

Dynamic Change of Migrant Networks: How migrant networks change under changing environment?¹

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Introduction

Migration studies widely acknowledge the pervasive role of migrant networks. However, these networks tend to be treated as exogenous variables to the migration process. This paper rejects the implicit assumption that networks simply “come” with migrants and remain essentially external to the migration process, more-or-less unchanged from their initial state of migration. This paper will explore the dynamic dimension of migrant networks, suggesting that egocentric networks change to accommodate changes in external circumstances, and to satisfy changing needs and resources for the networks’ internal participants. This paper suggests a tentative typology of network reconfigurations based on ethnographic data collected during three years of fieldwork in the Lhasa (the capital of Tibet) market. This typology will suggest four main types of reconfiguration undergone by migrant networks (in term of size, composition, and organizing principle) in order to adapt to the external social environment.

In the first part, the paper gives a brief review of relevant literature, points to the gap in the literature, and then offers an alternative explanation. In the second part, the field and the actual migrant networks studied are introduced. In the third part, it delineates the changes of these migrant networks, and discusses how migrants strategically activate and deactivate ties in order to adapt to changing circumstances. In the last part it gives conclusion and discussion for future studies.

Part One: The debate on migrant networks and the question remained.

The main focus of studies of migrant networks falls on its role as a mediating factor for migrant incorporation. The debate therefore centers on whether networks have a positive or negative role in helping migrants to migrate, to manage initial settlement, to find a job, and with on-going social, economic and emotional support. These migrant informal networks usually consist of at least a core kin network, and then by extension, of a wider homeland-based network. These “natural” networks, based on long-standing traditional links, allow people to draw from the implicit obligations inherent to these relationships.

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On the “positive effect” side, active networks are widely understood to be essential for sustained migration flows (Massey and Espinosa 1997; Massey et al. 1987; Taylor 1986). Once they arrive at a host locale, migrants heavily rely on the help provided by network members to make the often difficult initial transitional period. Migrant networks are the mostly widely used source for finding employment (Li, 1977, Waldinger, 1997) because it provides critical information and contacts that otherwise inaccessible to a migrant. It is also the vital element for aspiring migrants wishing to start their own businesses (Sanders and Nee, 1987), a process that results in the often observed phenomenon of “business niches” occupied by members of the same network (Waldinger, 1996). Once settled, migrant networks still provide vital help in migrants’ daily life, for continuous financial, social and emotional support (Menjivar, 2000).

On the “negative” side, the burden of migrant networks on individual members is emphasized. Most studies on this line tend to have a cautionary bent against the rosy “positive-effect” argument. Tight networks limit personal freedom, refrain individuals from seeking other resources, level the differences among individuals, or force people to accept a self-exploitative working condition (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). Moreover, while members can draw resources from a network, their reciprocal obligations can in turn overwhelm them (Menjivar, 2000, Nee and Nee 1986).

This debate on the role of networks as factors of integration tends to expose two related weaknesses in the research on migrant networks. The first is a common underlying structuralist assumption regarding the nature of networks. In this approach, networks are treated as entities that exist independently beyond their members, and the direction of causation is generally conceived unidirectionally: from network to migrant outcomes, not vice versa. While conceiving of networks as external structures is a useful approach at a macro level, it obscures the actual nature of network connections for the migrants themselves at a micro level: as lived patterns of actual interactions.

In contrast to wider societal structures, personal networks are small, concrete and actively created (and recreated) groups by people in direct interaction. The lines that connect the nodes of abstract network graphs are concrete events, concrete instances of interaction, and these events express intentional stances and intentional actions by individuals towards other individuals. Individuals do react to changing circumstances and consciously attempt to re-organize their active networks.

The second weakness of most migrant network literature lies in the treatment of networks as relatively static and unchanging. This tendency emerges naturally when the most notable research on migrant networks are done either on slow-changing traditional societies (for example Glaze, 1954) or on well established (with decades or hundred year of history) migrant communities in the US, such as New York and San Francisco Chinatown (Zhou 1992, Nee and Nee, 1986), Miami Cuban community (Portes and Stepick, 1993), New York and LA’s Korean town (Kim 1981, Light and Bonacich 1988). Even when some research has actually captured the early stage of a migrant community, providing the opportunity to observe the initial, fluid, stage of a migrant network in the

making, these migrant networks are still, unfortunately, treated as relatively static structures.

Due to this static perspective, there is a tendency to see networks as either-or structures. The often cited strong control of new members by the early-members (e.g. Nee and Nee 1986) is only seen as inherent nature of a network, rather than the result of more powerful members' strategies. Conversely, well documented migrant network restructuring phenomena – such as defection and network fragmentation -- are seen merely as systemic failure. It is often found instances of members defect their networks in seeking better opportunities and escape network's negative effect (e.g., Portes and Rumbaut, 1990, Stack, 1997), but these actions are treated as a few members' random move against a repressive entity rather than as an active strategy that inherent in their relations with other network members. Along this line of thinking, Menjivar (2000) found that under stressful situations (when migrants are in dire poverty), networks ties are severed, and networks fragment. This “can be fragmented” scenario was similarly treated as only applicable to extreme circumstances (e.g. extreme poverty), that may not affect the overall positive effect of migrant networks.

Among this ongoing and seemingly two-sided debate of “always positive” versus “sometime negative”, there is an assumption that migrant networks, once formed, will ever last and unchanging. And in extreme circumstances, once network fragmented, it will never recover. However, the analogy of “network” to the overarching “society” is inappropriate because the nature of personal networks is vastly different from “society.”

This paper proposes that there is a need to study migrant networks from a dynamic perspective, both in time and space. Its main proposal is that migrants actively manage their networks by activating potential ties or putting active ties in dormancy. Active networks are not the sum total of every possible interaction, but a selected subset of a potential, latent network of interactions. This paper treats migrant networks as conscious creation of migrant members, and investigates how the network changes when its members adopt different strategies when faced with a changing environment.

Main question:

This paper looks into the dynamic nature of migrant networks. The main question is simply: in which ways do migrant networks change as the process of migration unfolds and circumstances change? The main premise behind this question is that effective networks mutate to adjust both to changes in external circumstances, and as a response to internal changes in the interests and resources of the network's members. These adaptive changes occur in contract with the implicit notion that migrant networks are unchanging and lasting. Instead, we perceive that dynamic changing is inherent in the very nature of social networks. When the external environment changes, the networks will undergo changes in several dimensions.

