Materiality, Description and Comparison as Tools for Cultural Difference Analysis

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Abstract

Working in a Chinese studies department based in Europe, I am often confronted with the challenges not only of working with cultural difference, but also of working with the concept of “culture” in itself – one of the most famously difficult concepts in the social sciences and humanities. Further, recent socioeconomic changes in China—and the new media dynamics of the “Chinese Internet”—have produced new situations requiring socio-cultural analysis, but lacking a clear theoretical or methodological framework. In this chapter I argue that an essential first step in dealing with these issues analytically is to provide an adequate description of them, which can only be achieved by focusing on the materiality of the things (websites, platforms, communities) one is considering or comparing. I build on this idea to propose a methodology and a theoretical framework to deal with cultural difference in the context of socio-technical change, drawing on a single case study based on this approach.

Reference


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Working in a Chinese studies department based in Europe, I am often confronted with the challenges not only of working with cultural difference, but also of working with the concept of “culture” in itself – one of the most famously difficult concepts in the social sciences and humanities. Further, recent socioeconomic changes in China—and the new media dynamics of the “Chinese Internet”—have produced new situations requiring socio-cultural analysis, but lacking a clear theoretical or methodological framework. In this chapter I argue that an essential first step in dealing with these issues analytically is to provide an adequate description of them, which can only be achieved by focusing on the materiality of the things (websites, platforms, communities) one is considering or comparing. I build on this idea to propose a methodology and a theoretical framework to deal with cultural difference in the context of socio-technical change, drawing on a single case study based on this approach.

The Circulation of Cultural Waves

Culture, as a scientific concept, is famous for the impossibility of its definition. A recent book (Baldwin et al. 2006) provided no less than 300 definitions, and the authors claimed that these are actually syntheses of an even larger corpus. I will not try to perform yet another authoritative synthesis here, for others have already done this well (see for example Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952, Goody 1992, Borowsky et al. 2001, Baldwin et al. 2006, Triandis 2007), but I would like to quickly point out a few arguments, together with an illustration of where I believe the problem lies and where a solution can be found.

A shortcut through what could otherwise be a very long discussion is to say that “culture” concerns human beings and artifacts, and relates to the ways of life and of thinking of human populations. In common usage, the term’s meaning often has something to do with one of two domains: first, knowledge or art (e.g. when we speak about “a cultured person”, “cultural goods”, or “the industry of culture”); and second, that which is specific to a group of people and leads to the idea of cultural difference (e.g. “youth culture”, or “Chinese culture” compared to “American culture”). Both aspects are of primary concern for the study of new media in a global context.

Drawing on the work of Baldwin et al., an interesting point can be made by considering definitions of culture which are difficult to use for obvious reasons, and then by using a metaphor to sketch a solution. Consider the following three examples:
Definition 1:
Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952: 181, as quoted in Baldwin et al. 2006: 188)

Definition 2:
For our purposes we define culture as “the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving.” (Samovar and Porter 2003, as quoted in Baldwin et al. 2006: 208)

Definition 3:
Culture is the sum of stories we tell ourselves about who we are and want to be, individually and collectively. Culture works also as the staging ground of these identity narratives and of our daily routines. Culture comprises and constitutes the places where we live; it is the built environment and the peopled landscape. It also works in the memories that reside in the flesh, from the spark of recognition, an uncanny remembrance, to the dull reflex of forgetting and the dogged reminders inhabiting bone and muscle of a body once stretched in sport, childbirth, dance, labor, lovemaking. Culture works in the traditional sense as well, as sources of cultural wealth –the patrimony of state, nation, people– commissioned and collected through private and public patronage and stored in museums, galleries, film archives, corporate offices, or displayed in parks, plazas, and other public spaces. Finally, culture works in the ordinary sense of work taking place in the factories, studies, warehouses, schoolrooms, and other sites of cultural realization. Culture works where people work building the material fund, or hardware, from which we draw conceptual and narrative sustenance to understand the world. Every phone, computer, television, film stage, tapestry, celluloid strip, videotape, computer disk, semiconductor, printing press, cargo vehicle, or any other imaginable tool or bricks and mortar structure used in the culture industries embodies this culture work. (Maxwell 2001: 1-2, quoted in Baldwin et al. 2006: 194. I completed the last sentence using Maxwell 2001: 2).

Here is the metaphor: imagine someone who had never heard about atoms and wanted to make a definition of “matter”. This person might come up with a definition like: “Matter is sometimes solid, sometimes liquid, sometimes in gaseous form, of homogenous or heterogeneous consistence, can be found in a living being but also in inanimate objects or artifacts, on earth or in outer space, and is usually in motion but can sometimes be immobile.” Does it look similar to the above three definitions of culture? I think it does.

One part of the problem we have with the multiple meanings of “culture” is that we miss something smaller –the “atoms” of culture– which can help us deal with the various forms “culture” takes in the real world. The fact that the word is heavily used both in scientific literature and common expression with such a wide range of meanings is an indication that
everybody is referring to the same phenomenon, but observing it from different angles and in different states. I argue that it is our inability to deal with culture at the micro-level that prevents us from grasping it as an object of study. Instead, we end up working at the macro-level with abstract entities such as Chinese culture, nationalism, hybridity and so on, which we then struggle to make sense of empirically. As a result we often conclude unsurprisingly that things are more complicated than expected.

I defined elsewhere the micro-level parts of culture as cultural waves (Zimmermann forthcoming), which I believe do not relate to matter itself but to the shape matter can take. In short, the idea is to use this concept to talk about the shape of matter in the same way we use atoms for its material structure (physicists have long gone beyond atoms but this is another story). The word “wave” is intended to bring the focus on the shape of matter rather than on matter itself, and to suggest the idea of the transmission of the shape from one material form to another. I use the related concept of cultural element (Zimmermann 2010) in order to speak about aggregates of cultural waves (e.g. as molecules are for atoms). In this perspective, a word, a picture, a sound or the shape of a tree are cultural elements, and as such they are constituted by cultural waves. The main idea is simply to go deeper in our handling of cultural issues, and get closer to their materialities.

In order to study cultural differences, one needs to study the processes of formation, transformation and dissipation cultural waves are going through. New media provide many illustrations of this argument with the flows of texts, sounds, and images they host and help circulate. As an example, think of a picture of a building, taken with a camera, sent by e-mail to a friend who prints it on a sheet of paper and then his child makes a drawing based on the printed document. While the building is still out in the street, and the images still in the camera, on the computer’s hard disc, on the sheets of paper (the printed one and the drawing) and the signals sent along the cables already dissipated, what we observe is a shape that has circulated from the building to the child’s drawing.

The task of analyzing these circulation processes is what interests me here. It can be achieved by staying close to the materiality of the observations one is making. Two key points are a) to use less abstractions to express arguments, and b) to stay as close as one can to a description of what one has been doing. I aim to avoid abstract vocabulary, and instead to focus on the words I have heard or read, the events I have witnessed or taken pictures of, describing them in the most precise way possible, taking as a motto this quote of Bruno Latour:

The simple fact of recording anything on paper is already an immense transformation that require as much skill and just as much artifice as painting a landscape or setting up some elaborate biochemical reaction. No scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description. This is, on the contrary, the highest and rarest achievement. (...) If a description remains in need of an explanation, it means that it is a bad description. (Latour 2005, 136-7)

1. My focus on materiality is influenced by recent developments in STS, especially Trevor Pinch’s work in Sound studies. See for instance (Pinch 2002).
2. My argument here is inspired by the work of Howard Becker who shares Latour’s view on description (see Becker 1998, p. 58). Becker’s writing is the perfect illustration of the principles presented above. He has also published a book on the issue of writing which discusses in length the methodology he relies on (Becker [1986] 2007).
Here is an illustration of how one can move from explanations to descriptions. Consider the two pairs of sentences:

A. “ICT are a form of social empowerment for farmers in rural China”
B. “Author X argues that mobiles enable farmers in rural China to organise themselves in ways unseen before”.

A. “In July 2008, a new social networking site was spreading among Mainland Chinese net surfers.”
B. “In July 2008, while staying at a Chinese friend’s place in Beijing, I noticed he was spending hours on a website I had never heard about before.”

In each of these two examples, sentences A and B are both saying the same thing, but where the first one has a higher degree of abstraction, the second one is more concrete and descriptive. In the first pair, A is more difficult to grasp: we don’t know what are the kinds of ICT and social empowerment concerned by the statement, we only know that there is a correlation between the two. B is more concrete: we are talking about a colleague’s work on mobile phone technology which says that it changes the ways farmers organize themselves. In the second pair, A hides both the subject and the subjectivity behind the research. B, while sounding more personal and less “scientific”, is actually more precise in the sense that it gives more details about the process that produced the results.

What is needed to perform cultural difference analysis in the context of new media dynamics is a move from A to B sentences when reporting on research. By staying closer to the materiality of the circulation processes we produce clearer research and avoid the macro-level trap. I will now give just one example of a case study where I apply the cultural waves theoretical framework. I use the methodology presented above, and provide a description written deliberately in the first person. I also discuss how comparison was used as a tool to improve the analysis.

Describing the Chinese Internet

In July 2008, while staying at a Chinese friend’s place in Beijing, I noticed he was spending hours on a website I had never heard about before: “Happy Network” (kaixin001.com). It was a new social networking site that had been launched a couple of months ago. I registered, and I started to take screenshots and notes about what I saw on the web pages. This basic task of logging in and observing the changes in the design of the site and the contents provided by other users quickly became a daily routine.

