Connectivity and college students’ participation in micro-charity: a qualitative study in China

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ABSTRACT
Traditionally, Chinese people are deeply trapped in an intricate web of guanxi and their charitable commitment is mainly limited within close ties. Recently, the rising social media provides new potential for people’s participation in micro-charity online. With connectivity, the socio-technological affordance of social media, people’s participation in micro-charity is imbued with distinct meanings from that in traditional charity. This study drew on in-depth interview with eight college students. The results indicate that the participants’ engagement and commitment are embedded in their interactive activities and end up having significant consequences both for charity and for themselves. During the process, participants undergo rich subjective experience which is clustered around developing connection, fostering engagement, encouraging collaboration and empowering their selves. This study concludes that people’s participation in micro-charity is mixed with connective actions – a hybrid that increasingly applies to life within a space of connectivity in which traditional guanxi is losing its grip on individuals, and blood and clan-ties-based relations are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks.

Introduction
Charity is a very important aspect of people’s civic life. It fosters ethical development and catalyses interpersonal bonds and promotes social solidarity. Yet, in China, charity is lagging far behind its boost economic development (Yan, Huang, Foster, & Tester, 2007) and this, as Luo and Li (2010) note, is mainly due to the entrenched traditional guanxi-oriented culture. Luo and Li argue that Chinese people are deeply trapped in an intricate web of guanxi which has restrained them to cultivate their ‘charity consciousness’ (Luo & Li, 2010). Over the past several years, however, micro-charity has become increasingly popular, especially among young generation. We have noticed such an emerging change and contend that it is an innovative for the development of charity in China. In this qualitative study, we draw on the concept of connectivity to study on college students in their participation in micro-charity. By doing so, we aim to examine their new, at least distinct, subjective experience with its comparison to that in traditional charity.

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Guanxi and traditional charity in China

The concept of guanxi originated from Confucianism which holds that human beings are fundamentally relationship-oriented. Guanxi, as a synonym of English ‘relationship’, literally refers to interpersonal connection in Chinese society. As a complex and multifaceted construct, it is difficult to be defined in a clear-cut way. We here draw on Fan’s (2002, p. 546) idea and heuristically define Guanxi as ‘a special relationship between two persons. But how special (or close) this relationship depends on the nature of the relationship.’ ‘The nature’ here mainly refers to how close or distant the alters are to the ego. Chinese people in their social interaction tend to categorize others into different groups, such as family, classmates, colleagues and the likes. The multiple categories of guanxi present as ‘differential mode of association’ (chaxu geju) (Fei, 1992).

The ‘differential mode of association’ provides a moral framework for Chinese people’s social life including their charity engagement. Basically, one should follow the rule of ‘relationship appropriateness’; that is, ‘moral behaviour varies according to a person’s role, position, and relationship with other role-players in a highly differentiated and hierarchical social nexus’ (Tan & Snell, 2002, p. 362). Yiying Yang’s (2009) study suggests that Chinese people are deeply locked in the circles of interdependent relationships which are largely based on close ties including family and clan members, intimate friends and the likes. In these circles, people construct a narrow and limited concept of ‘us’ within which people are expected to maintain high commitment and obligation to help each other. These close circles are the secular world where Chinese people live within and the very places that their charity comes from and goes for. In this sense, Liu (2015) argues that the charity in Chinese society is in essence a form of ‘acquaintances charity.’

So far, the government has picked up the role as the leading initiator and organizer in charity. A variety of government-based institutions (such as Red Cross Association of China) have been established and programmes (such as the Hope Project) have been started. However, there have been frequently occurring crises in trust, which have casted a dark shadow over the government-led charity development in China. While the government-led charity has been trapped itself in the flood of questions and controversy among general public, fortunately, new charity, especially micro-charity has begun to come up to the stage.