Part Two: Method, data and field

Investigating *how* networks change using standard network analysis methods requires data at the network level and across certain time span. Gathering statistical data of this kind for migrant population is a complex and arduous task which would be greatly rewarding in terms of outcomes. However, ethnographic data can be used to provide possible topologies of migrant networks. Using longitudinal data gathered from a number of small networks as described by its participants, it is possible to reconstruct the changes in network configuration from the perspective of the migrants themselves. This typology can be used as heuristic guides when extracting patterns using qualitative methods. Data for this paper mostly comes from ethnographic data from a fieldwork in Tibet by the author over a three-year span. The observations took place in various business niches and situations, which were in various stages in terms of market conditions, the prospects of saturation, the levels of competition, and therefore the prospects of profitability.

The four dimensions of change I am proposing are not fully independent, but they can be considered as distinct but interrelated modes of reconfiguration that may occur simultaneously or independently according to circumstances. In this article, I use four networks to illustrate the process of each type of change. When applicable, I use heuristic graphs to illustrate these changes.

The city of Lhasa, and Tibet in general, was better known for its lack of material consumption throughout history (Duoijiecaidan and Jiangcunluobu, 1995). Because of the severe constraints from the climate and geological factors, Tibet has never been able to produce needed goods locally despite a series of ill-fitting state strategies to develop local industries from 1960s to 1980s (Ma 1997). From the 1980s, several factors has changed Lhasa's commercial outlook. The high level of disposable income of urban residents in Lhasa (resulting from generous government subsidies) (Sautman and Eng, 2001), the lack of local manufacturing capacity (Wang, 1995), and the gradual loosening of governmental policies regarding migrants (Hu, 2004), have combined together to make Lhasa an attractive place for migrant business people from other parts of China. (For detailed analysis see Hu 2003, Hu and Salazar 2004).

The number of private small businesses in Tibet total (Lhasa's data is unavailable) has grown over 1000 times in twenty-years, from 53 business (63 people, mostly locals) in 1978 to over 50,000 (65,000 people. About three quarters of those in Lhasa are migrants) in 2004 (China Statistical Bureau, 1991-2002). From being one of the least serviced and isolated parts of the PRC, Lhasa from early 1990s has become the city with the second highest density of commercial outlets in China.²

² The "density of commercial outlets" was a statistical index measuring "People's Lives" used in China's annual *Statistical Year Book* that published before the mid-1990s. The higher the number of commercial outlets in a given population, the more convenient for people's daily lives. This index may have bias because it did not specify the size of commercial outlets and therefore equated a small outlet with a big store. Nonetheless, one commercial outlet for every thirty people in Lhasa (Luorongzhangdui, 1997:176). still meant that it was very convenient for the local consumers to get access to goods and services. Fieldwork confirms this.

The market of Lhasa is a migrant-dominated market. Given that 94% of consumer goods sold in Tibet are imported from other provinces, it is not surprising to find migrants from other provinces specializing in the retailing of different goods and services. Notably, however, the growth of migrants businesses in Lhasa is not linear. The market reached what seems to be its maximum level in a short period of time and has remained more or less stable since. Later policy changes aimed at stimulating further growth did not have significant impact on the total size of the sector (Hu, 2004). Competition is fierce, profit margins and prices tend to fall. As a result, conflicts among competitors are common, and business' turn-over rate is high: about 85% of migrants choose to leave Lhasa within two years' arrival; only about 5%-10% would stay five years and more. (Hu, 2003)

Niche formation is a common feature of immigrant entrepreneurship in most countries (Bonacich, 1973, Light and Bhachu, 1993). This is also the case in Lhasa, where is easy to identify a number of trade niches associated with an ethnicity or a place of origin, such as tailors from Zhejiang, goldsmiths from Fujian, phone sellers from Anhui, and so on. Such regional niches often develop in the early stages of entrepreneurial settlement in a "kin-corporate" structure, with the pioneers helping family members, relatives, and friends to set up their businesses in the same or similar trade area. Some larger niches may be dominated by a few such kin-based networks. These networks are the most important channel to attract and direct new people from their hometown into a business niche at the host city. However, when each niche is occupied by a chain of related people from a same place, market competition become competition among network members.

Against this background we examine the change of migrant networks.

Part Three: Migrant Networks and the changes under changing Market Conditions

The main source of pressure on the structure of migrant networks is changing market conditions. The chain migration that leads kin into the same trade means that many competitors are related. The Lhasa market is small enough that in a short and observable course of two to three years, a niche can complete the cycle from being empty to being saturated. As the market becomes saturated, competition for market-share becomes more and more a zero-sum game. With demand for any mature commodity more or less fixed, any sale made by one seller is one that another did not make. This loss is equal whether the competitors are strangers or relatives. Migrant networks are put under strain.

In the Lhasa data, this competitive strain expressed itself in four kinds of network reconfigurations. A) Diversification: an egocentric network is expanded by making new contacts, entering into new networks, either by attempting to assert possible claims to belonging, create claims by entering on a favor-exchange ring, or by redefining which kind of membership is being claimed. This does not necessarily mean the rejection of the primary kin network, and can link two distinct networks. B) Defection: when new ties/networks cannot co-exist with the kin network, some people choose to reject the kin network and join into a new network. C) Resizing: the extent of active links within the network is expanded or contracted through the activation or deactivation of latent claims

to network membership. D) Reorganization: while the extent of the network remains ostensibly unchanged, the internal configuration changes as the informal hierarchies and rules of interaction and deference are modified. These four dimensions of change are interrelated modes of reconfiguration that may occur simultaneously or independently according to circumstances. As shown below, the first two kinds of changes – diversification and defection – involve great cost and risk for a migrant, therefore happen less commonly than other forms of changes.

In this article, I use four networks in four migrant-dominated niches to illustrate the process of each type of change. When applicable, I use heuristic graphs to illustrate these changes. The first is a group of migrants from Henan (in China's middle) who concentrated in the auto-parts niche; the second is a kin group from Sichuan province (in China's southwest) who specialized in the garment retail market, especially shoes; the third is a kin group Jilin province (in China's northeastern) who dominated the Northern Style cuisine niche; the fourth is a kin group from Anhui province (in China's southeast) who dominated the telephone, pager and cellphone retail market.

