i.e. the home and the internet cafe). I choose not to adopt any standard coding scheme, leaving the coding scheme to gradually develop as the database of field notes grew (Bernard, 2006, p. 404). Floor plans and photographic records of the Lis' home (Figure 2) were also made, which ultimately helped to draw attention to the significance of the computer's location within the home (to be discussed later). Towards the end of the fieldwork I began to have more pointed discussions with individual family members regarding their use of the internet.

It should be emphasised, then, that this project did not originally set out to investigate the politics of home internet connections. It was through this open, iterative participant-observant style of research that the concerns relating to how to incorporate internet connections into the home came to the fore, driven by the informants themselves.<sup>4</sup> Upon further analysis of the data following the conclusion of the fieldwork, it became clearer that these ethnographic data contributed to theoretical debates regarding the domestication of ICTs, and the data were re-analysed in that light, leading to the conclusions made in this paper.

### Internet cafes and the turn towards home internet connections

For the young people of Red Mountain Town, by far the most popular way of connecting to the internet remained through internet cafes (*wangba*). The first internet cafe appeared in Red Mountain Town around 1998. By the year 2012, the number of cafes had grown to no less than 13.

Red Mountain Town's internet cafes were open 24 hours a day and, in common with practices elsewhere in China, terminals were rented to customers on an hourly basis.<sup>5</sup> Based on headcounts from within the town's cafes, around 90% of customers were males, typically below 25 years of age. In common with Qiu's (2009, p. 117) reflections on Chinese internet cafes, customers in Red Mountain Town used the cafes more as collective spaces to spend time with their friends, play games and be entertained.

In Red Mountain Town a wide array of individuals and organisations, including cafe users, parents, schools and the government all expressed that internet cafe use carried potential risks.

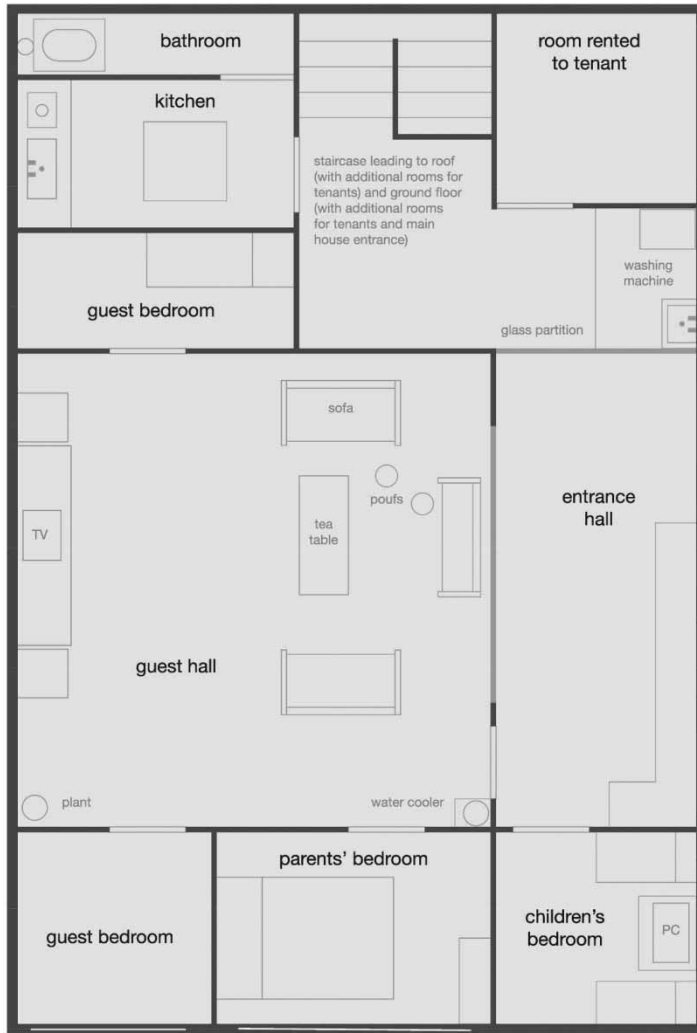


Figure 2. Floor plan of the Li family home.