Social media, connectivity and micro-charity

Today, the widespread use of social media such as Sina Weibo and Tencent Wechat has brought profound changes in the landscape of civic engagement in China (Harwit, 2014; G. Yang, 2009). Not surprisingly, it also has reshaped people’s participation in charities. Since Sina Weibo launched its charity platform in 2012, it has been witnessed that micro-charity has gained its popularity, especially among young generation (DeLuca, Brunner, & Sun, 2016; Huang & Sun, 2014). Micro-charity, by definition, is initiated by individual or private institution and aims to help someone in a local community.

Micro-charity is still newborn phenomenon for Chinese people who are often regarded as being lack of charity consciousness’ (Luo & Li, 2010). It reveals some meaningful changes in their civic engagement. However, so far only a few empirical studies concern this issue. Among them, Du, Qian, and Feng (2014) exploratory study indicates that in China, ‘individuals take a more active role in following the work of the micro-charity compared to the passive role traditionally taken in charities’ (p. 1639) and they conclude that participants’ altruism, shared vision and perceived accessibility synergistically predict their charitable behaviour. Zheng and Yu’s (2016) study emphasizes the affordance of social media for collective actions in micro-charity. By comparison, there is a huge body of literature written by non-Chinese scholars concerning people’s giving behaviour in online charity. Many of these studies put their analytic lens on the role of demographic and socio-psychological variables, including gender (Shier & Handy, 2012), social class (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010), empathy (Andreoni, Rao, & Trachtman, 2011), religiosity and altruism (Opoku, 2013), self-construal (Bennett, Kerrigan, O’Reilly, Skarmeas, & Shabbir, 2011), money perception (Wiepking & Breeze, 2012), shared vision and perceived
accessibility (Du et al., 2014), social pressure (Reyniers & Bhalla, 2013) and so forth. These studies have captured some influential factors on people’s online charitable behaviours. However, we recognize that people’s subjective experience on their participation in micro-charities is crucial because, as suggested by Lieblich, Zilber, and Tuval-Mashiach (2008), it is the very place where multiple philanthropic discourses interact with each other and thus allows the emergence of new or distinct notions, emotions and even identities relevant to charity. However, in the previous studies, it has received little exploration.

In the case of Chinese charity, as mentioned earlier, people’s subjective experience on their participation in traditional government-led charities is often guanxi-oriented. Yet, in micro-charity, people’s experience is inextricably intertwined with media technology. For example, people’s altruism is a determinant in their decision-making process during charity participation; however, when it goes to social media platform, it goes ‘viral’ and thus brings huge impact on people’s charitable behaviours online (Lacetera, Macis, & Mele, 2016). Altruism going viral suggests ‘the presence of network effect or social contagion’ (Lacetera et al., 2016, p. 202) and manifests the affordance of social media in collective actions (Zheng & Yu, 2016).

Without doubt, there are multiple socio-technical affordances that pertain to a social media platform. Inspired by Wellman (2001), Wellman et al. (2003) and Van Dijck (2010, 2011, 2013), we believe that connectivity among them is the potential and fertile one for us to obtain a better understanding of participants’ subjective experience in micro-charities.

According to Van Dijck and Poell (2013), connectivity, as one of the grounding elements of social media logic, refers to

the socio-technical affordance of networked platforms to connect content to user activities and advertisers. More precisely, in a connective ecosystem of social media, the ‘platform apparatus’ always mediates users’ activities and defines how connections are taking shape, even if users themselves can exert considerable influence over the contribution of content. (p. 8)

As suggested in the definition, connectivity bears a twofold meaning. First, it enhances users’ capacity to connect with each other. Second, it also conditioned their connection. Van Dijck (2010) contends that social media not only afford users to make connections but also engineer their connections. He attributes connectivity of social media to ‘platform apparatus’ which is determined by the underlying algorithmic rules that inherently sets connectedness as the primary pursuit for social media. Afforded by ‘platform apparatus’, users often have little awareness about how a connective space is coming to being on social media. For example, users’ relational impulses are unknowingly activated by the pop-up friend-recommendation based on certain algorithmic rules. And when users broadcast their charity-related information, as illustrated in Lacetera et al. (2016) study on viral altruism, they are unwittingly becoming an amplifier in its dissemination. Their activities on social media, hence, are unknowingly steered to foster a connective space for information and communication.