(A) Diversifying social ties

The internal solidarity of migrant network groups is often taken for granted, in that migrants will come to rely on each other, and only slowly integrate into the local community networks is somehow perceived as a natural process. This is not the perception from the migrants' own perspective. Alternative networks, either local networks or other migrants' networks are the most obvious place to seek extra resources. But while diversifying one's network is almost always considered desirable, actually achieving it is a hard proposition. Most migrants I met express envy towards other people who "know somebody" and wish they themselves could also "know somebody". If such an opportunity serendipitously arises, no-one will refuse on the ground of network solidarity or inter-group dislike. Instead, all will do their best to catch the opportunity. The boldest among the migrants try to grab any slim chance to enhance and establish ties outside their own original kin and locale network.

Besides fellow migrant business owners and employees, the most obvious source of useful contacts is local customers. This has the peculiar effect of making the utility of market share go beyond mere direct sales volumes. Satisfied, friendly customers are a tentative gate to the rich resources in the local city that are inaccessible to migrant business people. In the case of Lhasa, this "internalized externality" creates an extra benefit for the consumers, and can be an onerous charge on the sellers. Mr. Liu, an auto-parts shop owner from Henan province, represents a story of conscious and hard-working effort to try to diversify his contact network by linking with the locals.

Mr. Liu came to Lhasa via a text-book style of chain migration. Under the auspices of an auto-repair shop owner from a nearby village, Liu arrived at Lhasa smoothly, and opened his shop quickly. His upstream supply line that originated from the capital city of Henan province was established before his arrival. All this is a classical example of leveraging one's original networks to facilitate migration. Once he arrived, however, Liu didn't

want to spend too much time mingling with fellow Henan folk beyond the three men he knew from home. Instead, as a business man with ten years' experience, he wanted to "know people" in the host city. He said:

"I did business in many places. At the beginning, when I was in Henan and Hebei, I was young, I only knew to hang out with other Henan young men. Though I still felt closer to them, I gradually realized that I need to know other people, useful people. In today's world, success depends on who you know. In Lhasa today, Henan folks do two things: selling auto-parts and making steamed bread. It doesn't help my business to make more friends with other auto-parts shop owners. And you tell me why I should bother to get to know those tiny bread-makers. I need to know more useful people."

To gain a competitive edge in Lhasa's rapidly saturated auto-parts market, Liu consciously made "useful" friends from the very beginning. He started with taxi drivers, especially with local Tibetan drivers: as regular customers for car parts, they were obviously "in" into the local scene. Soon from one Tibetan driver, Liu learned the name of the Tibetan official in the nearby car inspection yard (where all cars in the city go through mandatory annual inspection). Under the help of another Tibetan taxi driver, Liu managed to prepare culturally appropriate gifts to give to the Tibetan car inspector during a traditional Tibetan holiday. The car inspector, in return, allowed Liu to send a helper to linger in the car inspection yard to promote his business directly to drivers. Having this access just two months after opened the new shop was a critical success for Liu against his many competitors. (Alas, it was short-lived: Liu's helper was soon bribed away by another auto-part shop, and the turncoat diverted potential customers to Liu's competitors.)

Gradually, Liu extended his contacts to more people, a few low-level government employees of various kinds. Liu wasn't sure what concrete benefit he got from the few government people he knew, but Liu wished that, at least, they would refer their friends to his shop for auto-parts. Liu also tried to pull the more conventional strings of a Henan connection with a few officials from Henan province who worked in the Lhasa government, but those people were not enthusiastic to meet yet another country-folk-in-need, so Liu gave up the idea after a few attempts. Married with wife and son at home village, Liu even tried to build up a more-than-friendship relation with a female singer that he encountered by accident, even though he was soon turned down (it must be said that love affairs are not a trivial way of making contacts, as I shall show in the next section).

Liu also got along well with the young auto-repairer from Sichuan who worked for the next door auto-repair shop owned by Liu's countryman. Deeming that the young man had good auto-repairing skills, Liu invited the car-repairer for meals behind the back of Liu's countryman, in essence head-hunting from his original sponsor. Over a bottle of beer, Liu gradually passed the idea that the Sichuan auto-repairer should really partner up with Liu in order to make bigger money. Liu told the Sichuan young man that if one could manage to transport a big truck-load of the legendary water melons from Xinjiang

to sell in inner cities thousands of miles away, big money was guaranteed. Naturally, a good auto-mechanic would be essential to complete the rugged journey. The Sichuan auto-repairer was moved by the rosy prospect and agreed that once Liu was ready, he would leave his current boss and join Liu to go to Xinjiang.

Due to his awareness of its importance, social experience, and diligent efforts, Liu managed in the one year of his staying in Lhasa to create larger and more diverse social ties than most other migrant business owners could do in the same time. However, establishing these ties came with considerable costs. The most basic was the high cost of creating and preserving new relationships, which requires the development of mutual trust, mutual obligations, and friendship. New links are both time- and resource-consuming. Liu always had a pack of expensive cigarettes in his pocket and a bottle of good liquor under the counter for this purpose, though Liu didn't smoke himself, only drank the cheapest liquor, and cooked all the meals with his three Henan friends. Gifts certainly cost a lot of money and energy. But most damaging to his small business was the products and services that Liu "generously" offered on credit to selected people. At the end of the year, as the list of people who owed him money grew longer and the amount added up, Liu could not afford to continue to invest in his social connections in this manner (to see how Liu tried to collect these debts, see Hu 2003, Chapter 5). At the end of one year, the ambitious Liu closed his adventure in Lhasa and moved to another city. With this move, Liu's investment in building a diversified network was wasted.

(B) Defection

When competition among network members becomes too fierce, abandoning one's network seems at first sight to be the most plausible move: if one cuts off all the ties with one's old network, refuses to fulfill any obligation, and simultaneously gives up all claims for assistance, competing against former network members would become easier. There is also the problem that, if diversification is achieved, one becomes a critical source of otherwise inaccessible resources for other members of the old network: such demands for help can become very heavy indeed.

