Virtual Gifts and Guanxi: Supporting Social Exchange in a Chinese Online Community

Jiang Yang[1], Mark S. Ackerman[1, 2], Lada A. Adamic[1, 3]
[1]School of Information, [2] Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, [3]Complex Systems

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Ann Arbor, MI, USA, 48109
{yangjian, ackerm, ladamic}@umich.edu

ABSTRACT

Significant cultural differences persist between East and West. Software systems that have been proven to operate efficiently within one culture can fail in the context of the other, especially if they are intended to support rich social interactions. In this paper we demonstrate how a virtual currency system, not unlike ones employed by many US-based websites, evolved within a thriving Chinese online forum into an essential medium for extremely diverse and culturally specific social exchange activities. The social interactions reflect the traditional Chinese idea of *guanxi*, or interpersonal influence and connectedness, while at the same time incorporating the norms of a new generation of Internet users.

Author Keywords

Chinese culture, guanxi, virtual points, gift, social exchange, social interactions, reciprocity, online community, inter-cultural studies

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Human factors.

INTRODUCTION

Various information services and systems (e.g. eBay, Orkut, and Yahoo!) have encountered serious challenges when entering China, an emergent and promising market with 400 million Internet users. We argue that in order to successfully localize, such services need not only adequately navigate the current Chinese economic and political landscape, but also need to account for the deeply rooted Chinese culture.

To address the need to understand how Chinese culture interacts with online systems, in this paper we present a case study of diverse social interactions among Chinese netizens, based on over 4 years of comprehensive data collected from an online bulletin board system (BBS), Mitbbs. Mitbbs is the most frequently used online forum for Chinese nationals who are studying or working abroad, primarily in the United States. Because Mitbbs is hosted in the US, it is less affected by censorship than forums located in China.

Founded in 1998 by volunteers, Mitbbs was later commercialized and is supported through the sale of advertisements. However, in essence, it has been sustained by the hundreds of thousands of Chinese who are seeking both help and a sense of community during their stays abroad. Similar to the experience that most Chinese young people had with their college BBSs, i.e. participating in a virtual community and developing social networks, Mitbbs supports a significant part of its users' informational and social life abroad. This could be seen on the *Anniversary* board, created on the 10th anniversary of Mitbbs' launch, where users have posted their experiences and memories of Mitbbs. For example, a user, *anvv*, who had used Mitbbs throughout his ten years abroad, wrote a post titled "an 'unknown'[1] dream for ten years".

A community such as Mitbbs can succeed only if it can motivate users to exchange information and socialize. To this end, Mitbbs introduced "*weibi*," a virtual currency system. For example, posts promoted to the front page earn their authors *weibi*. However, despite the limited and rather unimaginative initial prescribed use of *weibi*, the virtual currency system evolved to be an essential mechanism in Mitbbs because it supports critically important social interactions. It is through the lens of *weibi* that we study social interactions in this community.

As the virtual currency was adopted by Mitbbs' users, its uses evolved in a very culturally specific manner: It quickly began to serve as a mechanism for social exchange activities termed *guanxi* in Chinese. Thus, the online social interactions can reflect real life Chinese social dynamics. *Guanxi* networking (to be explained further below) has

---

[1] "Unknown space" is a nickname for Mitbbs, based on "Unknown BBS," its precursor hosted at Beijing University.

been viewed as an "informal aspect of the institutional culture [28]" and a stimulus of social actions [1]. Virtual points, through their flexibility and ambiguity, allow users to carry out socially important and culturally nuanced *guanxi* behavior.

This paper is organized as follows. We first provide the literature background that is crucial to understanding the social interactions of Chinese users in Mitbbs. We then introduce the Mitbbs system and show how its diverse social exchange is supported through the interaction between the virtual point system (*weibi*) and the *guanxi* networking dynamics. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings and conclude.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

We ground our study by describing three general streams of literature: cultural differences between Westerners and East Asians, including studies within CSCW, studies about *guanxi* in China, and virtual points in online communities.

In inter-cultural sociology and cultural psychology, Westerners and East Asians are often categorized as belonging to two differing groups. In terms of this literature, Westerners tend to be labeled as more analytic while East Asians tend to be more holistic; and thus, Westerners are context-independent, more narrowly focused, and use formal logic, while East Asians are field-dependent, broadly focused, situational, and dialectical [17, 26]. In terms of social orientation, Western cultures tend to value independence, individualism, autonomy, and self-achievement [9]; in contrast, Asian cultures emphasize interdependence, harmony, relatedness, and connection [8, 22, 24]. Cultures of independent-orientation tend to view the self as bounded and separate from others, while interdependent-orientated cultures view the self as interconnected and encompassing important social relationships [15]. Thus Asian cultures are "characterized by belonging, mandating the fulfillment of obligations and responsibilities to others" [6].

CSCW has generally followed this literature, although there is wide concern over its limitations for design. For example, Kayan, Fussell, and Setlock found that Asian users prefer multi-party chat, audio-video chat, and IM emoticons [12]. Other studies have similarly examined inter-cultural differences in computer-mediated communication (e.g., [21], [27]) and in work teams (e.g., [23]). Lindtner et al., however, points out that these contrast-focused approaches can force a problematic distinction between "here" (the West) and "there" (China) [14]. Instead, as Lindtner et al. did in their study of gaming in Chinese Internet cafes, we focus here on specific Chinese practices around social exchange and their re-enactment in digital environments so as to avoid this reification.

Central to our study of social exchange is the notion of *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is a major theme in social interactions in Chinese society. Those familiar with Chinese culture would not doubt its importance, but Westerners find it hard to grasp. Essentially, *guanxi* describes the ties between an individual and others [11], fostered through exchanges of favors [20]. It is based in a sense of *renqing*, sometimes translated as harmonious relations. As Yang states:

```
An important feature of renqing principles is
the notion of the necessity of reciprocity,
obligation,    and    indebtedness    in    human
relations.    What    activates    reciprocal
relations, what imbues relationships with a
sense of obligation and indebtedness are the
work of relational sentiments and ethics.
Concrete expressions of renqing are found
especially in the gift-giving that goes on at
special occasions such as birth, deaths,
weddings, and New Year's. ([33], p. 122).
```

Gift exchange plays an important role in establishing and sustaining *guanxi* networks. Yang [33] and Yang [34] in their ethnographic studies found two characteristics in *guanxi* to be prominent. First, reciprocal obligations for favors are assumed [10], and the interactions are designed to cultivate mutual dependence and manufacture obligation and indebtedness (p.6, [33]). As Kipnis states (p.307, [17]):

```
There is ... a congruence between the size of
gifts, the burden of obligation, the strength
of feeling that either existed or was hoped
to develop, the closeness of the guanxi, and
the dependability of the guanxi.
```

Second, gifts tend to be perceived as equivalent to money, and they can be circulated, calculated, and compared (e.g., cash gifts, gifts forwarded to another person).

According to Chiao [3] and King [13], *guanxi* is based on and enhanced by shared social experiences among individuals. For people in non-hierarchical or family relationships (i.e., among friends), *guanxi* connections are a primary mechanism of Chinese social life [4, 25]. *Guanxi* is essentially "not only instrumentality and rational calculation, but also sociality, morality, intentionality, and personal affection" ([33], p.88).

Guanxi is also viewed in the sociology literature as a social mechanism substituting for formal institutions in current Chinese society [30]. "The structure of social relationships in China rests largely on fluid, person-centered social networks, rather than on fixed social institutions" (p.14, [33]). As mentioned, *guanxi* is difficult for Westerners to understand. While it can be compared to social capital [2] [19] in some ways, *guanxi* is more oriented toward dyadic relationships and is less societally structural, allowing *guanxi* networks to be freely connected and often bridge institutional boundaries [33]. Therefore, social capital adheres to and affects (positively or negatively) a social unit, but *guanxi* networks are fluid and autonomous with respect to any institution. It might be noted that despite active research on social capital in Internet contexts, how *guanxi* networks evolve in Chinese online communities is understudied.

Figure 1: Typical post page for Mitbbs: a user is asking "how to review a review-paper" in *Immigration*, where there might be senior people in academia to answer this question.

Table 1 lists the Chinese terms that will be important to our discussion in this paper, including a rough translation. The reader is reminded that terms relating to Chinese culture seldom translate precisely to English, and it is important to focus on the Chinese concept rather than its English translation.

Table 1. Concepts important in Chinese culture

Term	Literal meaning	Free translation
renpin	moral quality	close to the popular use of the term "karma" in the US
RP	same as *renpin*	abbreviation of *renpin* (popular online slang)
renqing	human relationships	human feelings, emotions, relationship, favor
guanxi	relationships	ties between individual and others, through the exchanges of favor

The third line of literature concerns virtual points and gifts in online communities. Virtual points are often used to motivated contribution and participation in question-answering (Q&A) forums. Interestingly, while the English site Yahoo! Answers used a fixed-point rate per question and answer, the two major Asian sites (Baidu Knows in China and Naver Knowledge-iN in Korea) allowed users to make variable point offerings to obtain answers. Yang and Wei [31] found that more points can attract more answers in Baidu, and over time users learned to optimize point expended per answer gained in both Baidu [31] and Naver [16]. Yang and Wei [31] also revealed how Chinese users priced the questions differently based on topics and degrees of importance. Wang and Mainwaring [29]'s study of

virtual currency usage in the largest Chinese social service-Tencent QQ examined the perceived value of the virtual currency and its complex interaction with the currency type and the contexts of obtaining and spending the points. Finally Hjorth [7] noted the pervasiveness of gift-giving in Korean CyWorld use. These studies all hinted at a very diverse, flexible, and contextualized usage of virtual currency and other gifts to support the complex online social exchange activities in Asian culture, and the current study will address this in depth.

MITBBS: REPRESENTATIVE AND UNIQUE

Founded in 1998, Mitbbs is the largest and most frequently visited online forum for Chinese people in the US. As of 2004, there were more than 300,000 users visiting the site monthly, and about 20,000 are currently online at any given time. Most users share the common background of being the first generation studying or working in the US and they are typically highly educated. With the arrival of 10,000 new Chinese students to the US each year, Mitbbs continues to enjoy high participation.

Mitbbs shares major design features with other online Chinese and non-Chinese forums, including the format of the homepage, the subdivision of forums by topic, and supplementary blogging and social-networking services. On Mitbbs boards *ChinaNews*, and *Military*, people share and discuss news -- usually Chinese news, which is often hard to access and discuss on other Chinese forums or websites due to censorship. They help one another by sharing information on various boards such as *Job-hunting*, *Immigration*, *Next-generation (child-rearing)*, or *Postdoc*; share money-saving tips or conduct business on

PenneySaver and *eBiz*; seek a romantic match through *Pie-bridge*[2] and hobby-buddies on forums such as *Movie*, *Tennis*, and *Photography*; meet local people on forums such as *Michigan* or *Seattle*; and find schoolmates on the alumni boards.

When participating in discussions of sensitive topics, users may not want their ID and true identity to be linked. *Majia,* or alternative IDs (see Table 2), are thus frequently used. On the other hand, as in many other webboards, people on Mitbbs post images, including pictures of themselves. Posting a photo is a frequent self-disclosure activity, and the site explicitly encourages this through awarding points and holding various campaigns or contests. For example, people model their dresses on *Fashion*, show off their muscles on *Fitness*, pets in *Pets*, and even body parts on *Sex*. For example on *Pets*, *jackyang* posted some pictures of his son and dog:

```
Ally (name of the dog) and his younger brother:
taken 5 months ago. [jackyang, 08/04/2010]
```

Around twenty people replied, including:

```
Wow, your son is so tall now, time passed so
quickly, in just a second he went from a baby
to a handsome boy. [Ted, 08/04/2010]

I'm admiring… Ally [she] is still too
beautiful!!! [magua, 08/04/2010]

It has been so so so long since I last saw
you [xiaoshu, 08/04/2010]
```

Flame wars are also frequent on Mitbbs. Standard topics for flame wars include "democracy in China," "whether one should return to China," "should one buy a Japanese car or American car," and "should Chinese girls date Americans." These can entice threatening or abusive posts, which might result in users being banned or board masters impeached.

Mitbbs posts are asynchronous, but because of the large user base, interaction can be quick. For example, *little9*'s post to the *Soccer* board obtained 143 replies within 3 minutes when thousands of users gathered on the board during the 2010 World Cup. On the other hand, discussions about controversial topics can potentially last months.

It should be noted that in Mitbbs, users can remove some posts and images, allowing an interaction pattern closer to synchronous systems. For example, as mentioned, a typical post on the Fashion forum is a participant's presenting herself in a favorite dress:

```
Just had final (exam) today…I am so bored now
I want to show my new dress. Is anyone
interested in seeing? [eggpiggie]
```

After receiving some replies expressing interest, the picture will be posted for minutes to hours and then deleted from the original post. A later reply was regretful:

```
Oh, I missed it again! Can you show me one
more time? [cocoLily]
```

---

[2] A legendary bridge where couples meet.

While Mitbbs has a number of unique interaction characteristics, those are not the central concern of this paper. We focus here on the use of *weibi* for social exchange.

Table 2 lists some of the specific terms that are extensively used in Mitbbs discussions and which will be important in this paper.

Table 2. Mitbbs Jargon

Term	Literal meaning	Meaning on the forum
weibi	fake currency	virtual money on Mitbbs
baozi	steamed stuffed bun	a pack of 10 *weibi*[3]
ben	run quickly	1. post pictures of one's self; 2. virtually present in public
majia	vest, shell	alternative ID one might have to post with particular concern

Mitbbs structure and coordination

Similar to other Chinese webboards, Mitbbs is structured with more than 300 sub-forums (called boards). These boards are grouped into 12 large categories, such as "news," "oversea life," "sports," and "alumni." Each board is a space for people to post on a given topic. The centralized homepage provides links to highly ranked threads and boards.

Each board is coordinated by volunteer administrators. There is one "board master" (BM) with several (1 to 5) "vice board masters" who are subordinate. These BMs mark or promote posts; edit (e.g., delete inappropriate posts and archive old posts); reward, warn, or ban users; coordinate discussion; manage the board's balance of virtual points; and, organize events (e.g., organize a special event with awards for posts). BMs themselves are organized through a board called the "Family of BMs," where people can propose to initiate new boards, to be a BM, or to complain about a BM. A "station master" sysop can then make decisions based on this information.

In addition, new or updated BBS policies are also posted, discussed, and modified through the thread format on boards. In fact, new policies have been invented, discussed, and institutionalized through the history of the BBS. For example, some users do not like their posts getting promoted onto web site's front page (which may bring too much attention to the concerned parties in the post), thus there is a new policy that an author or BM can prevent this promotion from happening by adding a tag in the post's title. Sometimes the policies are local to a board. For example, on the *Military* forum, a frequent topic for a flame war is "Chinese girls dating Americans." In July 2010, the *Military* BM posted the policy "whoever raises this topic again will be banned for 3 days."

---

[3] Very interestingly, Yang observed villagers circulating real *baozi* in their gift-exchanging during the Chinese spring festival.

Mitbbs' coordination system reflects a mixture of hierarchy and autonomy. In many ways, the administration is similar to any webboard: Users are moderated by BMs, there is a subordinate relationship between chief and vice-BMs, and stationmaster's authority overrides any decisions. In addition, users can voice their opinions on any issue, which can affect the administrators in that they need to satisfy users to the extent that they will return. On the other hand, there is a deference to central authority, or at least an acknowledgement of it, that is unusual on Western sites.

Finally, a point system or virtual currency was introduced to incentivize participation. As we will demonstrate, points have been freely used in a variety of social interactions for diverse purposes and across contexts beyond their original intended use. We will describe the use of these virtual points following a brief description of our study.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The first author was a casual user of the Mitbbs site for over 4 years. Mitbbs forums have been a significant part of her life: providing political or entertainment news, offering experience and advice about problems with living in the US, as well as random surfing.

To further analyze Mitbbs behavior, we first read more than 2,400 threads from a period of 10 months. The first author translated some of these threads for subsequent analysis and to explain how the board was used. From the same time range, we selected more than 600 exemplars that were representative instances of Mitbbs social interactions around *weibi*. These threads were then translated, analyzed, and categorized in discussion with the other authors. We further scanned each board by querying for the keywords *baozi* and *weibi* in the thread titles, to obtain a basic sense of how participants use virtual points on each board. We identified a set of popular boards that extensively involved point exchanges, such as *Ebiz* (e-business), *NextGeneration* (child-rearing), and *Fashion*. These were compared to boards with few point interactions, such as *Military*, *Returnee*, and *Family* (which is mainly about controversial family issues).

In addition, to gain the participants' perspective about their interactions, we conducted 1.5~2 hour interviews with 13 Mitbbs users. Nine interviewees were from the first author's personal social network, including friends of friends. Four additional volunteers were recruited via messages sent to forum participants. We also interviewed a board-master, who provided insider information on how the point mechanisms work. Most interviews were conducted through Google Talk, since using IM rather than other mechanisms allowed the interview subjects to release only a handle which could not be connected with their Mitbbs ID or real name.

In this paper, we have pseudo-anonymized all names and removed identifying detail.

POINTS ON MITBBS

Mitbbs launched its virtual point (*weibi*) system in 2006. The system was intended to reward contribution and administrative jobs. To mimic a real-world currency system, the site allows users to deposit (to get interest), transfer, and exchange these virtual points. *Weibi* are often exchanged as *baozi*, or units of 10 *weibi*.

Users can earn points through writing a post on one of the boards (0.1 *weibi*), having their post selected or promoted (10~100), posting pictures (10~20), gambling profits, and receiving them from other users.

Points can be used in a number of ways. The primary uses of points are modifying avatars, gambling, giving to a board account, and social exchange. Each is covered in turn.

Avatar fashion. About 10% of Mitbbs users who post display avatars next to their posts. These users must "clothe" their avatars on a regular basis, and this requires points. There are hundreds of items (e.g., jackets, purses, pets, facial expressions, hairstyles) available, priced from zero to 50 *weibi*. New items expire in 45 days after purchase, while second-hand items will continue only for the remainder of the 45 days since the first purchase. If the user does not clothe his avatar, the avatar will be shown in underwear. One of our interviewees tells us that she needs *weibi* to buy some clothing, "when I want to post something, ...I don't want to *ben* in underwear.... I need a fig leaf. ...[The] cheapest or second-hand works" [I2].

The expiration was intended to encourage people to continue to earn and spend money for their avatar. The BBS also operates regular contests for best dressed avatars based on the votes from other users. However, as mentioned, only 10% posts are by users who have avatars in their profiles[4].

Gambling. Gambling can be a relatively fast way to earn or spend *weibi*. Gambling can be run by an individual, but mostly BMs run gambling as the banker in the name of a board. Gambling themes are diverse: people bet on stock values, soccer matches, birth dates of children, exchange rates for the RMB (Chinese currency), and even when the Amazon.com website will crash. Gambling on stock values is often an on-going activity, while others like soccer scores are seasonal or event-driven.

Board accounts. Each board maintains its own *weibi* balance. BMs reward users through board accounts for high quality posts or for participating in posting or presenting campaigns. Board accounts can also fund gambling. This will be discussed further below.

Finally, users can give points away to other users. This is discussed at length next.

---

[4] People can change their display image from a picture to an avatar, or the reverse. For example, during the World Cup 2010, when users could buy their favorite team's uniforms, we observed relatively more users using avatars.

VIRTUAL POINTS IN USE

Weibi was intended originally to motivate contribution. However transferring points among individuals soon became the medium for a diverse set of social interactions, prevalent in many of the boards.

Value of *weibi*

It is important to note that *weibi* is not officially convertible to real currency, and its real value is ambiguous at best. For example, one interviewee assigned a small monetary value to *weibi*. He recalled how he had used 100 *weibi* to buy a "15-off-75" Staples coupon (i.e., a coupon to save 15 $US on a 75 $US purchase), which he thought was a good deal: "You need real money to buy coupon on eBay…. Once I saw some people use US dollars to buy *weibi* at 150:1, which means I paid less than 1 dollar for that coupon" [I10] (Occasionally, users in need of *weibi* will post to a board asking to buy them from other users). Others do not perceive any monetary value for weibi. An interviewee who gave 1000 *weibi* to his friend for gambling, said, "*Weibi* is worth nothing [in real life]" [I12].

Instrumental uses of weibi

Rewarding and incentivizing others' contributions is frequently observed on Mitbbs. Often, users post questions seeking serious and professional answers with a promise of *weibi*. For example, users have needed to know about house closing costs, formatting green card application letters, medical symptoms, lowest possible prices for computer equipment, or even how to find a Dell customer support "phone number for a living person." Offering points in hopes of obtaining better answers is similar to the use of points in question-answer forums [31, 32].

People also use *weibi* to gather people's attention. *Baozi* may be offered to people to promote a post onto more prominent positions (especially to the Mitbbs homepage). For example, one user offered *baozi* to those who would reply to her post about Jian-lian Yi, a Chinese star player in the NBA, in the hopes of having it promoted to the front page. Another user showed his loyalty to a national soccer team by offering a *baozi* "reimbursement" to those users who would purchase Argentine uniforms for their avatars. *Baozi* has been used quite frequently in donation campaigns, e.g., two users offered 1 *baozi* to each of up to 50 users who would support (by replying) a post calling for donations for Qinghai (China) earthquake victims. Another user promised to give away all his *baozi* for votes in the "Chase Community Giving" campaign contest on Facebook.

Less instrumentally, people also award others for a good post they encounter. For example, when one user enjoyed reading a post, she sent a *baozi* to the author and also posted the reply, "Hey, I really like your post, I will give you a *baozi*." These "afterward" *baozi* gifts act to further social interaction and one's *guanxi* network. One of our interviewees has posted several times on "how to apply makeup" with her photos demonstrating different techniques. She got a lot of compliments in the thread, but also, she received several messages with *baozi* attached. She said, "*baozi* is useless for me. I share for fun… [but] I am happy to get these [messages]" [I13]. Another interviewee also received *baozi* with questions regarding his post about job seeking, "I replied in detail… and I think he added me as friend [on the site]" [I4].

Purchasing favors

Exchanging favors is often done between pairs of people who have good *guanxi*. *Weibi* can facilitate these kinds of exchanges among strangers on the BBS. Very importantly, these strangers are outside of one's preexisting social (and *guanxi*) network, but very likely to develop new *guanxi* in the future. Alternatively, they may have an indirect *guanxi* link by sharing the common identity of Chinese students. (This type of link is important in Chinese culture [10, 33].) Most of these exchanges will not be done without this kind of connection, and *weibi* serves as "indirect payment" when one seeks favors from outside of one's preexisting networks [34].

Illegal copies: One interviewee [I5] told us she spent hundreds of *weibi* to buy books in PDF format from other users on the site. For example, she bought an unlicensed copy of the "Career Cup," a book on answering technical interview questions, from another user for 100 *weibi* (sold as a legal electronic copy for 29 $US online). This was a deal off the thread and board, but we could infer many such transactions from people's relevant conversations.

Review referral: A user posted a request on the *Faculty* board, asking for an opportunity to review journal or conference papers. One's review record is crucial when applying for an EB-1 green card (for US permanent residency), and there is considerable discussion about this in relevant boards such as *Immigration* or *Faculty* (who are very likely to apply for this type of green card):

```
Journal: 20 baozi

Conference PC (Program Committee): 5 baozi

My research direction is data mining in
computational biology. And later I switched
to information retrieval on mobile devices.
Send me BBS mail, and I will send you my
vita. [happyLife]
```

Similarly, *horseJean* asked for code that could be used to compute a "tight-binding model in NonoST". Another user wanted a sample reference letter for faculty job applications, and she offered 5 *baozi*.

On the *Automobile* board, baozi is frequently used for checking a car record with a given VIN number. Some people buy the Autocheck or Carfax service when checking the record of a used car, and they usually can look up the records for more than one car. This favor is done for free as the person has already spent the money, and people started to use *baozi* in exchange for this help. This has recently started to change, as people have begun to ask for money to do the checking.

Collecting *renpin*

Collecting *renpin* (often "RP") is a very common use of *weibi* on Mitbbs. *Renpin* in Chinese was originally used to describe one's character or moral quality. Online, its meaning has shifted to more commonly connote something akin to "karma in present life". Positive actions or deeds can accumulate *renpin* and result in later good luck.

Renpin reflects a mixture of karma from Buddhism and the norm of reciprocity in people's *guanxi* networks. However, *renpin* is a kind of karma that will pay out within one's present life. In addition, Chinese people practice *guanxi* networking by cultivating mutual dependence and exchange of favors [10, 33], and people who do not follow the rule of equity will lose *renpin* and be considered untrustworthy [1].

Netizens have even derived a "Law of Conservation of Character[5]": one needs to spend certain amount of *renpin* in order to get good luck in a particular situation, and if one gets bad luck that is because he has used up his *renpin*. It has been observed that *renpin* often drives people to "do good" in social interactions on the Internet in the absence of other social norms and religion. While some interviewees were skeptical of *renpin*, many more expressed sentiments like "I don't exclude the possibility to collect RP by distributing *baozi*."

On Mitbbs, *weibi* plays an important role as the medium of collecting *renpin*. People distribute *baozi* to accumulate "blessings" from other users when they are hoping for a good outcome, for example, for a pregnancy, a parent's visa interview, a spouse's upcoming job interview, or a new romance. As another example, a user, oke, said in her post that:

```
Baozi on the Baby board (NextGeneration) was
really effective. I had a very smooth
delivery of my baby, after I sent 66 baozi
when it was 4 days overdue.

Now I want to distribute 66 baozi again,
asking for blessings on our 2-month overdue
greencard approval.
```

Another user gave away "double-filling" (20 point) *baozi* in order to get rid of his "bad luck":

```
I bought baozi specifically for this. I was
really unlucky in May, Lost a package around
3000 bucks Got a 800 bucks ticket and got my
car back with another 200 bucks and got a
very bad negative feedback⁶ and threw away my
contact lens as trash. Everyone please give
me some luck… [IamLegend]
```

This post obtained more than 150 replies although it only offered *baozi* to the first 20 people who sent blessings. Many people replied with posts such as "really bad fortune-loss", "serious blessing", and "endless good luck." The posting also received numerous suggestions such as to wear "something fortunate" such as crystals.

One of our interviewees described his experience of distributing *baozi:* "I requested blessings for my doctoral dissertation …It was a complicated situation, and I got [my thesis] signed by my committee on the last day …The process, anyway, was very tricky." He sent *baozi* to each of the 100 users who replied, because "it would show my sincerity." He believed he had collected RP for his thesis process: "Eventually I was surprisingly lucky… It passed and I believe the *baozi* worked" [I3].

Banquets of baozi

Banquets are one of the most prominent social instruments to sustain *guanxi* networks [33]. On Mitbbs, people frequently hold "banquets of *baozi*" to celebrate various events. According to the "theory of *renpin*," one needs to re-accumulate *renpin* as one "redeems" a portion as good luck. Thus people need to "do something good" by gifting back to the community to keep the "*renpin* balance." Akin to food and drink given by hosts in real-life banquets or *hongbao* (a red small envelope containing cash) [33], the *baozi* that is given on Mitbbs is considered a carrier of luck, thus rewarding the community.

A few examples of banquets of *baozi* include a successful delivery of one's baby, a successfully obtained visa, an approved green card application, an accepted offer on a house purchase, and getting job offers. The success can be smaller as well: the successful sale of one's used computer, finding a good deal on a purchase, or even celebrating Spain's 2010 World Cup championship.

Baozi are not the only kind of gift item used for this. As we observed on the *Job-hunting* board, many users provide *mianjing*⁷ to reward the community. For example, one interviewee asked for blessings before her husband's interview, and she urged him to post his *mianjing* onto the board as she promised.

```
I did not have many points so I did not give.
I felt an obligation to share mianjing …I
think there are some people who blessed us
because they want [mianjing]… it can somehow
help people...It is returning the favor.[I2]
```

Often, people give both *baozi* and useful information together as a reward to the community. For example, one user gave away *baozi* for receiving her Eb1a card (the highest priority greencard) and shared comprehensive information about her background.

Gifting *weibi* to friends

Weibi exchange is not limited to simply enhancing one's *guanxi* online, but can be exchanged as a gift among friends to enhance both online and offline relationships. However, unlike other *weibi* uses on Mitbbs, *weibi* transfers among offline friends is often invisible. Despite this, we saw many

---

⁵ http://baike.baidu.com/view/1586.htm

⁶ As a seller in eBay

⁷ Literally translated as "scripture of interview," this is where people write about the experience they had with the interview, especially "what kind of interview questions one has been asked and how he answered."

cases where people indicate their transfers of *weibi* in discussion threads. For example, a user transferred 500 *weibi* to the *eBiz* board "sponsoring *Xiongxiong* to distribute [his] *baozi*."

Our interviewee who distributed 100 *baozi* for his dissertation also got many *weibi* from his offline friends: "I had accumulated a few by myself…and I know a couple of rich guys. I asked many from them, hah hah!" [I3]. Another interviewee said he had given 1000 *weibi* to a friend from college, "*baozi* is worthwhile… 1k *weibi* can make [my friend] very, very happy, why not?" [I12].

Individual-group interactions
Guanxi exists not only between two individuals, but also between an individual and the group. Correspondingly, *weibi* can also be utilized to reinforce relationships between an individual and a community (often within a board). For example, a user, *yue*, felt sad to see some users leave the *Connecticut* board, and offered them *baozi* to stay in touch :

```
Several key people of our board – kekeLee,
catFish, and yunQi are leaving! Sigh, I just
got to know people here. I am moving too, but
it is good that I will stay in Connecticut…

I will give baozi to all tongxue⁸ who are
moving, welcome whoever is coming and [say]
farewell to whoever is leaving. …I wish all
you happiness anywhere. …Those who are
leaving please come back to chat when you get
time, friendship is forever…

There is a condition for eating [my] baozi:
people moving out need to tell where they are
going then I can find you later. People
moving in also please tell me where you live,
we can take care of each other.
```

People often donate to a board they liked as the reward to its community. For example, *appleSky* donated 500 *weibi* to the *eBiz* board, and he said in the post: "I just donated 500 to *eBiz*, come on, let's donate *baozi*, accumulate RP, and build our board together." It is also quite common that people donate part of their *weibi* to the board account and ask the BM to help distribute the rest. A mutually beneficial interaction can be realized through this process: the donor can show kindness to the BM by offering points to both the board and people on the board, while the BM can help distribute *weibi*, bridging both the donor and other community members in *guanxi*.

These community-rewarding activities often take place on boards where mutual help is appreciated and community is cherished. For example, on *NextGeneration*, people share knowledge and experience, and support one another going through the process of becoming new parents, while on *Pets*, people not only share experiences of their loved pets, but often defend against outside pet-haters. By donating *weibi*, people show their appreciation and good wishes to a board and its community. One user wrote "thanks to the

---

⁸ Classmates or schoolmates, general names for young people who are likely in school.

Baby board" when donating *weibi* to the board. Another user, *maya*, wrote on his return to China:

```
I have not figured out how to 'cross the
border⁹' onto Mitbbs, so I give away all my
baozi I have…and, I want to give my best wish
to the board, being still thriving and pure,
in this superficial society. Farewell….
```

Another kind of individual-group interaction through *weibi* involves sponsorships for on-board activities. For example, *Soccer* has an approximately 2 year old tradition of bidding for a board-logo sponsorship with a rate of 100 *weibi* per day. This allows fans to promote their beloved players or teams, as the winner will get his team logo on the right-hand side of the thread list. As well, one interviewee stated that people donate *weibi* as a form of registration fee or title sponsorship in food contests or online game competitions.

DISCUSSION
Weibi are of token value, and the system has support for them – this has fostered their use as an important resource for the Mitbbs users. Indeed, *weibi* serve as a critical lubricant for a wide range of Chinese customs and norms. We have shown above how people on Mitbbs use weibi to serve a number of purposes they find valuable: The Mitbbs users, Chinese students and workers in the US, value *guanxi*, or their networks of reciprocal obligations, as would any person in China. *Weibi* can also serve to foster *renpin*, or karma conservation. It is hard to overstate the fit to Chinese culture that the uses of weibi have on Mitbbs.

Weibi works for these purposes on Mitbbs because the virtual points are ambiguously valued, can be given away in flexible ways, fit socially valued goals, and are visible. Its use, however, is more explicit than perhaps would be desired.
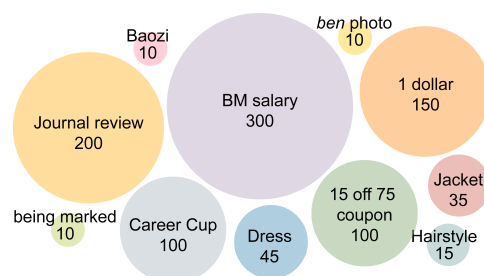

Figure 2. Examples of *weibi* exchange rates

Sweet spot between nothing and value
Because of the vague value of *weibi*, it serves well as the sweet spot between gifting nothing and providing a small gift (such as a token amount of real money). *Weibi* is **not** real money, especially when disguised by the name of *baozi*. Instead, it is the carrier for kindness, blessings, good luck, and social obligations. However, *weibi* works in this capacity because of its fit to *guanxi* and *guanxi* relationships. In fact, a classic economics experiment

---

⁹ Mitbbs.com is forbidden in mainland China, although people can gain access, for example, by using a VPN service from abroad.

serves as a counter-claim: a small amount of monetary incentive can be more detrimental than paying nothing [5]. In a Chinese setting, however, *weibi* appears to work well for a large range of social interactions, even though its value is ambiguous, if not nil.

Boosting social interactions

Since *weibi* can circulate, social interactions are thus boosted through it (but probably resulting in less tension than with real money). Contributions on Mitbbs appear to be encouraged through the use of *weibi*, and positive social interactions also appear to be encouraged. For example, users are willing to gift *weibi* to show their appreciation for a posting, and they post their pictures and valuable information. As well, users broadcast and celebrate their personal news through distributing *weibi* to other users, while obtaining plenty of admiration, praise, and blessings.

Since the value of *weibi* is contextual and perceived differently by different people, it can thus be flexible and substitutable as an instrument in these reciprocal social exchanges. For example, one user had posted pictures of real *baozi* she made, to thank the board for helping her settle in Seattle and to introduce herself to the community.

Karma conservation

Weibi in Mitbbs facilitates both the processes of collecting and returning *renpin* between individuals and the community, in order to maintain a "balanced karma." During the interactions about *renpin*, *weibi* can act as the token of the social debt [18]. In addition, due to its casual nature, it is easy to collect from and give to the crowd, thus it can enact the idea of karma circulating through the social system. *Weibi, by fitting in as a resource in socially valued ways,* can thereby add to a sense of generalized social obligation in a very Chinese culturally-specific manner.

Visibility of use

The uses of *weibi* are visible, reflexively reinforcing users' desires to create and maintain their *guanxi* networks through *weibi*. When seeing many people giving away *weibi* to celebrate, users come to understand that they should also do so. As well, they may be told do so, if they have something that could be celebrated or when they need blessings. For example on *Soccer* during the World Cup, a user (*Tevez*) was asked to give away *baozi*, when the same-named soccer player scored a goal in an important match:

```
tevez (should) give us baozi lah! [shanren2]
```

In another case, *mirror* was asked to give away *baozi* for his good luck in shopping. One replier posted mirror's account info showing he is "rich" with 3800 *weibi*:

```
Attention everybody, stand in line, mirror
has 380 baozi [avatar10]
```

Another reply stated simply:

```
[one] has to give baozi for this [kind of
good luck]. [Inception]
```

Note that this reflects a social norm in Chinese culture that higher status people should contribute more to the community or to society, and in a *guanxi* network, weaker parties should be often favored in the relationship [1].

Explicitness

Bluntness in social interaction is often required online. Similarly, growing and utilizing one's *guanxi* networks online by requesting favors and calling for action results in less subtlety than one might use offline. On the other hand, *weibi* is not money, and people are thus free to be less explicit in their requests.

The degree to which people explicitly use *weibi* to exchange favor varies across people and boards. For example, one interviewee felt uncomfortable when seeing people ask for *baozi* when offering information or answering others' questions in *PennySaver*, "I never saw this on other boards. It is a very happy thing to give away *baozi* in many other boards, to get blessing or celebrate, …I don't go to *PennySaver* often so that might be why I am not used to it… I come from other boards where people just answer questions to help others. I help people too, without asking for *baozi*." [I10]

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we discussed a thriving and devoted online community, Mitbbs. It is an online community where the users display behaviors typical of Chinese – the social uses of personal networks of reciprocal obligation called *guanxi*.

Although Mitbbs is a single site, and any generalizations must necessarily be limited, social interactions on Mitbbs appear to be fostered by a small design feature. This design feature, however, is one that turned out to be critical for Mitbbs' Chinese users -- a virtual currency. This virtual currency, or *weibi*, has little real value. Because its use is not structured, but is flexible, visible, ambiguously valued, and fits Chinese social practices, virtual currency is a valuable resource for Mitbbs users for a wide variety of their own purposes – all in a very Chinese manner.

As well, the virtual points are intensively used to practice and enhance a new social norm for the netizen generation: "karma conservation," which evolves from mixing Buddhism and the *guanxi* networking philosophy. This norm acts not only as an additional basis for social reciprocity, but it is also a significant motivation for contribution in this online community. *Weibi* allows *renpin* to serve as an important mechanism for peer contribution, again showing *weibi*'s Chinese culturally-specific design value.