Despite their activities being steered, users’ agency is not necessarily eliminated. On the contrary, as Van Dijck (2009) suggests, users’ agency should be re-theorized in the contents they generate online. In the case of a typical micro-charity, a social media platform pushes certain information for users, prompts them easily to rank, comment and ‘like’, and engineers more and more connections to be build and maintained. In and through this process, users generate a huge number of contents. These user-generated contents are imbued with users’ agency, that is, users play their role both as the data providers whose contents contribute to the efficacy of connectivity and, concurrently, as the facilitators whose activities are bringing a powerful digital environment into being.

According to Van Dijck and Poell (2013), social media represents an advanced human connectedness efficacy which has reshaped sociality, namely, ‘from densely knit to loosely bounded social networks of relations’ (p. 8). In Wellman and colleagues’ (2003) words, such a shift in sociality indicates ‘the change in society away from groups and towards networked individualism’. ‘Networked individualism’ implies that ‘[p]eople remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household’ and ‘[e]ach person separately operates his networks to obtain information, collaboration, orders, support, sociability, and a sense of belonging’ (Wellman, 2001, p. 16). In Chinese society, the rising social media has, at least to some extent, allowed people to break from the traditional tightly
bounded close ties to loosely bounded networks. That is, people are provided more opportunities to choose others to meet and connect with, and to communicte on a personal basis. Undoubtedly, such a significant move has profound implication for how people mobilize in a mass event. Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) have observed mass protests like Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street and concluded that the new mechanism associated with social media in a mass event is no longer 'the logic of collective' which is 'associated with high levels of organizational resources and the formation of collective identities,' but rather 'the logic of connective' which is 'based on personalized content sharing across media networks' (p. 739).

Connectivity sheds insightful light on studies of people's civic and political participation on social media in China. For example, Svensson's (2014) study on Sina Weibo suggests that connectivity allows journalists and opinion leaders to initiate and lead Chinese people's civic engagement online and, moreover, to become 'amplifiers and transmitters of the voices of the weak' (p. 177). In this study, we draw on connectivity as a framework to look into people's subjective experience on their participation in micro-charity. We set a heuristic guiding question as following: What did people think about their participation in micro-charity? In order to answer this question, we closely followed and observed a micro-charity on Wechat and conducted a qualitative study on college student participants.

**Methodology**

In order to examine college students' experience on their participation in micro-charity, this study drew on a qualitative approach which emphasizes to 'go in the field' and to 'go to the people' (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 3). On 27th March 2016, before the World Autism Awareness Day, a charitable fund-raising campaign was initiated by a local college students' union on Wechat. This campaign was titled with 'dating with you who come from the stars'. It appealed to donate for the children with autism. In the introduction of the fund-raising, there were some descriptions of the autistic children's condition which had touched students' heart and sparked explosive reposts of this link of web page. This campaign turned out to be a 'relay of love' on Wechat.

We closely followed and observed this charitable event. Then, we conducted series of in-depth interviews with 8 college students (4 female and 4 male). Participants were recruited through letters of invitation which were distributed through Wechat. All of them had taken part in this micro-charity. In-depth interview is regarded as a valid approach to access participants' subjective knowledge about their experience (Miller & Glassner, 1997). 'To access' here means to reach not only through the process of analysis, but also through the practice of listening and encouraging participants to share their experience. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured with preset open questions which mainly included:

- How did you get to know this event? What were you thinking and feeling about this event? What did you and your friends do for the children with autism when informed by the micro-charity on Wechat? What did your giving or other helping behaviors matter to you? What did you think that this charitable event would bring to you and your friends in the long term?

These questions mainly aim to grasp how college students understood and experienced their participation in the micro-charity.