However, abandoning one's network carries enormous risk and cost, that, in reality, even the most onerous of networks – such as one in which one is in strong competition with other members– will not be abandoned unless there is a solid alternative source of support. When competition is fierce, total defection can be a strategy to handle the competition among network members, but it is a high-risk move.

In a competitive situation, the most violation of network solidarity among a group of shop owners is to undersell each other. Because of this, Miss Zhao, a divorced pretty woman from Sichuan at her early thirties, who sold shoes, held a big grudge against her distant cousin, who ran a shoe store just the opposite the street. Zhao believed that one day her cousin knowingly undersold her on a very promising deal that Zhao desperately needed. Despite complained about this incident repeatedly (to the author) and swore to poach her cousin's customers whenever possible. Zhao could not just break up with the cousin and offend other network members. All she could do was to find an excuse not to

play Mahjong with the group for one night. Only two days later, Zhao went back to play Mahjong with the usual group, the cousin included. Ostensively, nothing had happened. The integrity of her support group was too important to sacrifice even in the face of a serious grievance -- that is, until she found something better.

Some time later, Zhao turned a near disaster into a godsend. She had tried to evade her taxes, but someone reported her to the tax bureau. She suspected it must have been a competitor in the same street, maybe even her relatives, which made her even madder at them. The tax bureau ordered Zhao not only to make up for all her unpaid tax, but also pay a rather heavy fine. Otherwise, the tax bureau said, they would suspend her license and close her shop. In the middle of her frustration, Zhao picked big fights with her boyfriend and eventually kicked him out. The boyfriend, in revenge, stole some of Zhao's stock of most expensive shoes and went home to Sichuan. In great distress, Zhao turned in tears to a Tibetan acquaintance with whom she had a good rapport. Sympathizing with Zhao's plight, and probably most importantly, showing off his connections in the city, the young man quickly managed to find the right person in the tax bureau to get Zhao's penalty waived and her tax lowered. The chivalrous gesture worked well: soon Zhao was romantically involved with this young man.

Zhao was elated with this new social connection and resented the fact that none of her relatives had been able or very willing to help her during her time of need. Zhao clearly understood the value of her new tie with this Tibetan young man compared to her existing ties with the Sichuan migrant shoe-sellers' network. The relatives also realized immediately that Zhao's new boyfriend could be potentially important for everyone in the group. However, before they found a way to mend fences with Zhao and ask favors from the new boyfriend, Zhao could see them coming. She did not need her relative's networks as much anymore, and more importantly, in her own words, "I am not going to let all the others come to me to ask [this Tibetan man] to help them with their taxes!"

So Zhao turned her back on her distant cousin and completely stopped going to play Mahjong with the group of relatives. On the other hand, she enthusiastically invested her spare time on the boyfriend, visited his family, learned some token Tibetan language, and tried to make friends with his friends, who were mostly young officials at the city government. The other cousins in her old shoe seller network couldn't do anything to make the suddenly valuable Miss Zhao take them in for the ride of her new connection with a Tibetan boyfriend who "knows" people. They bitterly concluded that Zhao was a "loose" woman and it was good for the whole group that she was no longer with them. And they secretly hoped that Zhao's romance wouldn't last.

The limits of kin-based networks among migrant business people, as shown in this case, are obvious. The often homogenous kin-based networks confer marginal benefits as problems become more complex and require "outside" resources. At the same time, those networks inflict increasing costs on individual members when market competition heats up. Not only can kin often be direct competitors; they are also often entitled to free rides on resources other members have obtained. A stable connection with a local government employee who had an extensive local network was much more useful to

Zhao than her petty networks of rural cousins that involved relatively high maintenance costs, such as having to put up with the cousin who undersold her. Zhao came to the conclusion that the two networks could not coexist. This was more than mere vindictiveness on her part. Her old county network would overwhelm her newfound government friends with their demands for help thus threaten her newfound luck. It is hardly surprising that she chose her Tibetan boyfriend and his network over her estranged cousin and her “useless” relatives. Similar double binds lead many other people to opt out whenever better opportunities and connections present themselves, or when they are threatened with their erstwhile connections absorbing all fruits of their success.

However, the obverse side of this strategy became apparent one year later. Zhao’s romance with the Tibetan official broke down, and Zhao found herself out of the loop: her local relationships were not deep enough to work independently of her former beau. At the same time, her Sichuan relatives were not very disposed to re-accept her without extracting payback from her. Zhao recognized the hopelessness of her situation in Lhasa, cut her losses and left Lhasa to return to her village, and probably try again in some other city.

Graph 2 shows the changes of this Sichuan network.
(Graph 2 here)

(C) Resizing the network and redefining its the membership

As diversification and defection involve rather large costs and risks, for most migrants, cleanly breaking away from a kin-based network is not an easy task. Very few migrants could manage to secure a powerful connection in the host city through either money, marriage, or other means. Instead, the network’s common reaction to intra-group conflict over market share or resources is often resizing the network and re-segmenting within the networks. Redefining the network boundaries means to redraw members’ mutual obligations.

When opportunities plenty, and inside competition is rare, it helps to lump in people based on a broader definition of commonality. Conversely, when resources and opportunities are limited and competition intensified, loosely defined locality-and kin-based “affinity” networks are pushed to narrow down to progressively smaller, closer-relation networks. Migrants redefine their relationships, their mutual obligations, and the boundaries between in-group and out-group. Who still qualifies as a “family” member and is thus worthy of cooperation and protection? Who is now an “outside” competitor and thus a legitimate target for aggressive undermining?

Migrants inside China use the “province” as the primary surface label to distinguish locality-based networks. “Province” is also a category favored by government bureaus for statistical purposes, akin to the preference in the US to use “country of origin” to distinguish foreign immigrants. However, as shown in the following case, this line of defining “insiders” from “outsiders” is not natural or straightforward. Under varying circumstances, the boundary of “acceptable network claim” can be quite different. It can

be as wide as pan-ethnic, pan-regional, provincial, or it can be narrowed down to county, village or even only direct family members. More importantly, the boundary is fluid and changes fast within short periods of time.