REFERENCES

1. Alston, J.P., *Wa, Guanxi, and inhwa: managerial principles in Japan, China, and Korea.* Business Horizons, 1989. March-April.
2. Bourdieu, P., *The Forms of Capital*, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, J. Richardson, Editor. 1986, Greenwood: New York. p. 241-258.
3. Chiao, C., *Guanxi: A Preliminary Conceptualization*, in *The Sinicization of Social and Behavioral Science Research in China*. 1982, Academia Sinica: Taipei. p. 345-360.
4. Farh, J.-L., A.S. Tsui, K. Xin, and B.-S. Cheng, *The Influence of Relational Demography and Guanxi: The Chinese Case.* Organization Science, 1998. 9(4): p. 471-488
5. Gneezy, U. and A. Rustichini, *Pay Enough Or Don'T Pay At All.* The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 2000. 115(3): p. 791-810.
6. Heine, S.J., D.R. Lehman, H.R. Markus, and S. Kitayama, *Is There a Universal Need for Positive Self-Regard?* Psychological Review. 106(October): p. 766-794.
7. Hjorth, L., *Home and Away: A Case Study of the Use of Cyworld Mini-hompy by Korean Students Studying in Australia.* Asian Studies Review, 2008. 31(4): p. 397-407.
8. Hofstede, G., *Dimensions of national cultures in fifty countries and three regions*, in *Explications in Cross-Cultural Psychology*, J. Deregowski, S. Dzuirawiec, and R. Annis, Editors. 1983.
9. Hofstede, G.H., *Culture's consequences: international differences in work-related values.* 1980: SAGE.
10. Hwang, K.-k., *Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game.* American Journal of Sociology, 1987. 92: p. 944-974.
11. Jacobs, J.B., *The Concept of Guanxi and Local Politics in a Rural Chinese Cultural Setting*, in *Social Interaction in Chinese Society*, S.L. Greenblatt, R.W. Wilson, and A.A. Wilson, Editors. 1980, Praeger: New York. p. 209-236.
12. Kayan, S., S.R. Fussell, and L.D. Setlock, *Cultural differences in the use of instant messaging in Asia and North America*, CSCW 2006, ACM: p. 525-528.
13. King, A.Y., *Kuan-hsi and Network Building: A Sociological Interpretation.* Daedalus, 1989. 120: p. 63-84.
14. Lindtner, S., S. Mainwaring, P. Dourish, and Y. Wang. *Situating Productive Play: Online Gaming Practices and Guanxi in China*. INTERACT 2009.
15. Markus, H.R. and S. Kitayama, *Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation.* Psychological Review, 1991. 98: p. 224–253.
16. Nam, K., L.A. Adamic, and M.S. Ackerman. *Questions in, Knowledge iN? A Study of Naver's Question Answering Community*. CHI 2009: ACM.
17. Nisbett, R.E., K. Peng, I. Choi, and A. Norenzayan, *Culture and systems of thought: Holistic vs. analytic cognition.* Psychological Review, 2001. 108: p. 291–310.
18. Parry, J.P. and M. Bloch, *Money and the morality of exchange*. 1989: Cambridge University Press.
19. Portes, A., *Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology.* Annual Review of Sociology, 1998. 24: p. 1-24.
20. Pye, L.W., *Chinese Commercial Negotiating Style.* 1982: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain.
21. Setlock, L.D., S.R. Fussell, and C. Neuwirth, *Taking it out of context: collaborating within and across cultures in face-to-face settings and via instant messaging.* CHI 2004: ACM: p. 604-613.
22. Singelis, T.M., *The Measurement of Independent and Interdependent Self-Construals.* Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1994. 20(October): p. 580-591.
23. Teng, J.T.C., K.J. Calhoun, M.J. Cheon, S. Raeburn, and W. Wong, *Is the east really different from the west: a cross-cultural study on information technology and decision making*, ICIS 1999: p. 40-46.
24. Triandis, H.C., *Individualism and Collectivism*. 1995, Boulder, CO: Westview.
25. Tsui, A.S. and J.L. Farh, *Where Guanxi Matters: Relational Demography and Guanxi in the Chinese Context.* Work and Occupations, 1997. 24: p. 56-79.
26. Varnum, M.E.W., I. Grossmann, S. Kitayama, and R.E. Nisbett, *The Origin of Cultural Differences in Cognition: The Social Orientation Hypothesis.* Current Directions in Psychological Science, 2010. 10(1): p. 9-13.
27. Veinott, E.S., J. Olson, G.M. Olson, and X. Fu, *Video helps remote work: speakers who need to negotiate common ground benefit from seeing each other.* CHI 1999, ACM: p. 302-309.
28. Walder, A.G., *Communist neo-traditionalism: work and authority in Chinese industry*. 1986, Berkeley: University of California Press.
29. Wang, Y. and S.D. Mainwaring. *Human-Currency Interaction: learning from virtual currency use in China*. CHI 2008: ACM.
30. Xin, K.R. and J.L. Pearce, *Guanxi: Connections as Substitutes for Formal Institutional Support.* The Academy of Management Journal, 1996. 39(6): p. 1641-1658
31. Yang, J. and X. Wei. *Seeking and Offering Expertise across Categories: A Sustainable Mechanism Works for Baidu Knows*. ICWSM. 2009: IAAA.
32. Yang, J., X. Wei, M. Ackerman, and L. Adamic. *Activity Lifespan: An Analysis of User Survival Patterns in Online Knowledge Sharing Communities*. ICWSM 2010: IAAA.
33. Yang, M.M.-H., *Gifts, favors, and banquets: the art of social relationships in China*. 1994: Cornell University Press.
34. Yang, Y., *The Flow of Gifts: Reciprocity and Social Networks in a Chinese Village*. 1996: Stanford University Press.