All interviews were digitally recorded. The recorded interviews then were transcribed and returned to the participants to check and edit. Some slight alternations were made to the verbatim transcripts. Informed by Strauss and Corbin (1998), the analysis process involved data selection and interpretation and thus inevitably gave rise to the possible bias. In order to minimize the possible bias, each of the two researchers independently conducted the analysis, and then worked collaboratively to debate and negotiate interpretations. We finished the initial coding process based on the conceptual units of original data. Then, we identified themes by consensus to structure the data. The interviews were held, and the analysis was written in Chinese. The final analysis was translated into English. In order to ensure validity and trustworthiness of translation, some measures were taken, such as back translation and consultation. In the study, the participants' confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Pseudonyms were used in this article to protect the identities of participants.
Findings and discussions

During the interviews, the participants shared quite rich experience on their participation in the micro-charity. Not surprisingly, their experience involved altruism, compassion, empathy, caring, social press, obligation, responsibility and the like. However, when put in the light of connectivity, their experience clustered around the following four board themes.

Developing connections

Traditionally, under the framework of the ‘differential mode of association’, it is difficult for Chinese people to trust and take responsibility for a stranger. Just as a popular saying goes, ‘it is danger to talk to strangers.’ Yet, in this micro-charity, college students performed in a different way. Although the initiators, organizers, and the receipts were all strangers for them, they tended to trust and take their responsibility. Their participation firstly carried a meaning to build up connection with others, no matter whether they are in and beyond the participants’ concept of ‘us’. For example:

Lao: My account was spammed by this event reposted by my friends. I responded to them on Wechat and talked to them about autism. The children with autism turned out to be our common concern that day. Thanks to the media technology. I can access to another world where people come from the stars.

Zhao: I did not know who (the initiators and organizers) they are. But I thought they were good and warmhearted people. I reposted this link of fundraising on Wechat. I would like to tell others about this special group of children. I also hoped my friends be warmhearted like me. Actually, I got to know several new friends in and through this activity. I contacted with the initiator and expressed my support to her. She became my friend. She came into my life without invitation. That is really awesome.

In the two extracts, college students’ participation in the micro-charity was inextricably associated with connection. Micro-charity for them was a place where they met with each other. When participants exposed themselves to the charitable information reposted by their friends, they experienced an implicit invitation to begin a conversational process. Lao’s word of ‘spam’ implies the underlying steering power of platform apparatus on users’ perception and responses. Seen in this way, the explosive circulation of the micro-charity-related information was in essence providing rich opportunities for participants to build up and maintain relationships. For Zhao, she even made several new friends as she stated: they ‘came into my life without invitation.’ ‘Without invitation’ here reflects the efficacy of connectivity in formation of engineered relationship. That is, her relational impulse was activated as she involved herself in the event.

It is worth noting that developing connection in and through the micro-charity could not necessarily be reduced to be the replication or extension of the traditional ‘differential mode of association’. In effect, the psychological distance between the ‘strangers’ (the autistic children, the initiator, etc.) and participants has been compressed and this inadvertently changed participants’ experience with the ‘strangers’. Qi puts it this way:

I would like to say that our online participation is not the end of the campaign. To me, it has brought profound impact. It reshaped my view on the children with autism. It is true that they come from stars. They are not inferior to, but just different from us. They are over there, far beyond my reach in everyday life, but they are still there, waiting to be understood. I really appreciated this campaign.

This extract reveals Qi’s emerging view on her relation with the autistic children. Obviously, she did not have a clear concept of what such an experience was. Yet, her experience here manifested that she was taking a critical stance as she reflected upon her old notion of the autistic children which, as suggested in the word ‘inferior’, carries a sense discrimination. Informed by the micro-charity, however, Qi was able to envisage and construct an alternative relational reality with the autistic children, which was based on difference rather than on discrimination. Qi learnt to respect the difference between the autistic children and herself and meanwhile, more importantly, she was willing to build connection with them. Seen in this way, the affordance of connectivity plays an invisible but important role that...
enables participants connect with others and eventually reshapes their relations with others in and through the micro-charity.