The change of the northeastern restaurateur network in Lhasa highlights the fluidity of active migrant networks boundaries. Compared to migrants from southern provinces that started to go to Lhasa in the 1980s, northerners were latecomers to Lhasa. The migration from northeastern provinces can be traced back to a construction team from Jilin province that first went to Lhasa in 1992 for a government sponsored construction project. A few construction workers, one of them Old Zhang, decided to stay on after the construction project finished in 1995. Old Zhang was later joined by his wife and the two opened the first northeastern style restaurant in Lhasa in 1996. Old Zhang's wife was the eldest of five sisters. In 1998, the Second Sister and her husband came to Lhasa and opened another restaurant.

When more northerners started to enter the Lhasa market around 1997 and 1998, the vast majority of migrant businesspeople there were from southern provinces. The few northeastern migrants displayed a strong sense of ethnic identity and solidarity towards fellow northerners, referring to each other cross-regionally as "hometown folks." They even generously lumped together people from other northern provinces into a "big northerner family." At the time, the Second Sister's small restaurant served as a social center for northerners, where personal messages were left and transmitted, and market information was gathered and dispersed. Her husband proudly claimed:

"We Northerners are not like the southerners. Those Sichuan, Hunan, and Zhejiang people all have factions and fight with each other. One backstabs another. We Northerners are different. We are straightforward and tight. We never fight with each other. Well, hm...yeah, it is true that we northerners like to fight, but that was at home. Now we are all far from home. We should unite. Why fight?"³

When asked why he, a man from Jilin province, called someone from Hebei province also as "my Hebei hometown folk," he said, "The old saying says that when you are outside you depend on friends. We don't have that many Jilin hometown folks here. At least Hebei province is also in the north, so we count them as 'hometown folks.'"

As any new cuisine always enjoys an often short-lived popularity in Lhasa, the lucky first group of northerners was at first quite busy raking in the money. The first couple updated their ordinary restaurant into a formal looking fast-food restaurant with western style service in 1998. The second couple started from a dilapidated one-room, three-table restaurant, and upgraded the business into a much larger venue with twenty tables, situated on a much busier street in 1999.

The word spread to home. Shortly after, the other three sisters and their husbands all found their way to Lhasa. One brother and two cousins of three of the husbands also

³ He was referring to northerners' reputation for being pugnacious.

arrived with their spouses. When all five sisters arrived Lhasa, they held a congenial big dinner together. This time, however, only “real” kin – the five sisters and their husbands, plus one brother of a husband -- were present. One of them announced: “Family is blood and flesh, after all.”

So four years after Old Zhang first decided to stay in Lhasa in 1995, 27 people had arrived at Lhasa using this link. With the chain migration came a mushrooming of northeastern style restaurants. The Fifth Sister and her husband took over the Second Sister’s old place. The Third Sister and husband opened a new restaurant. The Fourth Sister joined the Second Sister in investing in the new big restaurant. In addition with the cousins and other hometown folks, together this group opened more than a dozen Northeastern restaurants. Then, the solidarity and fictive kinship among Northeasterners faced the test of the market as the new millennium arrived.

From 2000 to 2001, the claim that “all northeasterners are one family” was less and less heard. Instead, northeasterners more often counted on their fingers the number of similar restaurants on the same or nearby streets, and complained that this proliferation had made business harder. Faced with competition from many hometown folks, each restaurant stayed open for exceedingly long hours. Even though now there were many more “hometown folks” around, each spent less time mingling with each other. The Second Sister complained ceaselessly about how hard they had to work, and about sleep deprivation, backaches, and so on. “Hometown folks?” she sighed, “too few hometown folks is not good; too many is not good either.”

Rifts appeared even within nuclear family members. Second Sister started to find fault with Fifth Sister, who had taken over their old restaurant. As she explained, “I was the one who told them about this [the Lhasa market]... You think they would be grateful? No way!” Not surprisingly, Fifth Sister and her husband confided a similar feeling of dissatisfaction toward the Second Sister couple. What the elder sister regarded as a generous “half-sale half-gift” transfer price for his original restaurant, the younger couple regarded as a rip-off. The younger sister complained: “They promised us that this location was this-and-that good. Nonsense! We’ve almost broken our backs and haven’t seen much money at all.” Soon, the two couples had to work nonstop for most of their waking hours, and saw each other less and less often.

One year later, Second and Forth Sisters could not solve the ambiguous status of co-ownership between the two couples. Finally the two couples took an un-fraternal measure. After rounds of negotiation, they sat down and signed a rather formal agreement. It was agreed that the Fourth-sister and her husband would become the sole owner of the restaurant; they would give the Second Sister couple a one-time 50,000 yuan payment for their investment, plus 5,000 yuan each year in the coming five years. By accepting the money, the Second Sister will leave and not come back in five years, or at least not come back to do a restaurant business. In effect, they had signed a formal buyout with a non-competition clause.

At the same time, the other sisters' business also changed. The Eldest sister sold their Western-style fast food restaurant and moved the whole family to the southern province of Guangdong to test new opportunities. The Third-sister's restaurant kept losing money and she had to close it down. The youngest, Fifth-sister, was doing fine, so she hired the third-sister and her husband as waiters in her restaurant. Their relationship became clear-cut and non-familial. The fifth-sister pays her elder sister a monthly wage, regardless of the restaurants' profit. And fifth-sister and her husband make all business decisions, the third-sister and her husband are in no position to ask for input in those decisions. The Fifth-sister and Fourth-sister rarely see each other despite being just two streets apart, except occasionally during holidays (like New Year). While none of the sisters has broken off contact officially, their relationship is not as close as before, and the effective networks of all the northeasterners has shrunk to a smallish group of friends and kin.

During all these changes, there were almost no dealings with their former migrant friends from Hebei, Shandong and Inner Mongolia anymore. Without defecting to a "new" network, each member retreated to a small circle of old kin and close friends, and started to regard their former friends as competitors. However, the potential for renewed connections remains, and it is understood that in a situation of crisis, the sisters would assist each other. The active network contracts without eliminating the extension of the potential network.

Graph 3 shows the development of this network.
(Graph 3 is here)

(D) Reorganizing the networks' internal structure

The restaurant business is somewhat more autonomous than other retailers, because basic inputs can be secured from the local open market. It is therefore comparatively easier for restaurateurs to operate on their own and not to have constant contacts with each other. Many retail businesses, which involve long and complicated supply lines, are not so easy to operate autonomously, and it is difficult to simply avoid contact with each other. In this situation, inter-group competition will not result in "shrinking" to a core network. Instead, reconfiguration will manifest itself as a re-segmentation within a network. This often means supplanting the pre-existing genealogical preferences and hierarchies with new ones based on economic resources.