At that time, a friend working in the advertising industry in Switzerland had told me about SNS as “advertisers’ paradises” because users could be selected according to their age, gender, taste, habits, etc., and targeted with appropriate advertisements. Economic incentives were also said to be the main engine behind the launch of social networking sites aimed at the general public (Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, was known as the youngest billionaire in the world). Therefore, I chose as a research question: “How is advertising provided on Happy Network?”
This question made sense in that it was large enough for a research project that would probably last several years, and it also seemed to touch on a central aspect of the dynamics of the object chosen. If I could understand the way Happy Network dealt with the question of advertising I hoped I would be able to understand better other aspects of its development as they would probably relate in a way or another to this first one. New media platforms are often working hand in hand with venture capitalists so any question related to the way cash is brought in or out at some point of the development process is always worth asking.

Even if spending days on a social networking website waiting to see advertisements may be fun (at least it was for me), one still needs a strategy to make sure the research is heading somewhere. In the context of new media studies, efficient tools to help the researcher figuring out what the data (s)he is collecting is about and making something out of it can be borrowed from qualitative sociology. In particular, the *grounded theory* methodological approach as developed by Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (Corbin & Strauss 1998) proves extremely useful, with its focus on materiality, inductive research processes, and its micro-level emphasis—from one which builds up to questions and comparisons.

During the first seven months of observation, I didn’t see a single ad on Happy Network. This wasn’t a problem for me because I knew that many web companies do not display advertisements when they start a new project. The search engine Google.com or the video-sharing website Youtube.com, for example, famously started to display advertisements only when they were sure enough people were using their services regularly and when they knew how to target their audience. So, in order to keep me focused on the data and to help me make sense of the documents I was collecting, I started to make comparisons. In 2008, Facebook – USA’s most successful SNS at that time– provided me with an adequate source of comparison for Happy Network.

The illustration below displays one of the first screenshots I took in July 2008. At that time, two main features of my Happy Network user page were radically different from Facebook. Where the latter used one page for my user information (a) and another for the news-feed about my friends (b), Happy Network mixed the two functions on the user page. And while Facebook stated explicitly that it would never tell my friends about whose profile or photos I viewed, Happy Network did exactly the opposite: a dedicated section called “Recent visitors” (upper right) displayed information about who viewed my profile and when. If I found the avatar of an unknown visitor intriguing I could click on it in order to visit his or her user page, which would then display my avatar and time of visit in his or her respective Recent visitors section.  

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3 Barney Glaser, who co-authored with Anselm Strauss the famous book on Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) started a somewhat different approach than Corbin and Strauss. I rely here specifically on the latter’s work.

4 I was told by a Swiss web designer that this feature, sometimes called “footprints”, is standard on many social networking sites in Asia.
In October 2008, I became interested in Happy Network’s virtual gifts section. The next figure shows the fourth page of Facebook’s virtual gifts window (upper left) and the first of Happy Network (upper right). One of the things that struck me while comparing the two websites was that some of the gifts were the same on the two platforms. Since Facebook had been launched four years before Happy Network, I wondered if the latter had copied them and then slightly modified them (the underwear and the angel on Happy Network had additional glitter and heartbeat animation effects). This question progressed in December 2009, when I noticed the design of the gifts changed on Happy Network (lower right): the underwear had become thicker and more colored, and the angel had now a new Tyrolean look (notice the colors of the candy changed as well). The cultural element “G-string” seemed to have circulated from Facebook to Happy Network and then within Happy Network, while its content had been first slightly altered, then heavily changed, during its journey.
The comparison between the virtual gifts section of Facebook eventually caught up with my research question on advertisement. At the beginning of 2009, I noticed various kinds of ads started to appear on Happy Network. Interestingly, where Facebook systematically displayed posters on my user page and on the news-feed page, Happy Network had none, but seemed to rely mostly on in-game advertising (a technique sometimes also called “advergaming”)5. Ads were displayed inside the many games Happy Network provided, for example on a wall behind the cars within a “Parking Wars” game (see Zimmermann 2011).

At the end of 2009, I noticed that the gifts section featured advertisements too (I suspect it started several months earlier). It proposed virtual gifts such as a Kentucky Fried Chicken hot beverage for the winter, Nokia mobile phones, or a Smart car. Typically, “ad” gifts were placed at the beginning of the gifts section. They featured a short animation (something normally only available for higher-end gifts) and giving one of them three times during a single day allowed one to use a gift from the high-grade section for free. “Ad” gifts were often displayed in relation to a special moment such as Christmas or the Chinese New Year.

The next screenshot shows one of these gifts, a Smart car with a tiger skin, offered on the occasion of the Chinese year of the Tiger. The illustration shows the gift section (upper part), and then the gift displayed in my message section when I received it from someone and while I played the animation (lower part). The screenshot was taken at the end of the short animation which lasted a few seconds. It displayed first the car with a white color and full of roses, then the roses popped out of the car and the color changed to yellow, then with the tiger lines, while the petals slowly fell down and a message appeared on top saying “Wish you love for the year of the Tiger”. The sentence contains a double pun on the word “tiger” in

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5 Facebook had other ways of displaying advertisements as well, but I do not discuss them because the comparison is only used here as a tool for analysis while the research is centered on Happy Network.
the second half, as its says literally “Love for the year of the tiger - Love the tiger’s oil” 虎年有爱 爱老虎油. The second part, 爱老虎油 ai laohu you, is a reference to a Tsui Hark movie where a character uses this funny transcription for “I love you”, but can also be understood as a way of saying “this car saves gas”.

Fig. 3 “Smart car” gift, screenshots from the gifts and the messages section of Happy Network, February 2010 (users’s names have been blurred to protect their privacy).

The Materiality of Culture

Since this paper is not really about advertisements on social networking sites in China but about how to use case studies like this to analyse cultural differences, at this point it is worth making a short summary of these observations from a methodological point of view. What do we have? A Chinese SNS which seems to recycle elements from other SNSes in an ingenious way. Specific functions such as the news-feed or the virtual gifts feature both similarities and improvements when compared to Facebook.

While it is hard to tell the exact story of their development without pursuing more research, it
seems pretty obvious that some cultural elements (i.e. aggregates of cultural waves) have been circulating from one platform to another, and then modified. The analysis of Happy Network which I began above is a description of how the observations and the comparisons have taken place, how the data have been collected, and how a few cultural elements I selected (the news-feed section, the G-string and the angel, the car) seem to have circulated from one website to the other and how some others (the advertisements) have circulated within the medium that host them.

It is worth noting that the paper you are reading is part of the circulation process too, since the cultural elements news-feed, G-string, etc. end up on these pages, –and this is why the accuracy of the description is so important, because we expect them to be presented as similarly as possible to those that I have been observing. A good description is a description that makes the cultural elements it discusses circulate without modifying them too much, and arranges them in the clearest possible way for the reader.

Interestingly, as the respective developments of Happy Network and Facebook between 2008 and 2010 illustrate, differences in web design regarding virtual gifts did not seem to be small details but rather major strategic choices between the two SNS. Facebook finally suppressed its virtual gifts section in July 2010 while Happy Network made it a main tool of advertising, with users happily sending ads to each other on a daily basis. In other words, the observation and analysis of Happy Network teach us something about “cultural differences” by showing us how design concepts evolved on its website.

Conclusion

Many of us, in speaking loosely of culture, point at ways of life and ways of thinking, leading to the general idea of differences between groups of people, groups of ideas, or groups of things. Then, when we need to use the concept in a scientific contribution, the idea of shared practices, shared meanings, and the question of where to draw boundaries between “cultural entities” often become the center of our concern. In the examples above, one could be tempted to use macro-level categories such as “Chinese”, “Western”, or a concept such as “hybridity”. We could also be tempted to write more affirmatively by saying that the cultural elements “have circulated” rather than “seem to have circulated”. But then how to talk about the Smart car icon and its tiger skin, and how to account for the uncertainty of the observations? Definitely, macro-level categories and affirmative statements would be problems, as none of the observations would fit them exactly.

My argument is that in order to study cultural differences we need to give up using macro-level categories, and limit ourselves to the vocabulary used by people using the specific instances of media under study⁶. Researchers shouldn’t rely on abstractions to describe their observations but on their own personal story with the data. There is always someone behind the research, someone who read texts, observed things or people, used tools, and it is this

⁶. I borrow this argument from interactionism in sociology (Becker 1973) which suggest to rely on how actors qualify themselves and others, and from science and technology’s advice to “follow the actors” (Latour 1987). Generally speaking, Becker and Latour share the same procedures and put forward similar arguments (very roughly sketched up, where the first one discusses art and methodological issues in social sciences, the latter relies on science studies and philosophy).
very personal experience between the researcher, her data and her tools that produce the result of any study. So don’t speak about Chinese traditional culture or hybridity. Carefully select samples you consider representative of what you observed or of the arguments you want to put forward, as I did with the Smart car and its tiger skin, tell about how you found them, what you understand about them, and if you have room for more, as Howard Becker or Bruno Latour would argue, provide more details.

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References


\[^7\] In 2011, I had over 4,000 screenshots of Happy Network among which I chose the few presented in this paper. The choice of the right example to illustrate one's point is a central part of the description work.