**Encouraging engagement**

In this charitable fund-raising on Wechat, the most frequently used strategies among participants are 'clicks' on the screams of their mobile phones. By doing so, participants posted and reposted fund-raising-related information, commented others' posts, sent 'like' or transferred a little amount of money. Some theorists (e.g. Karpf, 2010; Morozov, 2012) have criticized such behaviours and regarded them as a form of slactivism, which mainly brings in people an illusionary social impact of their behaviours. Moreover, as suggested in Schlozman and Brady (2012) study, people's interactions on social media might dilute their commitment and responsibility in civic engagement. However, in this study, college students' numerous trivial behaviours in effect have created a reality with a shared vision (Du et al., 2014) on helping the autistic children. To Zhi, even the simplest clicks of 'like' has also brought some essential social impact on the charitable fund-raising. She stated:

> I click the 'like' following my friends' reposts of this link of charitable fundraising. It is not simply a kind of Wechat etiquette. 'Like' is a symbolic note as well as reinforcement both for the receiver and for me, as the sender. We click the 'like' for each other in this event. We encourage each other and turned this event into a 'relay of love'. Ultimately, we all wish the autistic children could also receive our caring and encouragement.

Zhi's view indicated that she gave a twofold meaning to 'like' on Wechat. One was an expression of her preference or attitude towards the people or the event she 'liked'. The other was an expression of encouraging, and thus, 'like' becomes an exercise of cultivation of both her relationship with others and her commitment to the charity. As more and more people send out their 'likes', the micro-charity evolved into a 'relay of love' and proliferated in the public space of Wechat. Clicking 'like', as well as other online activities, including commenting, posting and re-posting, is not a pure expressive form of engagement. These behaviours eventually generated a huge body of contents which are steered and channelled with the affordance of connectivity. These contents turned out to transform the online space where participants dwell within. On this point, Niu stated:

> Yes, it seems a little bit superficial to click on the screen (to help the children). But in effect, it is my efforts. I believe many of my friends are doing the same thing. We tweet and re-tweet the event on Wechat. The charitable fundraising has became a campaign. We are all there and do something to support the autistic children. As the old saying goes: Many hands make light work.

In Niu's words, the charitable fund-raising was tweeted and re-tweeted on Wechat and the voices for the autistic children were synchronized as if to create a single harmonized melody in the virtual life world. That is, participants were 'doing the same thing'. In this sense, a powerful digital environment has been constructed on Wechat which was appealing attention and cultivating awareness and commitment from the potential participants. However, this was an ongoing process only emerging as each participant contributed his or her seemingly trivial 'clicks' in the micro-charity. Such a 'powerful digital environment' did not simply mean social pressure that influenced participant's decision-making. Rather, it was an outcome that was created by participants themselves with the affordance of connectivity. From Van Dijck's (2009) perspective, this is the agency participants performed in the micro-charity. That is, each participant's actions were associated with more actions by his or her contacts with others. Hence, each participant became an amplifier of the information stream and contributed to turn it into a torrent. Wechat was thereby turned into a growing field with vital energies to encourage more people's engagement in helping the autistic children who they might never meet in their real-life world.

**Fostering collaboration**

As a semi-closed platform, Wechat allows users to control the access of their space. According to Cheng and Zhao (2015), Wechat is in essence is a 'private-public space' that is well in accordance with Chinese-style circle culture which facilitates to construct a comfortable and trustworthy zone for users. Therefore,
Wechat may be just another online world for people to replicate the traditional guanxi structure and this will inhibit people’s participation in micro-charity. Yet, such an extrapolation seemed inconsistent with the final outcome of the fund-raising. In the end, the raised money exceeded all participants’ expectation. It totalled over 5,000 RMB (about 770 USD), a considerable amount of money for a local micro-charity. The raised money was used to fund several programmes for the autistic children in a local centre. The participants, who seemingly dwelt within their ‘private-public spaces’, in effect contributed to foster a huge collaboration. During the interviews, almost every participant contended that it was an unbelievable accomplishment. For example:

Yu: 5,000 RMB!! To be honest, I only donated 1/5,000. As soon as I got to know this amazing number, I shared it with my friends. All of us thought it awesome! It is the power of Wechat. NO! It is the power of love, the relay of love online!

Luo: On 3rd April, the day after the World Autism Awareness Day, the initiators posted some photos of the activities funded by this micro-charity. It is amazing. They took artistic photos of the children. So beautiful! There were other activities for the children. It made me believed that our effort had finally made a difference. Sometimes I am really curious about how this magic power comes into being on Wechat. You know, each of us actually donated a little money or even none at all.

The two extracts reveal that both of them originally did not expect the possible outcome of this charitable fund-raising. Their cognitive expectation of the outcome was originally framed by their reference to friend circles within which ‘each of us actually donated a little money or even none at all’. In this sense, they did live in separated, limited and narrow spaces. However, these circles are indeed sharing more or less connections with each other. In Wellman (2001) words, participants live in a style of ‘networked individualism’. Their seemingly individualist behaviours, like numerous stones almost simultaneously dropped in the water, have created a massive ripple effect in the virtual life world and thus given rise to synthesized collaboration.

It is worth noting that participants’ online collaboration even goes beyond the social media into their offline world. In the interviews, some of the participants mentioned that they have taken actions offline. Zhao stated:

We started a charity sale in the campus to raise money for a local autism centre. Frankly, we never had been such a compassionate in a charity before. Moreover, my partners and I also visited this centre. My major is psychology. I indeed hope to start a long-term relationship with the children there and learn to get along with them.

It could be imagined that the offline activities were also posted and reposted by the participants in their Wechat and further broadcasted the micro-charity and diffused about awareness of people’s conscience and responsibility in helping the autistic children. Seen in this way, the Wechat-based connection in the charitable fund-raising did not simply functions as communication systems, but rather as a form of mobilization which, as Bennett and Segerberg (2012) has noticed, was ‘based on personalized content sharing across media networks’ (p. 739). Moreover, such a form of mobilization ‘empowered flexible organizations that allowed rapid action and coordinated adjustments’ (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 8). Therefore, in and through numerous connections among participants, a huge collaboration in the micro-charity has been fostered and an unexpected good result has been achieved in the end.

**Empowering self**

Living themselves an interdependent life with guanxi structure, Chinese people are often regarded to have poorly defined self-other boundaries (Kagitcibasi, 2005). Their charitable helping, which is mainly for close ties, derives from compelling relationship and, ultimately, aims to reach a harmonious relationship. Yet, harmonious relationship, to a great extent, means a strengthened interdependence, rather than a strengthened self. In the micro-charity, by comparison, participants experienced an empowered self which was emerging associated with their critical awareness about their ‘being’ in the charitable fund-raising. Yu put it this way:

After I donated for the charity, I subscribed the Official Account of the fundraising. I continuously followed this event. This is quite different from what I had done in a traditional charity. … Traditional charity was often organized by
school. I was just demanded to donate. I was never informed where my money had gone. I didn’t know. However, in this micro-charity, they told me everything I wanted to know, the proceeding progress, the final outcome, the number of donors, and more importantly, what they had done for the children with our money. As a donor, I deserve the right to be informed.

Thanks to the affordance of connectivity, participants like Yu were able to continuously follow the event which in effect established a requirement for the initiators/organizers to release information to make the whole proceeding of the event transparent. The interaction among the social media platform, the initiators/organizers and the participants reflects the mutual shaping among them. Yet, one of the crucial outcomes for Yu was that he was allowed to exercise his agency in and through participating the charitable fund-raising. Yu stressed he deserved ‘the right to be informed.’ As Yu involved himself in connection with the initiators/organizers, he has been informed not only about the micro-charity-related information, but also about his right to be informed. This was newly minted experience compared to what he had undergone in a traditional charity. In his comparison of the micro-charity and traditional charity, Yu was able to obtain a critical awareness of his ‘being.’ Specifically, he was no longer a follower or subordinate but rather a privileged participant who has ‘the right to be informed’.

In addition, self-empowerment is not the result, but rather an emerging process involving participants’ activities, even those seemingly superficial ‘clicks’. Mu stated:

I did not donate any money. I am a poor student, born in a rural family. I reposted this link of fundraising and added my comments. It was my way to support the autistic children. I am not ashamed of this form of participation …I believe that I have contributed to make more people informed about autism. I’m quite sure about it. Some of my friends responded my reposts and my comments.

Mu’s experience indicated that he, as a college student lacking financial resource, was also allowed to take part in the micro-charity by voicing for the autistic children. It appeared as a simple process of information transmission. However, at a deep level, this process undoubtedly involved his self-reflection. By adding his comments as he reposted the link of web page, Mu did actively ‘become an integral component of the knowledge production process’ (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2013, p. 548) in the charitable fund-raising. His endeavour here offered him an opportunity to build up a new relation with his self and to obtain an empowered notion of his self, as suggested in his words ‘I am not ashamed of this form of participation’. Mu’s empowered notion of self reflects the democratic nature of micro-charity that everyone gets the opportunity to participate and to ‘find a new sense of self, community and empowerment’ (Spires, 2011, p. 2).

**Conclusive remarks**

While the young generation in China is often depicted as being more and more egoistic, narcissistic and selfish (Ye, 2007), living in narrow and closed circles and showing little compassion for the outside world (Wen, Li, & Ma, 2005), this study indicates that the college students have passionately engaged in the micro-charity for the autistic children. They have tried what they could to help the children who were originally outside their life world. Their experience of micro-charity was no longer restrained by the close ties in traditional guanxi structure. Their participation was shaped by connectivity afforded by social media. Their caring and commitment to the autistic children were manifested in and through interactive activities by numerous ‘clicks’ on the scream of their mobile devices. These simple expressions are amplified by the affordance of connectivity and ended up having significant consequences both for the charity and for participants themselves. As demonstrated in this study, these consequences include developing connection, fostering engagement, encouraging collaboration and empowering participants’ selves. Therefore, participants in micro-charity undergo truly a rich experience, where their inner characters and desires and the endeavours of external other parts (mainly including their friends, initiators and the autistic children in the micro-charity) together with the social media technology inextricably merged. Seen in this way, micro-charity thus is not simply about participants’ droplets of resources, nor simply about the popularity collected with certain goals, but rather about an emerging subjectivity with a distinct envisagement of connection, engagement, collaboration and self.
The social media affords ubiquitous connectivity for people with each other and this allows people's participation in micro-charity, at least partly, to transcend the traditional guanxi-oriented bounds. More precisely, their participation in micro-charity is mixed with connective action – a hybrid that increasingly applies to life within a 'culture of connectivity' (Van Dijck, 2013) in which traditional guanxi is losing its grip on individuals, and blood and clan-ties-based relations are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks. Yet, in the landscape of civic engagement in China, micro-charity is still an emerging phenomenon in its embryonic stage. As illustrated in this study, connectivity has not only reshaped charity but also profoundly changed participations' subjective experience on charity. However, there are rare studies, especially empirically based ones, on this topic. So far, government, educators and young generation all have ambivalent knowledge on connectivity of social media platform and its implication for online social life. Here, our work is only a preliminary one and it has raised more questions than answers. Future studies should conduct to re-conceptualize the relevant notions with connectivity, including but not limited to engagement, generosity, altruism, social pressure and the likes. Moreover, the micro-charity-associated education, discourse, governmentality and so on might also be put under the light of connectivity, especially in the context of China, to facilitate us to grasp and reach the potential of micro-charity in cultivating an alternative path towards a more civilized society.

**Note**

1. Wechat is a free mobile-messaging application developed by Tencent. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Wechat is a semi-closed platform. Users can post their status and link of web page in moments. The feature of 'Share to' gives users the control over the access to their personal disclosure in moments. Thus, Wechat allows more personalized communications within ‘Friends Circles’. At present, it is the most popular social media application among young generation in China (CnnIC, 2015).

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