In an "original" setting, like a village or hometown, a kin-network's internal hierarchy is largely organized by kin-distance and generational status. After migration, however, the foundation for maintaining original hierarchy is challenged by the new environment. Whether a member can extend influences to other network members, thus hold more power in the network, depends on whether a member can settle and progress well and gain more resources in the receiving place. So, often, when the external environment changes, network structure will modify to follow. Thus a "natural" network often transforms its internal structure based on a new form of power relations and renegotiated mutual obligations. In the case of Lhasa, the phone seller network from Anhui province illustrates such internal network reconfiguration

In Lhasa, the phone retail business (including pagers and cell phones) was largely in the hands of a group of migrants from just one county of Anhui province. Most of the stores located on the nick-named “cellphone street” on the east side of the city. These phone sellers, engaged in the relatively capital-and-skill-intensive trade of upscale goods, represent something of an upper echelon among migrant business people. Most of the sellers are related, siblings, varying degrees of cousins, uncles and aunts. Among the group, a couple, wife Wu and husband Yang, were the second youngest sellers. But they already had extensive experience in several trades in different provinces of China. When I met them in Lhasa, the couple was already doing better in business than most of their relatives. The wife managed customers; the husband fixed and reset pagers and cell phones. He was the first one among the group who bought a computer, used emails and web-searching. He even taught himself the basics of computer networking and started to gain business in setting up computer networks for local companies.

Successful as they were, the young couple didn’t think there was any reason for them to follow the traditional idea that younger people should respect their elder, or people from higher generations. The wife, Wu, never tried to hide her attempts to undersell the next door cousin Qian, although Qian was more than ten years older than Wu and Yang. Wu said matter-of-factly: “I have more capital, I can sell cheap. You can’t. So what!” Wu took great pleasure in not letting any customer pass through her door into Qian’s store. Robbing Qian’s customers almost became a source of entertainment for Wu in her long days of standing behind the counter. Qian knew all of this, but as she still needed to come over to Wu’s store to “take” phone sets⁴, she never openly showed signs of dissatisfaction.

The unlucky Qian certainly understood that, once outside the hometown, she could no longer get respect just for being ten years older than the younger couple. Her education was much lower, she couldn’t fix cell phones, and her husband wasn’t here to help her. What else could she do but subject to the power of other member? Even an uncle, in the guise of griping about the decline of overall moral standards in today’s world, complained to me that:

“Young people nowadays only set eyes on money, and have no respect of tradition. When they have money, they think they can do anything, including mistreat people. Our home county had the most famous Confucius scholar in the Song Dynasty, we have a long and glorious Confucius tradition. But even people from my county don’t learn the tradition properly. (*Sigh*)”

Regardless of this resentment about the subversion of tradition, overall network members play by the new hierarchical rules now. Every now and then, the relatives would meet

⁴ This refers to a commonly used strategy among cellphone sellers. Those who do not have enough capital to store multiple cell phone sets would use a sample set to make a sale to customers and tell them that “the rest of the sets are in storage; we will go get one for you in a minute.” Then they would go to the store of a relative who had sets to “take” one, pretending they fetched it from storage. The profits were shared between the two stores. This procedure created the image that the store possessed complete and up-to-date stock. It was especially beneficial when customers were buying multiple items.

over dinner or gather to gamble. Yang usually gambled ostentatious amounts for both the thrill and the potlatch effect, which underscored his status as a Big Man. The uncles and aunts never forgot to flatter Wu and Yang in these gatherings, saying they were the new hero of the county. The unlucky Qian participated in these gatherings but was careful not to say anything that might be offensive; as she could not afford to gamble much, she was also marginalized from this status-asserting ritual. Wu and Yang, holding a powerful position among their internal kin competitors, saw no need to cater to their kin's feelings or uphold traditional seniority relations in ways that would hamper them from making a profit. If a yuan was to be made at the potential expense of their competing relatives, so be it.

On the other hand, Wu and Yang saw no benefit in cutting themselves off from the network either, and so they continued to provide critical services to their cousins, by letting them "take phone sets." This act was implicitly accepted by all parties as enough compensation for Wu and Yang's subversion of the "old" rules of deference, and to a degree transformed a more-or-less horizontal network of mutual favors into a skewed quasi-clientelist system.

The change of this cell phone network is shown in Graph 4.
(Graph 4 is here.)

Part Four: Conclusion and discussion

The role of networks in facilitating and constraining patterns of migration and incorporation is well understood by researchers to be significant. This significance is also well known by the migrants themselves, so it is important to understand how these networks are actually used, perceived, lived in by their members. One dimension of migrants' experience with their networks is their conscious strategies at reconfiguring the network. This is more than specific accumulation and use of isolated bits of social capital, agents themselves explicitly recognize that they are trying to manipulate a lattice of connections.

Networks are strongly perceived by the migrants themselves as critical sources of information, support and capital, at the same time, they are aware that their networks also provide sanctions against detrimental behaviors, and impose mutual obligations and responsibilities. At the individual level, network participation can be understood as a cost-benefit analysis: when the benefits gained from a network is greater than the cost of remaining in a network – "cost" being obligations and responsibilities towards other members -- the individual is less motivated to stay and cooperate. Similarly, when opportunities provided outside the network are large and accessible, an individual is also motivated to diversify their contacts or to leave. Conversely, when the internal and external cost-benefit surrounding a network changes, a member can become more inclined to be active in, stay in, or rejoin a network.

When members leave, rejoin, or change the distance and strength of their ties with others, their mutual obligations can be emphasized or shirked, and as a result, their network

mutate, contract or expand. These transformations happen in terms of network size, the composition of network ties, and the organizing principle of network's internal structure.

The actual patterns in which migrant networks vary over time are an empirical question that demands more research. This paper provides an attempt using migrant business networks as example. It is reasonable to deduce that migrant networks in other contexts, as long as they are competing for limited resources (such as limited number of affordable housing, a limited quota of government aid, a limited number of job opportunities, etc.), competition should prompt the members to seek alternatives, and thus the same kinds of change of their networks should be observed.