These views conformed to a wider public discourse that exists in China regarding the dangers of the internet, which has already been well documented by various scholars (Herold, 2011, p. 8; Qiu, 2009, p. 240). Most notably this national discourse revolves around fears that internet use can become addictive and have damaging effects on young people's educational performance and morality (Golub & Lingley, 2008; Szablewicz, 2010).

In the case of Red Mountain Town, in addition to concerns regarding the addictiveness of the internet itself, a large amount of parental anxiety revolved around the safety of these cafes. Some parents described the internet cafe as having 'many people' (*renduo*) or alternatively 'too many people' (*ren taiduo*) who were always coming and going. For this reason they claimed that the internet cafe was 'too complicated' (*tai fuzha*) a place. These examples correspond with Rolandson's (2011, pp. 115–125) argument of the existence of a Chinese discourse surrounding internet cafes as chaotic places. Although in many situations in Chinese society, bustling, 'hot and noisy' social atmospheres are actively sought after (Chau, 2006, 2008), this desirable social excitement



can also be dangerous and must be contained within specific moral boundaries (McDonald, 2013, pp. 256–257).

Many parents also held that the transient nature of internet cafe customers made it a place within which it might be particularly easy to contract disease, asserting that there were ‘many illnesses’ (*bingduo*) within. Internet cafes in the town attempted to implement a number of measures believed to be helpful in controlling the transmission of disease. Staff would wipe down the keyboard and display between users. Customers were given drinking water in disposable paper cups, which were believed to be cleaner than sharing a washed cup between different customers. These concerns were also reflected in numerous online Chinese-language news and health portals that warned of the dangers of contracting infectious diseases in internet cafes; particularly common were reports that the venues were ‘hotbeds’ for tuberculosis transmission (Xunyi Wenyaoyao Wang, 2012; Zhang, Tang, & Yang, 2011; Zhao, 2012). Cafes were also licensed and inspected by local branches of the public health bureau.

Furthermore, parents were also particularly concerned that their children were missing out on family meals when in the internet cafe. Wolf (1985) and Santos (2009, p. 113) have both noted the practice of sharing food from a common stove as being an instrumental practice in defining membership of the family unit in China. The ‘Jia Junpeng’ internet meme case suggests that parental displeasure at the absence of children from homes due to internet use was also felt on a national scale. On 16 July 2009, a single post containing only the text ‘Jia Junpeng, your mother is calling you home for dinner’ (*Jia Junpeng, ni ma han ni huijia chifan*) appeared in Baidu’s ‘World of Warcraft Forums’.<sup>6</sup> Despite not knowing who Jia Junpeng was (or whether he even existed at all), this seemingly quotidian message struck a chord with the forum’s users, causing traffic to the post growing exponentially. By the morning of 18 July 2009, the conversation thread had received over 8 million views and 300,000 comments. A *People’s Daily Online* (2009) article interviewed internet scholar Hu Jiqing, who attributed the popularity of the meme to a widespread sense of guilt felt by those addicted to online gaming on the affects it had on their families. Despite the possibility that Jia Junpeng and his mother are fictitious creations, it is reasonable to suggest that the extent of this meme indicates that the parental anxiety Jia Junpeng’s mother signifies may be readily identifiable to young Chinese internet users, whose own mothers likely also call them back home from the internet cafe at mealtimes.

The examples given above illustrate the concerns parents held over young people’s use of internet cafes in Red Mountain Town. In many cases, parents hoped that the installation of home internet connections would facilitate a return of their offspring to the home. As such, in recent years home broadband connections have become increasingly common in Red Mountain Town. This service was first provided in the town by China Telecom (*Zhongguo dianxin*) and then from 2010 by China Unicom (*Zhongguo liantong*).

Home broadband coverage was offered to almost all work-unit houses<sup>7</sup> and new commercial apartments within the town centre; however, it was only from 2010 that China Telecom’s home broadband service started to penetrate the urban village areas on the outskirts of the town. Although statistical reports showed that 88.8% of all internet users in China connected at home, whereas 27.9% connected in internet cafes (China Internet Network Information Center, 2012, p. 19), the difference was not nearly so pronounced in Red Mountain Town, owing to the low income of the region in comparison to the rest of China and the limited availability of home internet connections. Both providers offered substantial discounts if a year’s subscription was paid in advance: China Telecom’s basic broadband charge was 1000 RMB (approximately \$165 USD) per annum, whereas China Unicom’s was 600 RMB (approximately \$99 USD). There also existed options to pay monthly.

Although home internet connections were becoming increasingly available and offered a potential solution to the problem of errant children, as the following ethnographic example of



the Li family demonstrates, their insertion into the domestic sphere remained a complex process, often resulting in many unforeseen transformations.

### The Li family's home internet connection

Mr Li was a wholesaler of soft drinks and lived with his wife, his elderly mother and their two sons, aged 14 and 21. Mr Li had lived in one of Red Mountain Town's urban villages all his life. Mr Li's wife explained that they installed the internet because they were troubled by the amount of time their youngest son was spending away from home playing on computers at both internet cafes and their neighbour's house.<sup>8</sup>

When I first arrived at Mr Li's house, the computer had been located in the two brothers' shared bedroom (Figure 2). The tower computer was placed on an old office desk, with a bed on either side. A plastic garden chair, a plastic stool and a metal rocking chair were in the room, facing the computer.

Installing the computer and internet had initially achieved the desired effect for the Li family. Once the machine and connection were in place the youngest son spent much more time at home, contentedly occupying himself with hours of gaming. He was particularly fond of the first person-shooter game *Crossfire*, which he played with his classmates via the game's online multiplayer mode. However, his avid gaming created a new set of concerns. Though the parents had achieved their ambition of bringing their son back into the home, they now became troubled by having to directly witness the exact nature of his internet use.

Furthermore, the location of the computer in the boys' bedroom precipitated a significant restructuring of the Li family's daily routines. One staple feature of the household's daily rhythm was summed up by the mother's expression 'eat dinner, watch TV' (*chifan, kan dianshi*), which she often recited, with some degree of joy, after every meal. This expression described the family's habit of retiring to the 'guest hall'<sup>9</sup> after dinner to watch television soap operas or light entertainment game shows together.

The introduction of the internet to the home was extremely disruptive to this process of dining and then watching television together as a family. The youngest son would frequently arrive last for the meal, his mother having to repeatedly call him away from the computer. He would gulp down a small amount of food, then set down his chopsticks and immediately return to the bedroom to resume gaming. Her son's apparent disinterest in eating caused considerable concern for his mother.

In the case of the Li family, the installation of home internet connections became problematic because it initially failed to achieve what the parents *really* seemed to hope it would do. Although it brought the family together within the bounds of one household, this did not necessarily result in them being bought together as a family undertaking communal activities. Instead, Mr Li and his wife spent their time in the guest hall watching soap operas as before, whilst their two sons occupied themselves in their bedroom on the computer. In this case, the problem was that although the internet had been bought into the domestic sphere, at this stage internet use on the computer had not become fully domesticated, in the sense that Silverstone et al. (1989, pp. 43–44) refer to domestication as the 'process through which information and communications technologies ... become inconspicuous, if not "invisible" within the home' (to be discussed later). Although the entire family were now under one roof, they still seemed to be worlds apart. If anything, the presence of the internet-enabled computer instead resulted in a major source of family contention.<sup>10</sup>

The installation of these ICTs had additional unforeseen effects on the family's daily routine. Having unlimited access to the internet, as opposed to the hourly billing in the internet cafe or limited use in their neighbour's house, meant that the level of internet use increased dramatically

for both sons, with them often playing games late into the night. The mother became particularly worried that the presence of the computer in her sons' room meant that her youngest son failed to have an afternoon nap or go to sleep at an appropriate hour in the evening. His parents often complained that game playing contributed to his inability to prepare for the middle-school exams. At dinner-times his mother would cite the gaming as the cause of his poor results. His wife even asked me for advice on how to curb her son's internet use.

The complaints of his parents seemed to have little effect, and the situation only came to a head when they exercised the most direct possible method in which to control access to the internet: they simply stopped paying the monthly fee, resulting in the service being suspended. However, this action only partially achieved the desired effect, as the two sons had taken advantage of the internet connection whilst it was in place by downloading several games that could be played offline. Although disconnecting the internet curtailed their online game playing, the sons were still able to continue playing offline computer games.

The story developed further when the aged cathode-ray tube monitor used with the computer developed a fault, making it impossible to use the computer altogether. The household routines began to revert to something resembling the situation prior to the appearance of the computer and internet connection. Post-dinner family television sessions occurred more frequently. However, the youngest son's presence in the home also began to wane, returning to previous patterns of computer use outside the home. On occasions he would not return home until the rest of the family had already finished their meal, once again provoking concern.

Eventually the parents relented, and chose to reconnect the internet and purchase a new LCD monitor for the computer. On the day the internet was reinstalled, Mr Li warned his son that if he were to once again fail to complete his homework or play too late into the night, then he would literally take a pair of scissors and cut the telephone line.

However, following the reconnection of the internet, an interesting development occurred: both of the parents gradually became aware of ways in which they could use the internet for their own enjoyment. For the father, it was the introduction to the online version of the playing card game 'tease the landlord' (*dou dizhu*). 'Tease the landlord' was by far the most popular card game played in the town, mostly with men as a pastime involving gambling small amounts of money. In the online version of the game, participants played against two online opponents, and with the object of accumulating points rather than money. Mr Li explained to me that the reason that he liked the online version over playing offline was that he 'didn't need to find people' (*bu xuyao zhao ren*), alluding to the inconvenience of trying to find opponents who were able to put aside the time to join in a game. Furthermore, in the same nature as described in Steinmüller's (2011, p. 263) commentary of Chinese street gambling practices which attracted bystanders who provided commentary and analysis, the sons also crowded around the computer screen to watch their father play, offering suggestions on which hand to present next.

This potential turn towards the internet was furthered when Mr Li's wife realised the connection allowed her to stream films and television programmes. Upon observing her sons watching television online, she asked them to teach her how to do this herself. This became particularly useful during a period following her surgical operation. For a short time she was unable to perform any housework. She remained seated on the bed of her sons' room facing the computer monitor, watching endless re-runs of Chinese soap operas. It soon ensued that there were occasions when the family, rather than being crowded around the guest hall television post-dinner, instead assembled in the boys' bedroom to watch streamed television programmes on the computer.

The parents' realisation that the internet connection could be used to perform leisure activities similar to the ones they had already been practicing was essential to helping further integration into the domestic lives of the family. Mr Li and his wife had initially simply viewed the computer

as a means by which to keep their errant son at home. However, they had not realised that the adoption of such an item would upset the daily rhythms of life in the home. They were doubtless even less likely to have perceived that, through prolonged exposure to the computer in the home, they were also likely to gradually become users themselves.

It seems of little coincidence that the lessening of conflicts in the Li family regarding the computer and internet use coincided with the realisation that the device carried the possibility of appropriation for communal activities. The most extreme way this happened in the Li family's house was through the eventual re-siting of the machine. During early 2011 the family redecorated a sparse outer 'entrance hall' room. They painted the walls pale pink and installed a new, L-shaped sofa which lay across the back wall. The sofa was placed to take advantage of the sunlight that entered through the room's long window, making it the warmest room in the house during the winter.<sup>11</sup> They relocated the computer to this room, placing it on a corner table facing into the room. They also moved in extra plastic chairs so that more people could sit around the computer. Now when the youngest son played computer games it was frequently under the observation of (or with) the parents. The repositioning of the computer in the living room also facilitated more occasions when the entire family came together to share the consumption of TV programmes or games of *doudizhu* or *majiang* on the internet.

### Analysis – domestication theory: similarities with and refinements to

A number of different theoretical models have been put forward to account for the way that people choose to adopt new technologies and attempt to incorporate them into their everyday lives. These models range from those that are deterministic in nature, such as the S-Curve/Technology Diffusion Model (Rogers, 1995) or Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989), to more qualitative micro-level approaches emphasising users' own agency in appropriating technology into their lives such as material culture studies (Horst & Miller, 2006; Miller & Slater, 2000) and the domestication of technology (Silverstone et al., 1989, 1992).

Hynes (2009, p. 26) undertakes a useful comparison of the utility of these theoretical models for understanding ethnographic data collected during her own study of internet adoption amongst Irish households. Hynes critiques the appropriateness of deterministic models such as the technology diffusion model and TAM for analysing the kinds of ethnographic data collected in her study. Hynes expresses preference for the domestication of the technology model, owing to its capacity 'to analyse the discrete phases of the process through which technologies become a part of everyday life' (Hynes, 2009, p. 26). The similarity between Hynes' method, approach and focus on the domestic sphere to that employed in this paper also suggests the appropriateness of this model for understanding the data from the Li family.

Domestication theory (Silverstone et al., 1989, 1992) describes the process that ICTs need to go through when they are brought into the home in order to become incorporated into the domestic sphere. Rather than simply trying to define specific motives or functions of ICTs, the theory instead emphasises the social relationships that surround the use of these technologies, especially foregrounding the interactions existing between household members, and how norms, regulations tensions or even conflicts over the uses emerged (Haddon, 2007, p. 27). As the ethnographic example of the Li family demonstrated, tracking these interactions becomes particularly significant as although defined motives may exist for installing the internet, it can nonetheless be difficult for families to predict the short- and long-term effects of installing a particular communication technology into the domestic sphere.

Silverstone et al. (1992, p. 21) outlined four aspects of domestication. *Appropriation* described the management of the entry of these ICTs into the home; *objectification* accounted for the physical and symbolic location of these technologies within the home; *incorporation*

illustrated how this connected with routines and structures of time and *conversion* considered how these technologies were then displayed by their users to communicate information about themselves. Hynes (2009) emphasises that these aspects do not necessarily occur in a closed, linear process, but are commonly renegotiated and challenged.

Whilst Hynes' study of 16 Irish households designates participants into groups, each of which poses different attitudes towards internet adoption (i.e. 'talkers', 'searchers', 'workers' and 'dis-missers'), this paper finds that the iterative and constantly renegotiated nature of domestication can be especially clearly exemplified by looking at households over extended periods of time, as the ethnographic case of the Lis detailed in this paper has demonstrated. The domestication of the internet for the Li family went through seven main stages over the period of fieldwork (Figure 3). This paper does not claim that all homes in Red Mountain Town follow these stages.<sup>12</sup> However, the data do demonstrate how the meanings individual household members attached to the internet were renegotiated over time.

Silverstone et al.'s theory of domestication also urges a consideration of how the household functions as a 'moral economy'. The authors emphasise the domestication of ICTs as a process involving these technologies becoming part of a transactional system concerned with the creation of value in the home. As such domestication is a particularly moral problem:

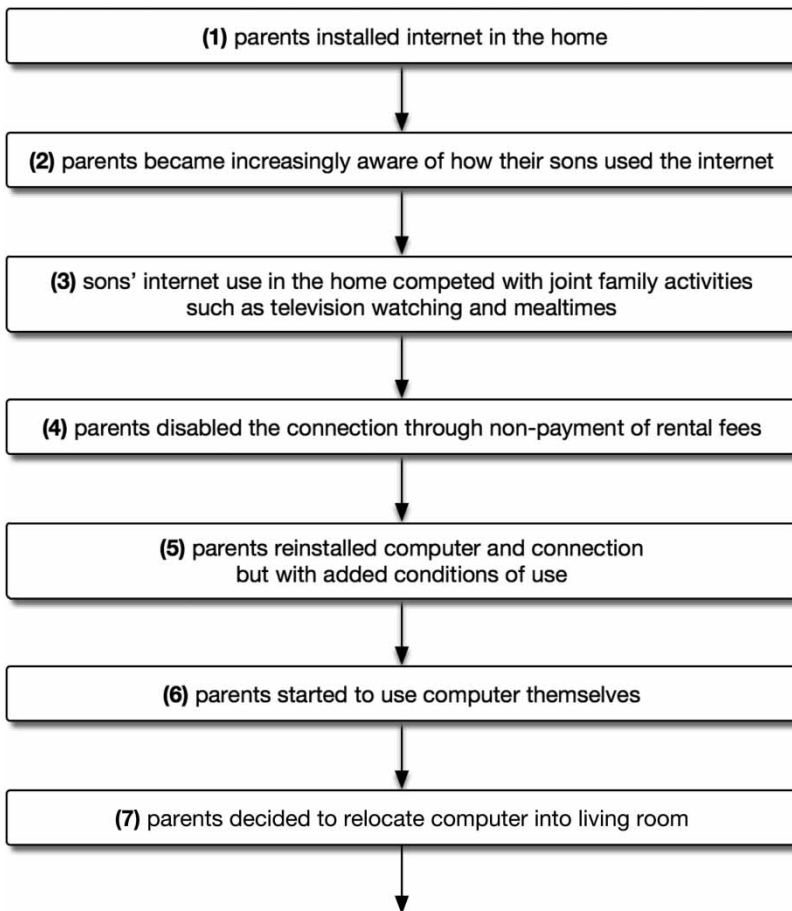


Figure 3. Summary of major stages of internet domestication observed in the Li family home.

Information and communication technologies make the problem of creating ontological security particularly problematic, for media disengage the location of action and meaning from experience, and at the same time (and through the same displaced spaces) claim action and meaning for the modern world system of capitalist social and economic (and moral) relations. (Silverstone et al., 1992, p. 20)

This view of the home as a moral economy is valuable in that it can move the attention towards the capability of technology to produce a certain kind of person, which encourages a reconsidering of the theory of domestication. Accounts of domestication theory often emphasise it as a process concerning how to successfully incorporate new technology into the home. As such, one could be forgiven for thinking it is the ICT that has to be shaped or moulded to the home. Hynes acknowledges that domestication may not entirely be about getting the technology to ‘fit in’, noting the reciprocal relation between the internet and household members, claiming the emphasis should be on finding ‘the crossover where technologies and people adjust to each other and find (or do not find) a way to co-exist’ (Hynes, 2009, p. 26). The ethnographic data in this paper, however, show that the bulk of concerns over internet use do not directly centre on how to incorporate the internet into the home, but are rather focussed on using the internet to affect and transform others within the home, specifically with the intention of creating certain kinds of persons. This paper suggests that the process of domestication may be better understood by considering how individuals seek to align each other towards the internet in a particular way.

A useful model with which to extend domestication theory by allowing the scope to consider more specifically about the *active nature* of ICTs in the home comes from Gell’s (1998) anthropological analysis of artworks. Gell emphasised that individuals utilise objects to exercise agency over other social actors. Woodward (2007, p. 68) applied Gell’s theories to understand the more mundane world of everyday clothing, noting that this agency is not uni-directional, but that different individuals may try to affect each other through the same object. These ideas start to demonstrate how objects such as home ICTs may be constitutive of what Gell terms a ‘system of action’ where objects are understood as capable of affecting change upon other persons (Gell, 1998, p. 6).

This becomes especially apparent if we re-analyse the stages listed in Figure 3. For example in stage 1, Mr Li and his wife appear to be bringing the internet into the home with the hope of affecting a return of their errant child to the domestic sphere. In stage 3, their son intentionally uses the computer in order to avoid partaking in joint family activities in the home. Troubled by this, in stage 4, the parents intentionally stopped their internet subscription in an attempt to disrupt their son’s use and return him to participating in joint family activities such as meals and television viewing. In stage 5, the subscription to the internet is restarted, once again as an attempt to win their son back into the home. However this time Mr Li establishes conditions of use, an attempt to influence his offspring’s own attitudes towards ICTs. In stage 6, as parents become more aware of the internet’s potential to carry out activities similar to the ones they already undertake as a family, we can see a shift in values towards this ICT: Mr Li and his wife start to use the internet (and involve their sons) in activities that are ultimately conducive to the family; their offspring are active in sharing knowledge of internet use with their parents, seeing that they too can affect their parents’ attitudes towards this ICT. Finally, in stage 7, when the computer is moved from the son’s bedroom into the new living room space, there is a clear reassigning of the computer and the internet into a form of joint family activity, as a further attempt to bring their children into family life.

### **Conclusion: domestication and ‘the Chinese internet’**

Before concluding this paper, it is necessary to acknowledge that the data presented here come from a single family over a period of 18 months. This paper does not intend to claim that the

Li family is representative of Red Mountain Town – and even less so, China – as a whole. Instead, the merit of the ethnographic account presented above comes from the fact that what is lost in breadth is instead gained in depth; as such an amount of time allowed me to gauge social transformations which occurred in a single home due to the introduction of the internet that would be impossible to obtain through statistical or survey methods. Furthermore, such an account describes participants' lives with particular fidelity, picking up features that respondents themselves may not necessarily be conscious of, particularly where the ethnography demonstrates subtle changes in participants' attitudes towards technologies over an extended period of time.

More broadly, ethnographies of domestication in China also help to challenge the tendency for internet and communication studies scholars to produce a particular academic discourse regarding 'the Chinese internet', which focuses on topics relating to 'society' and 'politics' and how China might be democratised through the use of technology (Herold, 2013, pp. 8–10; Qiu & Bu, 2013, p. 141). Herold critiques the tendency of Chinese internet studies researchers to focus on these themes, suggesting that this focus may reflect the sensibilities of academic researchers, rather than the priorities of Chinese internet users themselves. The Li family are thus more typical users of the internet in the sense that they are not particularly overtly politically active; they do not share the *habitus*<sup>13</sup> of political activists. Their everyday politics are more ones of familial life, where domesticating the internet also revealed the reconfiguration of power within the home (for example, through Mr Li's ability to stop the internet connection through non-payment of the broadband fees).

Similarly, the ethnographic data that have been presented in this paper have clearly demonstrated a set of concerns held by the Li family that predominantly centre not on issues of democracy or freedom, but rather on the effects of internet use on family, kinship, children's education and achievement, and the necessity of domestic commonality and shared experience. Cases like the Li family have the potential of contributing to Herold's (2013, p. 11) call for 'more studies that look at how people in China are using the Internet to do what they want to do' by focusing on the actual practices of internet use, and how this relates to users' online and offline practice and behaviours.

Whilst democratisation has not appeared to be of any major significance to the Lis' attitudes towards the internet, by contrast their overriding concern with the impact of the internet on home and family life has been useful in terms of reassessing Silverstone's theory of domestication. This paper supports Silverstone et al.'s (1992) assertion that new technologies need to be domesticated when they come into the home, whilst emphasising that rather than moulding technology to fit in to the home, the process is also directed at intentionally transforming family members in multiple ways. Furthermore, the case of the Li family has emphasised the incorporation of ICTs into the home as an ongoing process, and one that may never be wholly complete. In the Li household, the incorporation of the internet was hugely aided by a parental realisation that the internet could be used in a similar fashion to already established practices of family television watching and card-playing. Such practices enable the internet to be domesticated in a progression similar to that described by Madianou and Miller (2012, p. 124) where a new ICT 'finds a niche in relation to the properties of co-existing other media'.

This process of gradually becoming aware of the different possibilities of internet use chimes strongly with Lindtner and Szablewicz's (2011) account of internet spaces that also illustrated the turn away from internet cafes in China. The examples presented above suggest that the internet may initially be held at a distance by parents and viewed as a single unified entity. However, on arrival in the home there is a period in which what Lindtner and Szablewicz (2011, p. 89) aptly refer to as the unique spaces of 'multiple Internets', that are frequently in antagonistic relationship with each other, gradually become apparent to these parents.



This paper has demonstrated that the case of the Li family, rather than being parochial and insignificant, can provide a valuable evidence base on which to challenge and refine theory regarding the adoption of ICTs. The paper has confirmed the utility of domestication theory for understanding how technologies become appropriated into the home, whilst suggesting revisions to the theory in terms of both its rebalancing its current focus on incorporating the technology over the transformation of individual actors and the open-ended nature of the domestication process. Aside from these grander theoretical insights, the more humble contribution this paper makes is to offer an insight into the actual practices of internet use in a typical Chinese household and the social relations that lie therein, illuminating the concerns and motivations regarding internet use held by family members. Such insights ought to help encourage more varied and eclectic academic discourses regarding the Chinese internet and Chinese society in general.

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### Notes

1. In order to preserve the anonymity of the individuals who participated in this research, all names of persons and places have been altered.
2. A third and growing way in which people could access the internet was via the wireless 3G network which had been available within Red Mountain Town since 2009, and was being heavily advertised by all the mobile phone operators at the time of fieldwork. However, the impact of 3G was in its early days, and confined to mobile use.
3. Qiu (2009, p. 162), studying 'urban villages' in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, argues that the networks that hold these urban villages together are sustained by low-cost ICT. The situation is somewhat different in Red Mountain Town's urban villages owing to the town's poorer economic background, lower density and the fact that many migrants originate from within the county. Nonetheless, the internet and other ICTs are gaining an important foothold within these locales.
4. See Stafford (2000, p. 3) for a similar methodological example where the eventual research focus emerges naturally during the course of ethnographic fieldwork.
5. However, some cafes also offered 'all night' (*tongxiao*) sessions, hiring the computer for an entire 10-hour period between 10 pm and 8 am the following morning, at a discounted rate of 10 RMB.
6. The original thread appears at <http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kz=610537635>
7. Work-unit housing refers to urban accommodation formerly allocated to government or state-owned enterprise employees.
8. The youngest son was below the legal age to use internet cafes, and was sometimes refused service by such establishments. His older brother also often visited the cafes prior to installation of the internet in their home.
9. See McDonald (2013 pp. 74–130) for a description of the guest hall and its role in the home.
10. Fu's (2010) ethnography of digital practice amongst families in Shanghai details the way in which parents attempt to control access to the computer in homes, and similarly records how young people's intense desire to play computer games leaves parents in a quandary. Parents are caught between a desire to express love for their children (see also Fong, 2004, p. 140) and achieve family harmony, and concerns that the distractions of gaming will affect their offspring's educational



attainment, reflecting badly on them as parents. Stafford (1995, pp. 2–5) argues that morality, in addition to being learnt in schools, is also learnt through parents' daily life practice, and that there exists a perception that by observing a child's behaviour, judgements may be made on the parents' teaching.

11. Houses in the south of China typically do not feature central heating systems, making the sunlight a particularly important form of heat.
12. See McDonald (2013, pp. 191–223) for accounts of how other households in Red Mountain Town followed different trajectories when incorporating internet connections into their homes.
13. Habitus was a concept put forward by Bourdieu (1977, pp. 78), which he described as the generative principle that produces practice. Postill (2010) provides a further discussion of its potential contribution for understanding media practice.

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