The above described network changes may have sacrificed some of the easy generosity that network members had toward each other in the earlier days, but it is a natural response to changes in conditions and changing needs. These changes may also increase individual risks and aggravate the consequences of failure for some. They may allow successful migrants to expand beyond the carrying capacity of their network. Finally, such network changes may lead to de-concentration in certain niches, as regional near-monopolies are replaced by more heterogeneous groups of migrants motivated by reasons other than the inertia of chained networks.

In essence, it is not enough to recognize the importance of networks acting on migrants, but also the effect of migrants' decisions acting on their networks.

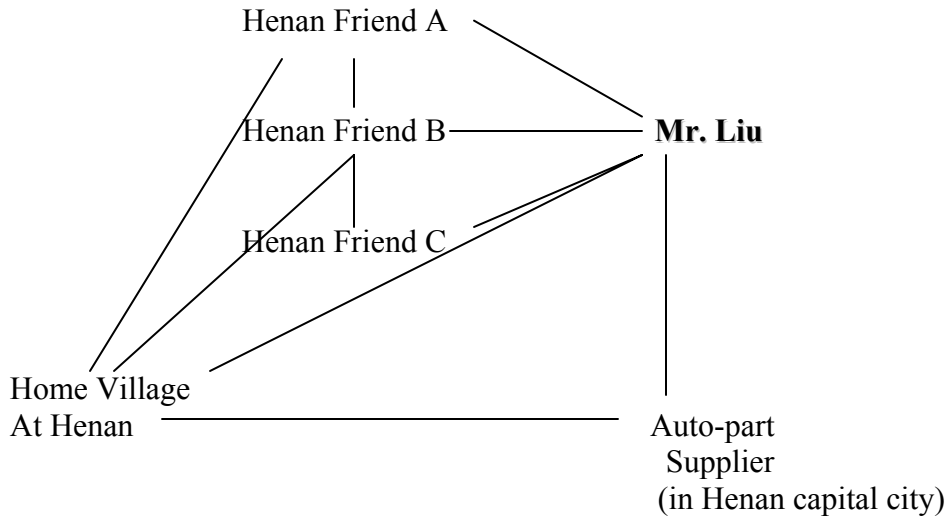
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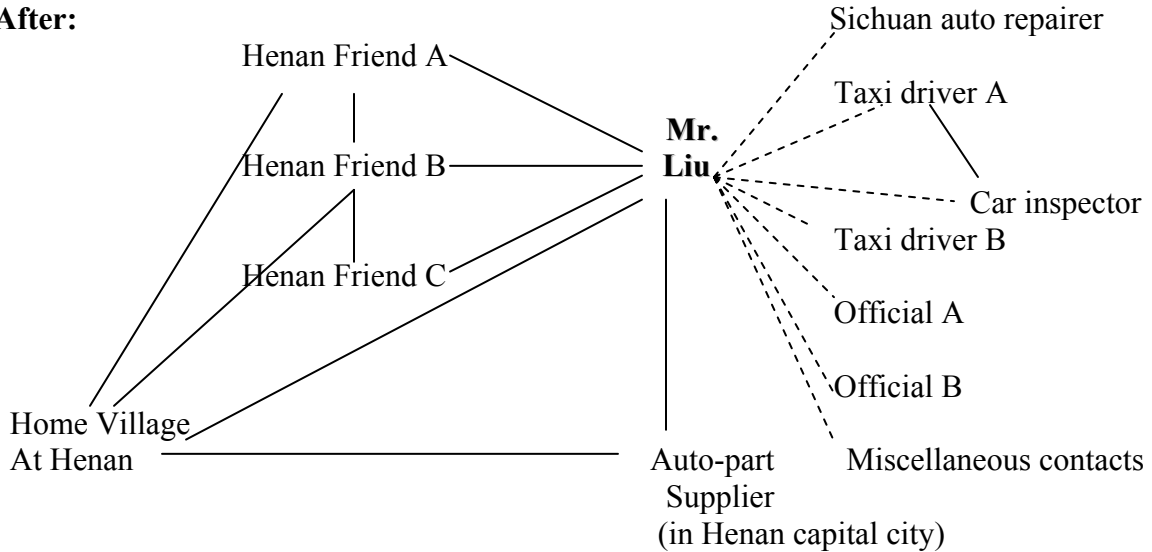
Graph 1: diversification of social ties: Henan auto-parts network

Before:



(Note: Primary network with contacts existed from home village.)

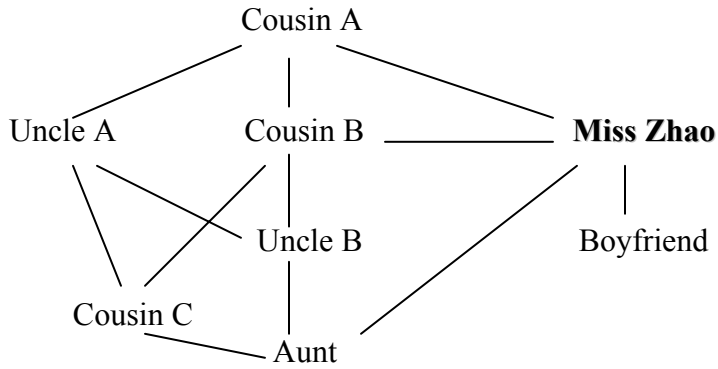
After:



(Note: Old contacts remain. As the same time various tentative new links, shown as ----- in the graph, are established.)

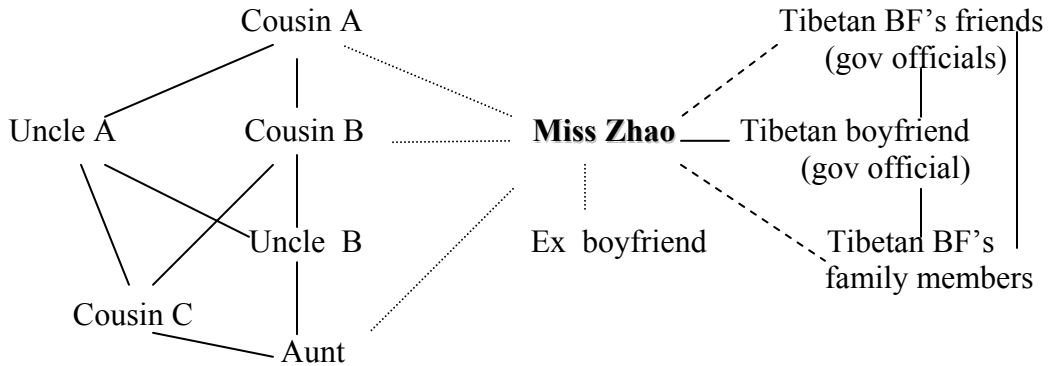
Graph 2: Defection: Sichuan shoe-selling network

Before:



(Note: Primary network with contacts existed from home.)

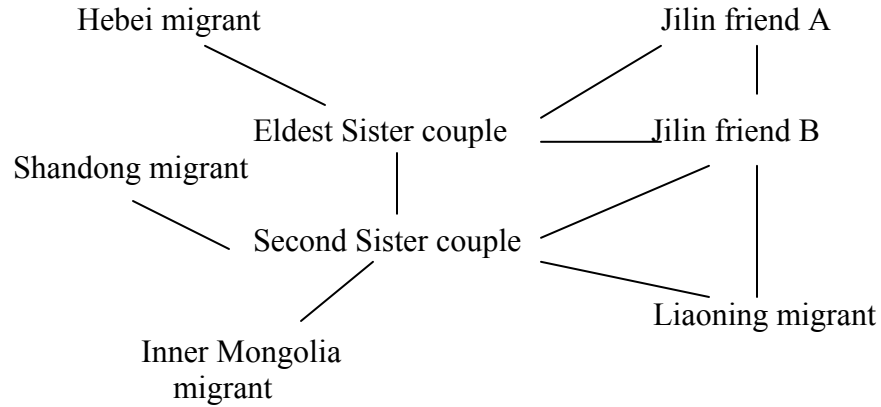
After:



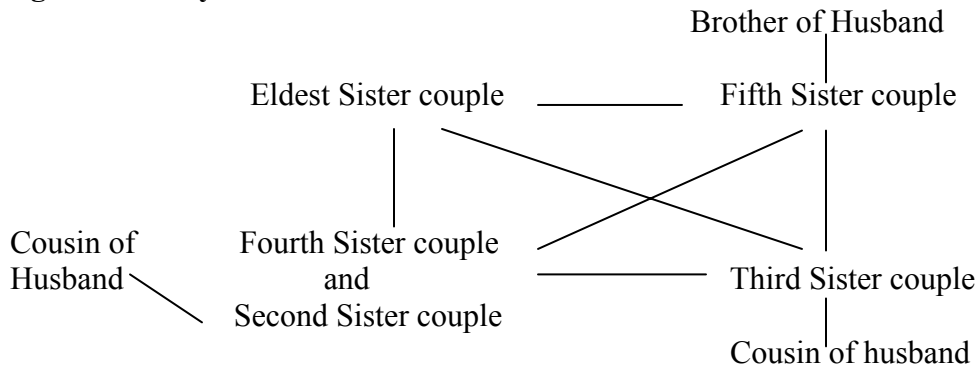
(Note: Miss Zhao severed all old ties, and joined a separate network. Severed ties shown as Tentative new ties as_.....)

Graph 3: Resizing the network and redefining the membership: Jilin restaurateurs' network

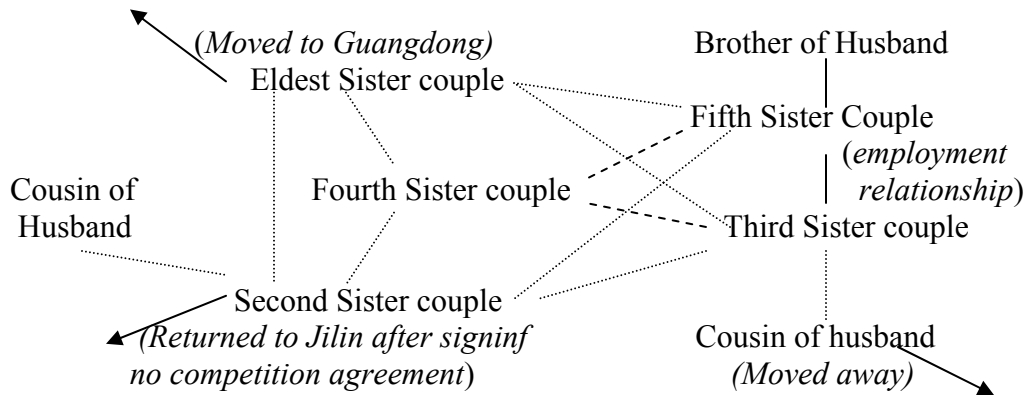
Stage 1: "Big Northerners Family"



Stage 2: "Family is blood and flesh."



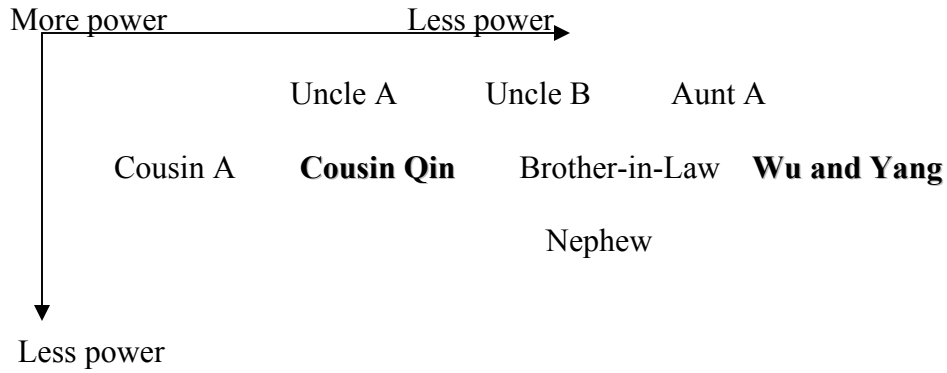
Stage 3: "Having too many country folks is not good either."



(Note: → exit market. — active relation - - - - less active relation
 inactive relation)

Graph 4: Change of organizing principle

The hierarchy of relatives according to generational and seniority positions:



The hierarchy of power in Lhasa that based on business success:

