Symbolic Appropriation of the Internet: Modernity, Peasant Bodies, and the Image of Familial Intimacy in China's *Nongjiale* Tourism Online Advertisements

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Abstract The peasantry is probably the last social category that researchers of technology and society readily associate with the use of high technologies such as the Internet. But in China recently, tens of thousands of peasant entrepreneurs, engaged in a unique form of rural tourism popularly called *nongjiale* (delights in farm guesthouses), have adopted the Internet as a medium for advertising their farm guesthouses. This paper is an anthropological study of how Chinese peasant entrepreneurs' adoption of the Internet is engrained in the broader material and symbolic orders of contemporary Chinese society. By exploring the way in which the Chinese peasants are idiosyncratically involved with the Internet, it also questions whether STS (Science, Technology, and Society) concepts such as users and non-users, developed essentially within Euro-American contexts, are adequate to explain the symbolic appropriations of high-tech in pursuit of modernity in China today.

Abstract (in Korean) "농민"은 인터넷 같은 하이테크의 사회문화적 함의에 관심 있는 연구자들이 주의를 기울이기에 가장 힘든 사회적 범주일 것이다. 하지만 최근 중국에서는 "농지아러"(农家乐)라는 농촌관광 숙박업체를 운영하는 수만의 농민 기업가들이 인터넷을 광고수단으로 활용하고 있다. 본 논문은 이들 중국 농민 기업가의 인터넷 채용이 당대 중국사회의 물질적, 상징적 질서와 어떻게 연결되어 있는가에 관한 인류학적 사례연구이다. 본 논문은 또한 중국 농민이 인터넷에 관계하는 독특한 과정의 탐구를 통해 "사

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용자"(users)와 "비사용자"(non-users) 같이 대체로 구미사회의 맥락에서 발달해 온 STS (Science, Technology and Society) 분석개념들이 현재 중국사회에서 하이테크를 근대성의 추구 일환으로 활용하는 기술의 상징적 전용 현상을 설명하는 데 적합한가라는 문제를 시론적으로 논의한다.

1 Introduction

The peasantry is probably the last social category that researchers of technology and society readily associate with the use of high technologies such as the Internet. But in China recently, tens of thousands of peasant entrepreneurs, engaged in a unique form of rural tourism popularly called *nongjiale* (delights in farm guesthouses), have adopted the Internet as a medium for advertising their farm guesthouses. This paper is an anthropological study of how Chinese peasant entrepreneurs' adoption of the Internet is engrained in the broader material and symbolic orders of contemporary Chinese society. By exploring the way in which the Chinese peasants are idiosyncratically involved with the Internet, it also questions whether STS (Science, Technology, and Society) concepts such as users and non-users, developed essentially within Euro-American contexts, are adequate to explain the symbolic appropriations of high-tech in pursuit of modernity in China today.

Over the last two decades China has witnessed a surge of *nongjiale* tourism, which involves members of the Chinese urban middle-class traveling from the city to the countryside to consume rustic meals and take lodgings in farm guesthouses run by peasant families. This Chinese version of rural tourism has been booming not only as a new style of holiday making among the Chinese urban middle-class, but also as a new form of private enterprise among millions of Chinese peasants.[1] Meanwhile, the Internet has spread rapidly throughout Chinese society. Both the socialist party-state and capitalist market forces have facilitated its adoption as a crucial technological catalyst for economic growth and social development (see CNNIC 2007; Damm and Thomas 2006; Tai 2006). At the turn of the century, these two distinct social processes began to intertwine. As the Internet became widely accessible and relatively affordable to the general Chinese public, even many *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs began to adopt this new wonder of modern technology to advertise their farm guesthouses. Now a simple click on a major Internet search-engine, such as Google, Yahoo, and *Baidu*,[2] promptly leads to thousands of *nongjiale* Internet advertisements (NIAs).

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[1] The growth of *nongjiale* tourism industry has been impressive. Although nationwide statistics are not yet available, the number of *nongjiale* farm guesthouses throughout China must have reached at least one million by now. According to Zou Tongqian's 2003 survey, which counted only enterprises in the greater Beijing area, more than 300 villages and about 24,000 peasant households were then engaged in the *nongjiale* guesthouse business (Zou 2004). Zou counted only registered guesthouses with official certificates. If unregistered enterprises had also been included, the figures would probably be doubled.

[2] One of China's most popular domestic-origin Internet search-engines.

NIAs post various textual narratives and photographic images in their web pages to maximize advertising effects. Like other forms of media advertising, however, NIA web-pages are not a seamless space that indiscriminately delivers the destination information and images of *nongjiale* tourism to the viewer, but a locus of selective representation in which certain sets of cultural values and images are highlighted while others are downplayed or excluded, shaping the gaze of spectators to varying degrees (see White 2006). This paper explores the selective processes of *nongjiale* online representation, in conjunction with offline *nongjiale* tourism practices (architectural design, choice of facilities, menus, and activities offered, etc.), to shed light on how Chinese peasant entrepreneurs articulate the cultural hierarchy and power relations of post-Mao Chinese society through their involvement with the Internet.

Many researchers of the Internet within and beyond the circle of tourism studies, especially those interested in promoting effective tourism management and marketing, tend to approach the selective processes of this kind of online representation as a matter of "success or failure" in projecting images of tourism destinations and cultural identities (e.g. Govers and Go 2003, 2005; Abdulla 2007; Nysveen et al. 2003; Holt 2002). This approach is implicitly or explicitly based on the assumption that a specific technological device has universal functions and meanings regardless of its users and use-contexts. Some critical commentators, however, would argue that this line of approach fails to capture the deeper symbolic orders, social processes, and power dynamics inscribed in the use of technologies (e.g. Silverstone and Hirsch 1992; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003; Miller and Slater 2000; Bray 2007). In what follows, I demonstrate that the process of selective representation manifested in the virtual space of NIAs is deeply embedded in the unique construction of modernity and rural-urban fault-lines in contemporary Chinese society.

Like rural tourism in Euro-American societies, the thematic formation of *nongjiale* tourism draws on the contrasts between rurality and urbanity (see Roberts and Hall 2001, 2003; Shaw and Williams 2002: 273–95). In the venue of *nongjiale*, however, the relationship between rurality and urbanity shows an interesting twist, a twist forging the way in which the image of peasant bodies and their cultural identities are represented in the virtual space of NIAs. The revolutionary modernization and development agendas that China has carried out ever since the 1949 Socialist Revolution have been significantly biased towards the city. This has engendered a cultural hierarchy in which China's urbanity has become synonymous with modernity while its rurality has been constructed in opposition to the discursive merger of urbanity and modernity (see Cohen 1993; Whyte 1996; Meisner 1982; Potter and Potter 1990; Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001). Within this cultural hierarchy, rural China has been represented as "the locus of tradition and continuity with the past" and urban China as "the site of modernization and change" (Ferguson 1997: 137). This particular discursive formation of rurality and urbanity in China prompts us to approach China's rurality embodied in *nongjiale* tourism processes as the conceptual other of not only urbanity but also modernity.

Both tourism and the Internet are among the most politically and culturally charged fields of Chinese society today (see Oakes 1998; Lew et al. 2003; Tai 2006; Zhou 2006; Kang 2004; Yang 2003; Zheng 2008). This paper examines NIA web-pages

and the Internet as an arena of competing discursive systems and complex social processes in which the contrasts between rural and urban identities, and the nature of rurality and urbanity (or modernity), are actively contested, negotiated, and reproduced in changing fields of power and meaning in post-Mao Chinese society. By illuminating how *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs relate to and interact with the Internet through NIAs, this paper also attempts to delve into some theoretical issues in the current scholarship of technology–society relationships. The discussions in this paper draw primarily on ethnographic materials that I collected in 2005–2006 in a site of *nongjiale* tourism in the northern rural suburbs of Beijing, together with my content analysis of some 100 NIA web-pages collected from ten different Internet portal sites in China.

2 Lotus Pond goes Online[3]

In the early afternoon of the last day of September 2005, I left my tiny "ethnographer's cottage" in a *nongjiale* farm guesthouse in *Lianhuachi* (Lotus Pond) to take a walk along the village roads. I took such walks daily as part of my research, establishing *rapport* with villagers and hopefully interviewing a few.[4] It was also an opportunity to enjoy the fresh air and mid-autumn sunshine radiating from the deep blue sky of the countryside north of Beijing. A few steps out of the guesthouse, I was stunned to see a huge stream of north-bound cars lining the narrow two-lane road at the eastern edge of the village. The colorful scene immediately reminded me that the next day was the beginning of October First Golden Week (*shiyi huangjinzhou*).[5] I had momentarily forgotten that for the last few days the couple who were my key informants had been busy purchasing quantities of meat and collecting a variety of wild vegetables from the nearby mountain slopes and streams, to prepare for hosting the hundreds of customers who would pour out of the city to enjoy the week-long holidays.

I was astonished by the sheer numbers of cars and people; the lively scene was more typical of a thriving downtown than a small mountain village. In the following few days, the village earned more than one million RMB[6] by hosting thousands of urban customers. This would be a completely unimaginable amount of revenue for most other villages scattered throughout the vast rural areas of China. Based on this new-style family enterprise of hosting urban trippers in farm guesthouses, in terms of annual per-capita income Lotus Pond (*Lianhuachi*) ranked top among the 21 villages in *Yanqi* township, and second out of 284 villages in *Huairou* district, in 2006 (HTN 2006). This is in stark contrast to the figures of about a decade ago when the annual

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[3] Some ethnographic descriptions and cases in this paper are excerpts from my forthcoming PhD dissertation "Delights in Farm Guesthouses: Nongjiale Tourism, Rural Development and the Regime of Leisure-Pleasure in Post-Mao China."

[4] At that time, barely 2 months had passed since I began my year-long ethnographic fieldwork in the village.

[5] This Golden Week is one of three new week-long national holidays and celebrates National Day on October 1; the other two celebrate Labor Day (*laodongjie*) on May 1, and Spring Festival (*chunjie*) at New Year.

[6] One USD was about eight RMB at that time.

per-capita income of the village was one of the lowest in the township (HTN 1995). It is the villagers' private enterprises—hosting urban excursionists in their farm guesthouses and derivative sideline economic activities, such as selling fire crackers and providing horse-riding—that have sustained this dramatic increase in income.

Lotus Pond village is located in one of the most beautiful valleys of *Yanqi* township, set in the mountainous terrain to the northwest of *Huairou* suburban district,[7] approximately 70 km from downtown Beijing. It is a relatively small rural village of no more than 151 households, with a population no bigger than 350. The village used to specialize in chestnut and apricot production, cultivating rough land in the mountain slopes and valleys. Relying on patches of arable land scattered here and there in the valley, the village also produces a small amount of corn, peanuts, and vegetables mostly for local consumption. Lack of land and resources meant that most of the village households were extremely poor, as in tens of thousands of other rural villages throughout China. Lotus Pond's beautiful but harsh mountainous environment remained a critical barrier to the village's development for a long time.

Around the mid-1990s, however, the village encountered a dramatic turning point in its trajectory of socio-economic development. The surrounding mountain valleys began to attract large numbers of urban visitors, and neighboring *Mutianyu* Great Wall Tourism District became one of the most popular tourist destinations in greater Beijing. One old peasant couple in Lotus Pond happened to host a few tired and hungry urbanites who strayed into their farmhouse. In 1996, capitalizing on the lucrative potential of such hospitality, the couple opened a small guesthouse, renovating their shabby farmhouse into a humble dining and lodging facility with five guestrooms. When I began my fieldwork less than 10 years later, about 23 farm guesthouses of smaller and bigger size had set up business in the village, providing rustic meals (*nongjiafan*, peasants' home-made meals) and lodgings (*nongjiayuan*, farmhouse) to ever-increasing numbers of trippers from the cities, especially from Beijing. The impressively high revenue that this village earned during October First Golden Week 2005 shows the success of these peasant-family enterprises.[8]

It was around late August 2003 that some of the guesthouses in the village happened to go online for advertising. A few months after the retreat of the SARS crisis that had hit every nook and corner of Chinese society for about half a year, a web-master salesman, Mr. Gong,[9] from a recently established *nongjiale* tourism portal site (http://www.jj667.com)[10] visited the village to introduce and sell NIA web pages priced at 200 RMB per page for a 1-year contract. His visit was very successful. Nine out of 12 guesthouses that he visited purchased the Internet advertising service. Mr. Gong explained to me it was because those guesthouse owners were eagerly searching for a breakthrough to cope with the dramatic

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[7] Huairou was a rural county before it was promoted to an administrative suburban district of Beijing municipality in 2001.

[8] For a more comprehensive ethnographic account of *nongjiale* tourism, see Park's 2008 PhD dissertation, especially Chapter II.

[9] Except for the name of a famous farm guesthouse owner whose identity is very much obvious because of her publicity, all names that I use in this paper are pseudonyms. Although this paper does not deal with politically sensitive issues, I use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of informants.

[10] Here, "jj667" is a homonymic abbreviation of "*jingjiao liuliuqu*" (Let's go to the Beijing suburbs on an excursion!).

decrease of customers caused by the horror of SARS.[11] But it was also probably because most villagers had already internalized the rosy vision of IT technology as an icon of development and modernity, given the influential propaganda for "*xinxihua*" (informatization) put out by the Communist party and the state controlled media in China.

Once introduced, NIAs were swiftly adopted by most farm guesthouses in the village. Before the adoption of the Internet, they advertised by touting on the street, erecting colorful signboards, or scribbling guesthouse names and contact numbers on the face of boulders at the roadside (see Appendix 1). Now several different *nongjiale* portal sites competitively provide different forms of NIA services, and some guesthouses doing good business post their Internet commercials on several different portal sites, spending more than 1,000 RMB per year.[12]

3 The Characteristics of NIA Web-Pages

When the web-master salesman Mr. Gong first visited the village's *nongjiale* guesthouses, he brought a few pages of printout sample to present the general design and content of NIA web pages to his potential clients. Based on the sample, Mr. Gong explained to them how the commercial web-page was going to work and what it would look like. Once a contract was made with a client, he collected detailed information about the client's guesthouse, including its title, the owner's name, its services, contact numbers, etc.; he also photographed the guesthouse and its physical facilities and environment to provide a customized web-page for the client. According to Mr. Gong's account, his company modeled the template of *nongjiale* web-pages on web-page designs for commercial hotel in urban contexts. Although the general framework of the web-page was already set up by the service provider, the peasant client was supposed to decide what kinds of specific words and photos should fill the bracketed space.[13] Figure 1 shows two examples of the customized NIA web-pages built using that template.

In general, the web-page is spatially divided into three sub-sections: firstly, the name and a brief introduction to the guesthouse and its owners, with a photograph of its façade at the top; secondly, six photographs projecting detailed images of *nongjiayuan* facilities including different kinds of guestrooms, dining area, Karaoke room, and official titles and/or certificates in the middle; and thirdly, a table of textual information about facilities, foods, contact numbers, related tourism and leisure activities, transportation, and price lists. Due to the standardized format and to consultations between villagers, the other seven web pages posted on the same portal site at that time look almost identical apart from minor differences in their

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[11] I interviewed Mr. Gong when he revisited Lotus Pond to update NIA web-pages in April 2006. His revisit is described in the ethnographic anecdote in section 5.

[12] This is not a small sum, given that the monthly salary of hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers in Chinese cities hardly reaches 1,000 RMB.

[13] If my fieldtrips to several different provinces, including Shandong, Zhejiang, Sichuan, and Yunnan, are indicative, the methods through which different tourism portal sites sell NIAs to *nongjiale* guesthouses are basically the same across China.
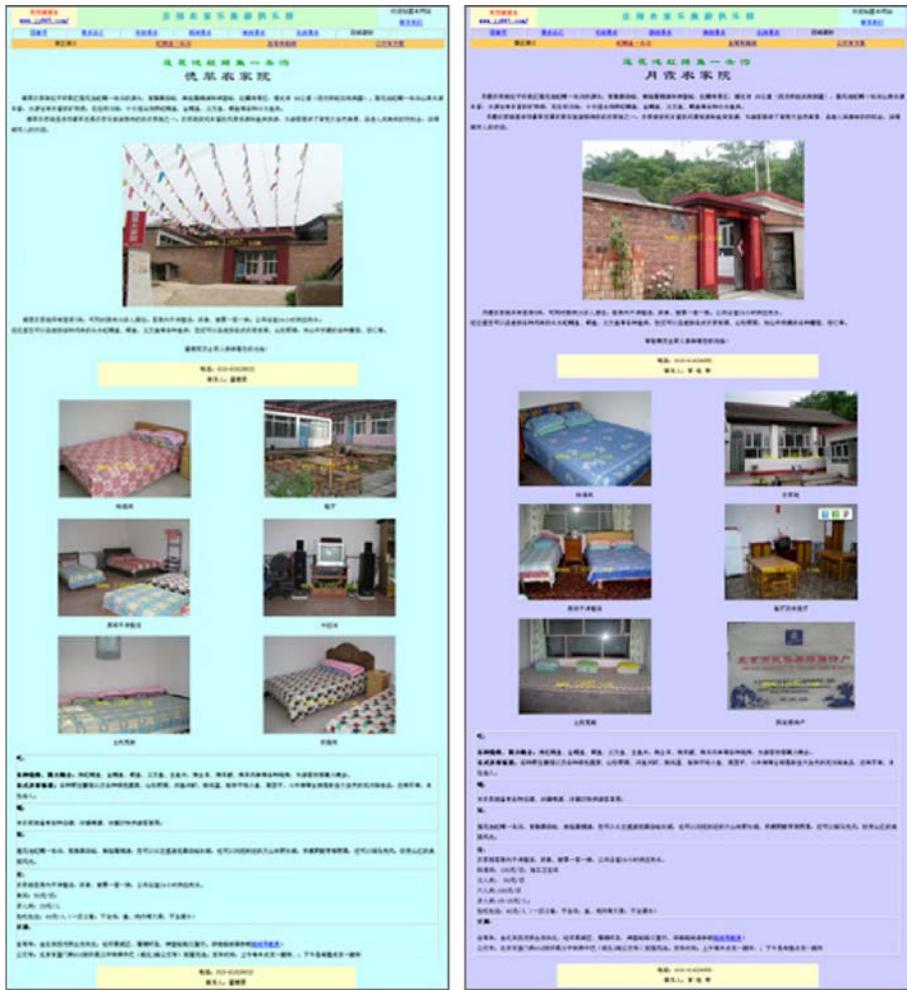
Fig. 1 Examples of Lotus Pond NIA web-pages

details. For example, the title photo at the top may be replaced with one of the inside courtyard, and some of the six photos in the middle may be replaced with those of *nongjiafan* dishes, kitchen, toilet, shower rooms, landscape, etc. These differences no doubt reflect the peasant clients' personal tastes, whims, and business tactics.

A plain content analysis of about 100 NIA web pages collected from ten different *nongjiale* portal sites[14] revealed a significantly similar pattern in the design and

[14] They are http://www.jj667.com; http://www.jxtravel.cn; www.jingjiao.com.cn; www.njlinfo.com; www. njle.com; http://www.nongjiale.org; http://www.njl8.com; www.52njl.com; http://www.njl88.com; and http://www.njynet.com. I presume that there are many hundreds of portal sites specialized in either tourism in general or *nongjiale* tourism in particular posting NIAs, such as http://www.jxnjy.com; www.ajnongjiale. com; www.xanjl.com.cn; http://www.ujj.com.cn; http://www.xiangxia.cn; www.cqnjl.com; http:// www.517njl.com; www.123njl.com; www.njlcn.com; http://www.51njle.com; http://www.ujj.com.cn, and so on. All these tourism portal sites were accessed through Google, Yahoo, and *Baidu* between April 2006 and May 2007.

content of NIA web-pages across China.[15] Of course, the nine NIA web-pages of the Lotus Pond farm guesthouses do not represent all the variations of NIA web-pages in general. Different portal sites configure the space of web-pages in different ways based on the amount of budget spent, the number of pages, the nature of adopted IT technologies, etc.[16] Their contents also vary significantly, reflecting regional and cultural variations of *nongjiale* guesthouses and their different forms and contents of services. Nevertheless, the variations of most NIA web-pages seem to revolve around the general framework exemplified by those of the Lotus Pond guesthouses. My analysis suggests that Lotus Pond NIA web-pages belong to a certain prototype or ideal-type of NIAs out of which both simpler and more elaborate versions diverge, and whose dominant characteristics are commonly shared by NIAs in general.

Analysis shows that the specific contents of NIA web-pages tend to cluster around seven general categories reflecting both the practical considerations of effective advertising and the destination images of *nongjiale* tourism: (1) food and drink (*chi* and *he*); (2) lodging facilities (*zhu*); (3) leisure and tourism activities (*wan'r*); (4) introduction of hosts and their welcoming comments; (5) landscape and surrounding natural and cultural environments; (6) practical information such as *nongjiale*'s location, transportation, contact numbers and price lists; and (7) official titles and/or certificates from local governments. Although they sometimes overlap and their borders become blurry, each of these categories, according to the Chinese people whom I interviewed, carries multiple layers of cultural values integral to *nongjiale* tourism discourses and practices offline. Table 1 succinctly displays what kinds of cultural values each of the seven categories respectively carries in their representation of *nongjiale*'s destination images.

The table first of all reveals that two discursive systems, each saturated with a distinct bundle of cultural values, are competing over the virtual space of NIA web-pages: one is rurality and the other is urbanity, urbanity being conflated with modernity within the cultural hierarchy of China as I briefly discussed at the beginning. The signifiers of nature, authenticity, healthy lifestyles, greenness, simplicity, traditions, family, home, and familial intimacy converge upon rurality, while those of convenience, modern comfort, urbanity, and hygiene constitute modernity. The coexistence of these two competing discursive systems is not exclusively characteristic of China's NIA web-pages; it is widely observed in various online representations of rural tourism in Euro-American societies as well. However, the power dynamics between the two discursive systems in NIAs are significantly different from those in Euro-American contexts. Online representations of rural tourism in Euro-American societies are centered primarily on what is imagined as rurality in the societies, while the signifiers of modernity play no more than supplementary roles in constituting imageries of comfortable

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[15] Although the analysis was limited to only ten portal sites, its result can be extended to NIA in general because many of these portal sites post, or set up links to, the web-pages advertising *nongjiale* farm guesthouses across China.

[16] The IT technologies that they use keep being updated rapidly with the adoption of new multi-media tools such as flash banners and real player AV presentations.

Table 1 Cultural values projected in NIA web pages

Categories of contents	Projected cultural values	Format
1. Foods and drinks: *Nongjiafan*	Rusticity, greenness[a], wildness, hygiene, home, family, authenticity, tradition, simplicity, healthy lifestyles	Texts and images
2. Lodgings: *Nongjiayuan*	Convenience, modern comforts, urbanity, hygiene, rusticity, family, home, authenticity, tradition, healthy lifestyles	Texts and images
3. Leisure and tourism activities	Greenness, healthy lifestyles, convenience	Texts and images
4. Introduction of hosts and their welcoming comments	Authenticity, peasants, simplicity, kindness, family, familial intimacy	Predominantly texts and very rarely images
5. Landscape and surrounding environments	Greenness, wildness, rusticity, traditions, authenticity, hygiene	Texts and images
6. Practical information	Convenience, modern comforts, urbanity	Texts and images
7. Official titles and certificates	Symbolic value of state sanction	Predominantly images and very rarely texts

[a] It is translated from the Chinese word "*lüse*." It constitutes such terms as "*lüse shipin*" (green foods) and "*lüse huanjing*" (green environment) which have been incorporated into both popular and official lexicons within and beyond the context of *nongjiale* tourism, with the advent of environmentalist discourses in Chinese society today. It was generally during the second half of the 1990s that environmentalist ideas, expressed through such words as "*shengtai*" (eco- or ecology), "*huanjing*" (environment), "*lüse*," "*huanbao*" (protection of environment) and NGOs began to permeate China's popular and official discourse (see Weller 2006: 56, 70; Yang 2005; Ho 2001)

accommodations.[17] But in NIA web-pages markers of modernity significantly eclipse those of rurality in terms of both their relative distribution and frequency of presence.

The characteristics of NIA web-pages become much clearer when they are juxtaposed with those of *nongjiale* tourism venues and practices offline. Among others, two significant differences emerge from this juxtaposition. Firstly, the relatively balanced power relations between modernity and rurality in *nongjiale* tourism offline become visibly tilted toward modernity in its online representation. Secondly, peasant hosts and their cultural identities as icons of family and familial intimacy, which play pivotal roles in offline venues of *nongjiale* tourism, are largely downplayed or completely absent in NIA web-pages. This is especially so in the case of photographic images as seen in category 4 of Table 1. Such texts as "*zhuren shi zhenzhengde nongmin*" (the hosts are authentic peasants), "*jiaren yiyang jiedai nimen*" (receiving you like a family), and "*dao jiade ganjue*" (feeling of arriving home) are occasionally present. But photographic images projecting them are almost entirely absent. The minimal presence or absence of the images of the peasants hosts and their romanticized cultural identities in NIA web-pages are another significant difference that distinguishes *nongjiale* online representations from those of Euro-American sites, where they are highly visible and crucial players, if not dominant or central (see Appendix 2).

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[17] Because of different historical experiences and socio-economic situations, different societies imagine rurality in significantly different ways. One example would be that the themes of "landed gentry-class lifestyles" are salient in Euro-American cases while those of "small-holding peasant lifestyles" are prevalent in China.

To summarize, NIA web-pages are largely characterized by the relatively dominant presence of modernity and the relative absence of the images of the peasant hosts and their cultural identities. Table 2 presents the characteristics of the online representation of *nongjiale* tourism compared with its offline counterpart in terms of the power dynamics between rurality and modernity.

4 *Nongjiale* Tourism Online and Offline

The dominance of modernity in NIA web-pages is echoed in many features of *nongjiale* tourism offline, especially the architecture of farm guesthouses, *nongjiayuan*. At first glance, the architecture of *nongjiayuan* seems to be characterized by its spatial hybrids of rurality and modernity. On the one hand, most *nongjiale* farm guesthouses are embellished with various markers of rustic farmhouses such as bundles of dried corn ears or red peppers hung here and there on the wall, a small vegetable garden at the center of the courtyard, some old agricultural tools or household artifacts displayed in some eye-catching spots, and (in north China) one or two rooms furnished with *kang*.[18] These material fragments of rural lifestyles signal to urban tourists to varying degrees such cultural codes as rusticity, greenness, healthy lifestyles, and tradition. On the other hand, as projected in NIA web-pages, most *nongjiale* farm guesthouses look more like an urban-style house or mansion than ordinary farmhouses generally observed in rural China (see Appendix 3). They are furnished with an array of modern facilities including private showers, 24-h hot running water, flush toilets, air-conditioning, luxurious beds, and fancy electrical consumer products, most of which are generally absent in China's average farmhouses.[19]

As in the case of NIAs, architectural hybridity of this kind is not exclusive to China's *nongjiale* tourism but also characterizes rural tourism throughout the world (see Taylor 1997; Cloke 1993; Roberts and Hall 2001, 2004). This presumably reflects a transnational belief that, even if rural tourists are looking for something "authentically" rural in farm guesthouses, they would not tolerate a complete absence of modern comforts and hygiene. This holds completely true in the case of *nongjiale* tourism, where peasant hosts seek to attract more customers by offering spaces that cater to their ambivalent desires: for romanticized rural lifestyles on the one hand, and for comfortably modernized and sanitized accommodations on the other. Here again, what makes the Chinese *nongjiale* guesthouse special is the power relations between rurality and modernity embodied in its space. While the architectural style of farm guesthouses mostly revolves around rurality in Euro-American contexts, the space of *nongjiale* guesthouses is largely dominated by markers of modernity, leaving only a few minor traces of rurality.

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[18] The *kang* is a raised platform bed which can be heated from underneath and is generally used in north China for winter heating (see the article by Mareile Flitsch). Although it is still widely used in rural areas, most urban Chinese people associate it with rusticity and the past. Because it is usually built of mud and mud bricks, they also call it "*tukang*" (mud *kang*).

[19] See the article by Xiujie Wu. By this criterion, farm guesthouses in Lotus Pond are relatively less urbanized versions of *nongjiayuan*.

Table 2 Characteristics in NIAs' representation of *nongjiale* tourism

Discursive systems	Contexts	Online	Offline
Rurality	Nature, wildness, greenness, healthy lifestyles, authenticity, etc.	Prevalent	Prevalent
	Family, home and familial intimacy	Supplementary (texts) or absent (images)	Central
Modernity	Convenience, modern comforts, hygiene	Dominant	Prevalent

   The dominance of urbanity and modernity in the architecture of *nongjiayuan* is an obvious paradox within the broader thematic formulation of *nongjiale* tourism. So it is not surprising that quite a few urbanite guests complain about the "over-urbanization" (or over-modernization) of farm guesthouses, as in the following comment made by a customer from downtown Beijing during my interview.

> I am completely disappointed with the style of the house. It does not look like a *nongjiayuan* (farmhouse) at all. If I wanted to stay in this kind of modernized guestroom (*xiandaihuade kefang*), I would go to one of the *dujiacun*[20] or hotels in this valley. Or I would stay in one of the fancy hotels downtown rather than travel all the way from the city to stay in this hotel-like guestroom. Even that might not be necessary. I would not come out at all because my apartment is much fancier and better in quality and design than hotel guestrooms. When we come out here, we want to experience a relatively authentic rural lifestyle (*bijiao didaode nongcun shenghuo*).… Do you think we come here because we cannot afford a *dujiacun* or hotel? No, not at all! It's not a matter of money.

   What is interesting is that, despite the high frequency of complaints about over-urbanization, most peasant entrepreneurs whom I interviewed within and beyond Lotus Pond village showed a strong desire to renovate or completely reconstruct their guesthouses in still more urbanized styles. A guesthouse owner's future business plan symptomatically reveals this desire.

> When I earn some more money with this (guesthouse), I will construct a multi-story building (*loufangzi*) with tens of guestrooms. And I will fill all the rooms with a lot of stuff (*hao duo dongxi*) such as air conditioners, private toilets and showers, big TV sets, and Karaoke machines. Then I think I can earn "big money (*daqian*)." With this present single-story house (*pingfang*) I cannot make much money.

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[20] This is a Chinese translation of the English term "vacation village" which must have been introduced into China by tourism management experts. It is another type of accommodation facilities having rapidly spread in China's countryside over the last two decades. They are distinguished from *nongjiale* guesthouses in terms of their scale of business, their ownership, and the tourism experiences that they provide. They are usually much larger in scale than typical *nongjiale* guesthouses and owned primarily by outsiders or local elites who can hardly be categorized as peasants. But sometimes, because of the blurry dividing line between these two different types of accommodations, a big *dujiacun* names itself *nongjiale* to appropriate the popularity of *nongjiale* tourism and serves *nongjiafan*. Meanwhile, the term *dujiacun* is also used to designate a *nongjiale* tourism village as a whole like in the case of *Lianhuachi minsulüyou dujiacun* (Lotus Pond folk-tourism vacation village).

His reasoning, that more modernized accommodations will attract more customers and thereby bring more money, is predominant among most *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs. Whether this reasoning is correct depends on the extent to which the quantity and quality of physical facilities determine the volume of business of farm guesthouses. I found in my field research that they were no more than part of the many factors that influence the business turnover of farm guesthouses. Quite a few farm guesthouses with relatively poor facilities were very successful in their business, while some with a full array of modern comforts did very slow business, or were on the verge of bankruptcy. This implies that the degree to which peasant entrepreneurs desire to instill modernity and urbanity in the space of their guesthouses might be far beyond what is actually necessary.

Based on this line of judgment, some urbanite guests comment on this "peasant way of thinking" (*nongminde xiangfa*) in patronizing terms:

> If they had preserved some more rustic qualities in their *nongjiayuan* instead of getting rid of them completely, they could have attracted many more customers. They just don't know what we city people want. We are not that *jiangjiu* (fastidious about facilities and hygiene)….. Many of us are from the countryside. It [the lack of modern comforts and hygiene] is not a big issue. ….. This peasant way of thinking is just a sign of their low quality (*suzhi di*). They don't know what management is!

Is the over-urbanization of farm guesthouses really a symptom of "peasant stupidity" or their "low degree of *suzhi* (quality)" with which many urbanite guests associate their peasant hosts? Or, to put things more fairly, is it a vector of their "moral economy," a concept that James Scott (1976) contrived to explain the socio-cultural embeddedness of the seemingly irrational economic behavior of peasants? Or is it a symptom of the "rational peasants" conceptualized by Samuel Popkin (1979) to challenge Scott's moral peasants? The question requires us to delve into the underlying socio-cultural forces that have led to the "over-urbanization" of *nongjiale* farm guesthouses and the general predominance of modernity in *nongjiale* tourism both online and offline. Here I look briefly at the broader socio-cultural and politico-economic landscape out of which *nongjiale* tourism has emerged.

Rurality is the very material and symbolic vehicle of rural tourism and it cannot exist without its conceptual counterpart, urbanity (Roberts and Hall 2001, 2004). Just as modernity presupposes its temporal Other, tradition, so urbanity assumes rurality as its spatial Other, and vice versa. Sometimes converging and at other times diverging, these two bundles of dichotomy have been crucial discursive forces that have informed the social construction of rural-urban fault-lines not only in contemporary China but also in the modern world in general. Rural tourism in a specific society emerges out of a particular construction of rural-urban fault-lines in that society (*ibid*). As a matter of course, if *nongjiale* is the Chinese version of rural tourism, it should be approached from the specificities of the social construction of rural-urban fault-lines in China.

Like most other post-socialist and post-colonial societies, clear rural-urban distinctions have been a crucial vehicle of modernization and development and thereby a significant source of inequality in which the minority urban population has enjoyed highly visible social, cultural, and economic privileges at the cost of the

rural majority in contemporary China (Cohen 1993; Meisner 1982; Potter and Potter 1990; Whyte 1996). As is widely known, the rural Chinese population has been ideologically identified with a stigmatized past through the dominant discourse of anti-traditionalism; furthermore it has been institutionally incarcerated in "backward" rural localities through the household registration system (*hukou*) (Potter and Potter 1990; Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001). Of course, this process has been articulated with the political economy of the urban biased economic development and modernization projects carried out by the socialist party-state since the 1949 Socialist Revolution (see Whyte 1996; Meisner 1982; Chen 1999).

With this conflation of identity politics, institutional apparatuses and political economy, innumerable negative stereotypes have been applied to the rural population and rural localities. An indicative example is the stigma carried by the words, "*nongmin*" (peasants) and "*nongcun*" (countryside). In China the general public, intellectuals, and policy makers alike commonly use the words to epitomize backwardness and underdevelopment, and associate them with the lack of "*suzhi*" (quality). As Ann Anagnost (2004) points out, the attributed absence of *suzhi*, associated with the bodies of both peasants in rural areas and rural migrant workers in cities, has been a crucial vector of what she calls "the corporeal politics of quality" which reproduces and underpins the unequal value exchanges between the rural and the urban in post-Mao China (see also Yan 2003).

Modernity, however it may be defined, has triumphed in contemporary China, and its absence is superimposed on peasant bodies and rural localities, constructing them as its "backward Other." If Maoist China[21] conducted this "modernist" agenda under ultra-leftist political campaigns for "socialist revolution" and "socialist construction," post-Mao China has carried it out under the slogans of "*chengshihua*" (urbanization), "*chengxiang yitihua*" (rural–urban unification), "*nongmin zhifu*" (peasants' getting rich), "*jianshi shihuizhuyi xinnongcun*" (building a socialist new countryside), and, when it comes to the realm of IT, "*nongcun xinxihua*" (rural informatization).[22] Of course, the socialist party-state has always been the central player in this modernist politico-economic and cultural agenda.

In this process, China's rurality has been constructed from two ambivalent layers. The first is a romanticized layer carrying the signifiers of countryside idyll, greenness, healthy lifestyles, simplicity, family, home, and familial intimacy, etc., and the other is a stigmatized layer carrying those of stupidity (*ben*), underdevelopment (*bugou fazhan*), backwardness (*luohou*), lack of civilization (*meiyou wenming*), low degree of cultural quality (*suzhi di*), low education (*wenhua shuiping di*), and lack of hygienic mentality (*meiyou weisheng guannian*) or dirty (*zhang*). Naturally, the peasant bodies and rural localities involved in *nongjiale* tourism have become saturated with both the positive and negative signifiers of rurality. Although those negative signifiers are not visible on the "front stage" of *nongjiale* tourism due

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[21] Ironically, Chinese peasants and rural localities during the Maoist era were also idealized and romanticized respectively as the vanguard and the site of revolution.

[22] Here, the two slogans, *chengshihua* and *chengxiang yitihua*, particularly signal the extent to which urbanity has become synonymous with modernity in the discourse of modernization and development in post-Mao China.

to the romantic idealization of rural lifestyles, they certainly play a significant role in its "back stage."[23] Given this ambivalent construction of China's rurality and the forces of modernist discourse imposed upon them, the peasant entrepreneurs cannot but try to saturate their guesthouses with modernity. To a certain degree, by internalizing the negative discursive formation of their cultural identities, they willingly attempt, successfully or not, to carry out the modernist agendas of Chinese society and proactively urbanize (and modernize) their bodies and dwellings (guesthouses).

At this point, it becomes clear that it is both the peasant entrepreneurs' commercial rationality, and the weight of modernist discourse imposed upon peasant bodies and rural places, that together have led to the dominance of modernity in both offline and online contexts of *nongjiale* tourism. Certainly, the high visibility of official titles and certificates in NIAs (Category 7 in Table 1) indicates the central role that the socialist party-state plays in the flood of modernist discourse. In this sense, it can be argued that the *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs are simultaneously "moral" and "rational" peasants.

However, this still cannot explain the fact that the relatively balanced power relations between modernity and rurality in *nongjiale* tourism venues and practices offline become visibly tilted toward the former in NIAs. Neither can it capture the selective process of online representation in which some signifiers of rurality, especially those of peasant bodies and their cultural identities, are largely downplayed or absent, and, at the same time, some others such as those of greenness, healthy lifestyles, and authenticity, generally remain intact in NIA web-pages. This issue has to be addressed in terms of the micro-processes of *nongjiale* tourism practices and their discursive milieus.

According to my ethnographic research in Lotus Pond, only a tiny portion of customers (no more than 5%) visit guesthouses after conducting web searches. The great majority of customers (about 70%) get to know of, and visit, a specific guesthouse through introductions from family members, friends or colleagues. Other offline media, including the street touting, signboards and scribbles on rock faces which I mentioned earlier, also play a substantial role (about 25%) in attracting urbanites who casually hunt for guesthouses on the scene. Of course it is possible, given the high fever of "*nongmin zhifu*" (peasants' getting rich) in Lotus Pond village in particular and rural China in general, that competition over 5% of the customers might be a strong enough economic incentive for peasant entrepreneurs to eagerly upload their guesthouses online. However, seeing that the intimate, long-term, and, borrowing from their own expression, "family-like" (*jiaren yiyang*) host–guest relationships operate as a crucial pivot of *nongjiale*'s appeal to its customers, NIAs' advertising effects *per se* may not be as important as they appear to be.[24]

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[23] Borrowing from Erving Goffman, Dean MacCannell (1999: 91 – 107) uses the terms "front" and "back" to address the staged-ness of modern tourism. See also Erik Cohen's (1988) article.

[24] I found that on average more than 60% of customers in Lotus Pond (ranging from 30% to 90% in different guesthouses) are *huitouke* (returning customers), and the better the business of a guesthouse, the higher the percentage.

Then what explains the high tide of going online among *nongjiale* guesthouse owners? The following ethnographic anecdote delivers some clues to this question.

> One evening in mid April 2006, Mrs. Wang (56), one of my key informants and the owner of the *nongjiale* guesthouse where I stayed most of the time during my fieldwork in the village, asked me if I could take some pictures of her guesthouse, telling me that in a week the web-master salesman Mr. Gong was going to visit the village to renew the contracts with his clients. Early that afternoon he had called his clients to tell them to prepare some photos if they wanted to replace any in the existing web-pages. Like most other guesthouse owners in the village Mrs. Wang didn't even have a cheap film camera, let alone a digital camera. I was excited because this might be a good chance to get research cooperation from some guesthouse owners whom I had not yet been able to interview. "Of course, Yes! I can definitely help you. Let's do it tomorrow! Why don't you tell some other people that I can help them too?" I merrily replied.
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> The next morning, around ten o'clock, five villagers gathered in Mrs. Wang's courtyard to take me to their guest houses one by one. Starting with Mrs. Wang's guesthouse, I took dozens of photos for each guesthouse with my Olympus C-5060 digital camera. Having spent about nine months already in the village, I had accumulated a fair knowledge about the workings of *nongjiale* tourism. Part of it was that most urbanite customers cared a lot about the signifiers of "authentic" rural lifestyles, staged or not, including not only rustic facilities and foods but also the very personal, intimate, and "family-like" relationship with the hosts. This knowledge led me to the belief that their existing NIA web-pages did not well represent the core themes of *nongjiale* tourism and thereby failed to cater for the customers' concerns. Based on this idea, in addition to photographing physical facilities such as guestrooms, Karaoke machines, toilets (they call them *weishengjian* meaning "hygiene room"), and shower rooms, I tried to direct my camera lens to the objects that I thought nicely signified *nongjiale*'s "authentic" themes, such as old agricultural tools, bunches of dried corn ears hung here and there, disintegrating stone-mud fences covered with dry weeds, and most importantly, the human figures of the owners and their families. After taking more than 150 photos total, I returned to my place with them to show the photographs through my computer screen so that they could choose the best among them. Because it was already lunch time, Mrs. Wang quickly fixed some noodle dishes for us. While they were eating the noodle, I brought out my laptop and opened it on the dining table, and "proudly" showed them the photographs.
>
> Admiring the wonder of the technology and the colorful images on the computer screen, they picked out the photographs that they wanted to post in their web-pages. To my disappointment, however, none of them chose my "masterpieces", taken as what I considered icons of rusticity. All their choices were the pictures that mechanically projected the "urbanized" image of their facilities. "Why don't you choose some photos of yourselves?" I asked them. "How can we put our own photos there? That will **look really ugly** (*kending*

buhaokan)!" they shouted all together, as if they had rehearsed this many times. I tried to convince them based on my "professional" knowledge about *nongjiale* tourism. "If you post some photos like this (designating an image of an owner couple), the advertising impact will be much stronger. And if you include this kind of photo (an image of an old agricultural tool), city people will like that." Nevertheless, my "amateur business counseling" did not work at all. I was surprised to hear them say, "Not so many customers see [the web-pages] anyway. We just think that way [having web-pages filled with the images of urbanized facilities] is **pretty** (*piaoliang*). We just like it that way." Thinking my persuasion was of no use, I finally showed them a sign of surrender. "Okay, then let's do it as you wish!" At that moment, one of them triggered a general burst of laughter by joking to me: "We peasants are **not pretty enough** (*women nongmin bugou piaoliang*) [for the web-pages]!" So my "masterpieces" did not get a chance to début in NIAs, since the peasant "art critics" did not rate them highly. Luckily, however, they at least wanted to keep all of them for their family albums. I burnt two CDs separately for them: one for the web-pages and another for their family albums. Of course the first CD was filled with the images of "*chengshihua*" (urbanization).

Although this anecdote offers only a few tiny details of the complex universe of *nongjiale* tourism practices and its surrounding discourses offline, it reveals some critical points that illuminate what NIAs actually mean for these peasant entrepreneurs, and why the images of modernity are more dominant online than offline. First of all, the anecdote shows that, although those peasant entrepreneurs are also well aware of the low degree of NIAs' advertising effects, they don't really care ("Not so many customers see [them] anyway"). This suggests that they certainly do not adopt NIAs simply for the technical utility of the Internet as a high-tech medium of advertising that will enable them to appeal to customers' "fastidious" concern for modern comfort and hygiene. Secondly, the villagers seem to have a particular aesthetics according to which images of urbanity (or modernity) would be "pretty" and those of their bodies and the "authentic" rusticity of their guesthouse "not pretty" on their NIA web-pages. And obviously this aesthetic criterion also explains why they don't want to post photographic images of themselves on NIA web-pages. This again implies that they think the virtual space of NIAs is primarily for modernity, whose beauty can be contaminated by the "ugly facets" of rurality signified by the "not pretty enough" images of their bodies and the "authentic" rusticity of their guesthouses. Interestingly, however, this peasant aesthetics is reversed when it comes to the offline practice of collecting and displaying photographs in farm guesthouses.

I occasionally noticed one or more photo frames hung on the wall near the gate of farm guesthouses or in their main halls used for Karaoke and/or as dining rooms. These frames are mostly filled with photographs of human figures including owner couples, their family, and customers.[25] Sometimes official titles or hygiene certificates (*weisheng xukezheng*) are posted together with the photographs or hung

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[25] Some of my photographs of the guesthouse owners and their families in Lotus Pond were posted in this kind of photo frame.

in a separate frame side by side (see Fig. 2). At first glance, they do not look very different from the family photo frames placed on, or hung over, the long side table in the main living room of the average farmhouse in rural China. But in terms of their functions and the symbolic meanings they carry, they are significantly different. Wherever they are hung or placed, the primary viewers of the photo frames in farm guesthouses are not only the owners' family but also their urbanite guests.

When customers arrive, peasant hosts often receive them outside and usher them into the courtyard. If all the customers, or some of them, are new, the peasant hosts usually take them on a short tour inside the guesthouse, advertising the greenness and authenticity of the foods, the hygienic quality of the guestroom, bedding, toilet, and shower, the authenticity of their "peasantness," and so on. In the short tour, they occasionally take the customers to the photo frames and proudly introduce them,

Fig. 2 Photo frames in *nongjiale* guesthouses

pointing out who in the photographs are their sons or daughters or grandchildren, what they do for their living, how long a certain person in a photo has been their customer, which customer is now like their own family, and so on.

What is noteworthy here is that, unlike the virtual space of NIA web-pages where those peasant entrepreneurs hesitate to post their own images thinking that they are "not pretty enough," they willingly present their photographic images to their customers in this kind of offline context, which implies that here they may actually think they are "pretty enough" to show off. Furthermore, they are not just simply presenting the images of their "pretty" bodies to the customers. Rather, by presenting those photographs, they proactively advertise themselves as "authentic peasants", using the photographs as signifiers of family-like intimacy and home-like comfort, a basis for establishing family-like relationships with their guests. This is certainly part of their business strategy to capture more customers by manipulating their cultural identities as projected by the urbanites. So why do their bodily images, which they want to eliminate from their NIAs because they are "not pretty enough," suddenly become "pretty enough" to be utilized for their business?

The answer to this question is again articulated with the ambivalent construction of China's rurality and peasants' cultural identities. As I briefly discussed earlier, the villagers' peasant bodies simultaneously carry "romantic" and "stigmatized" images of China's rurality. The images that they manipulate or "show off" here in offline contexts are not the latter "ugly" one, but the former romantic one that their urbanite customers in particular and Chinese society in general have projected on their bodies under the rubric of "*didao*"or "*zhenzheng*" (authentic). In this sense, they are very effectively "staging" or "acting" their authenticity and cultural identities to their customers.[26] At this point, one might want to ask the question of why they don't do the same thing in NIAs. This should be explained in terms of two interrelated factors: one is the implications of the Internet to the peasant entrepreneurs and the other is the nature of communication media used to project their cultural identities.

Firstly, as I pointed out above, NIAs are adopted not only for their technical utility for advertising but also for their signification of the modernity that the peasant

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[26] This line of staging authenticity and cultural identities can be observed in many aspects of *nongjiale* tourism processes. An example is the staging of green and organic qualities of *nongjiafan* (peasants' home-made meals) served in farm guesthouses. In Lotus Pond, many guesthouses provide a dish of assorted fresh vegetables to *nongjiafan* diners. Although this item is not usually in the menu book and thereby not charged for, it has important symbolic roles to saturate *nongjiafan* table with the image of freshness, greenness, and healthy lifestyles. To highlight the authentic qualities of the vegetables, peasant hosts often intentionally collect them from their courtyard garden right in front of the diners' eye and proactively advertise the qualities of freshness and greenness when they serve the dish. Thus, most diners tend to believe that not only the assorted fresh vegetables but also all other vegetables used to cook *nongjiafan* are fresh and organic. However, those qualities are more or less staged by the peasant hosts in that the vegetables used to cook various *nongjiafan* dishes are not all from the courtyard garden or neighboring farm households. Actually, more than half the amount of the vegetables used for *nongjiafan* dishes is purchased from mobile vendors from the city and thereby they are not necessarily more fresh and organic than those that the city people purchase from urban market places.

entrepreneurs are eagerly yearning for. As many researchers have suggested, both the socialist party-state of China and capitalist market economic forces have facilitated and promoted the spread of the Internet as a crucial technological catalyst for modernization and economic growth in China (e.g. Tai 2006; Zhou 2006; Kang 2004; Yang 2003). The slogan of "*xinxihua*" (informatization) is ubiquitous in both popular and official discourses to which those peasant entrepreneurs are exposed on a daily basis, not only through the state-affiliated media, but also through the official line of the Communist Party organization whose tentacles still reach into every nook and corner of society. In this vein these peasants, who incessantly experience the superimposition of modernity over their bodies and places in their everyday life, naturally approach the Internet as the most up-to-date technical wonder, radiating the powerful symbolic forces of modernity. This is why the peasant entrepreneurs often boast about their guesthouses' going online to customers, as if the simple fact of going online signified the "modern-ness" of their bodies and places.

Secondly, it seems that photographic images serve different functions than texts in their projection of peasant hosts' cultural identities on NIA web-pages. As seen in Table 2, the cultural identities of the peasant hosts are registered through such texts as "*jiaren yiyang jiedai nimen*" (receiving you like a family) and "*dao jiade ganjue*" (feeling of arriving home). But with a few minor exceptions (in only three cases out of one hundred),[27] there is hardly any trace of the hosts in the photographic images in NIA web-pages. The peasant entrepreneurs may regard the textual format as a safer medium of communication for projecting the romanticized facets of their cultural identities while simultaneously avoiding disclosure of the "not pretty enough" facets. Their choice of texts as the major communicative medium makes sense given that the photographic images might be easily interpreted by the urbanite spectators as the signifiers of "ugly," "uncivilized," and "backward" peasants in the online contexts. In offline contexts, on the other hand, the images can be backed up by the "staging" or "acting" of family-like, intimate, home-coming-like reception and treatment of the customers. This seems to be why the textual signification of family, home and intimacy is often used in NIA web-pages while their photographic markers, that is, the images of the hosts, are largely absent in that medium.

The peasant entrepreneurs' aesthetics appears to be an important factor that informs the way in which they relate to the Internet. However, the peasant aesthetics is not simply a vector of their passive internalization of the modernist agenda of Chinese society. Rather, the peasant entrepreneurs proactively manipulate the imposed modernity for their own pleasure and symbolic gain. By uploading their guesthouses online, they find substantial pleasure beyond the technical utilities of the

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[27] For example one guesthouse owner, Shan Shuzhi, a national heroine of *nongjiale* tourism in neighboring Guandi village, proudly posts her own photographs in her NIA web-pages. Mrs. Shan has become known nation-wide as a heroic persona of successful peasant entrepreneurship, having been featured in "*Zhifujing*" (The Canon for Getting Rich), a major CCTV program that promotes entrepreneurship. The address of her homepage is http://www.farmunion.cn/nongjiayuan/shengtangyu/shanshuzhi.htm (accessed on May 12, 2007).

Internet. Even though they are not routinely able to see for themselves what their NIA web-pages look like, because they don't own computers to access the Internet, they nevertheless "just think that way is pretty" and "just like it that way". Here the Internet, or more precisely the imagination of the Internet, effectively caters to the peasant entrepreneurs' yearnings for modernity. At the same time, their connection, limited though it is, to the Internet as the powerful icon of "the most up-to-date" modernity provides them with some symbolic capital, or some sense of self-confidence and dignity, in their interactions with urbanite guests who incessantly overwhelm them with their "fastidious" tastes. This seems to be why peasant entrepreneurs eagerly adopt the Internet despite their awareness of its minor effects as advertising.

Susan Sontag elegantly suggested in her seminal work *On Photography* that "to collect photographs is to collect the world" (1977: 3). Here, the peasant entrepreneurs collect photographs online and offline to construct the world that they yearn for, a world saturated with dazzling modernity and urbanity. In this sense, the absence of images of peasant bodies and their cultural identities in NIA web-pages is actually a presence, in the form of the peasant entrepreneurs' hidden yearnings for modernity. Their presence in offline contexts paradoxically reveals that they are actually absent, in the sense that they are largely staged or acted to cater to the urbanite guests' nostalgic yearnings for the romanticized rural lifestyles. Although the earlier discussions already alluded to some clues, one might want to ask: What is the "script" in the peasant entrepreneurs' "use" of the Internet? Who is the writer of the script that informs the design of NIA web-pages? To answer these questions, we need to probe deeper into the characteristics of the peasant "users" and the social milieus in which the script must have been written.

5 "Non-Using Users, Using Non-Users" and China's Mediation Junctions

Lotus Pond *nongjiale* guesthouses have gone online through NIAs for years now, but this does not necessarily mean that many of them actually have a computer station through which they can access the Internet directly. On the contrary, there are only four computer stations in the whole village, two of which are owned by farm guesthouses. One of the other two computers is in the village committee office; the other is owned by a relatively well-off household running a small grocery store in the village. The computer in the village committee office is, according to the villagers, merely a "decoration" (*zhuangshi*) that the township government donated to the village to promote "rural informatization" (*nongcun xinxihua*).[28] It is rarely used because none of the six village committee members

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[28] Using a computer station for this kind of decorative purpose can also be seen in the famous guesthouse owned by Shan Shuzi, mentioned in the previous footnote. A very old computer station, which she got from one of her friends in downtown Huairou, stands in a guestroom in the second floor, but it is not connected to the electric socket. Indeed even the monitor and the main station are still not connected each other, and the keyboard is missing. Shan too refers to the computer as "*zhuangshi*" (decoration).

are computer-literate. The computer in the village shop, however, is actually used for multiple purposes such as making and printing documents, accessing the Internet, and playing multimedia files, not only by the young couple in the household but also by the household head, a man in his late fifties who received a high-school level education, a very exceptional case among the senior villagers who are his peers.

Of the two guesthouses in Lotus Pond equipped with a computer station, only one actually uses the computer for NIAs, relying on the guesthouse owner's high-school graduate son who has a basic knowledge of how to use the computer and the Internet.[29] The owner of the second guesthouse computer station is a young couple from Sichuan Province who moved into the village about 18 months ago and run a guesthouse which they rent by the year from a villager. However, they use the computer not for NIA web-pages but primarily for emails and multimedia entertainments such as computer games and DVD movies. What one can see here is that, although all 23 farm guesthouses in Lotus Pond have been online through NIAs for several years now, only two of them are equipped with a computer station to access the Internet and only one of them actually uses it for managing its own NIA homepage (http://www.slrnjy.com, accessed around March 2006). Except for the two guesthouses that have a cheap computer station and access to the Internet through slow telephone lines, none of the guesthouses in Lotus Pond has the necessary hardware or technical knowledge. The wide range of field trip that I have conducted in the Beijing suburbs and in other provinces indicates that the situation in Lotus Pond is typical of most *nongjiale* tourism sites throughout China.

Discussions in the preceding sections draw largely on the assumption that *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs are somehow users of the Internet. However, this application of the term "users" to the peasant entrepreneurs is problematic to the extent that the term usually connotes the subject's substantial connection and access to a certain technological object or device. As the case of Lotus Pond village illustrates, the computer is still too expensive for most *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs; the knowledge bases that would make them qualified users are simply unavailable to them; and thereby their connections, or what Douglas and Isherwood call "lines of communication" (1996: xiv), to the Internet are so fragmented and ruptured that it is hard to say that they actually "use" it in the literal sense of the term. Yet although it is problematic to identify them as users proper, they are not "non-users" either. As we have seen, they obviously appropriate the Internet for both its sign value and its technical utility for their own goals, even if they are not armed with the necessary technological devices and knowledge

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[29] It is also the only guesthouse in the village which has its own homepage in addition to the kind of NIA web-pages that other guesthouses commonly subscribe to. However the homepage is not very different from other NIA web-pages, just more complicated and sophisticated in design and content. It is not yet furnished with interactive functions that enable online reservation and host-guest communication. At present the owner is only planning to upgrade it. This is also one of the only three NIA web-pages on which the peasant owner's photo images are posted. I assume that he is self-confident enough to do this because his guesthouse was once introduced on a Beijing TV news show. He has captured a still image of himself on the TV show and proudly posted it on the homepage.

bases that would render them users proper. This leads to an interesting paradox: the user is present in the absence of use, and the use is present in the absence of the user.

There has been much scholarly endeavor in current academic circles to refine conceptual tools for effectively deciphering the complex ways in which technology and its use or consumption are engrained in and articulated with culture and society (see Silverstone and Hirsch 1996; Miller 1995; Miller and Slater 2000; Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003; Bray 2007). One of its significant corollaries is the transition of analytic emphasis from "the consumer" to "the user" so as to empower the consuming and/or using subjects with agency and capture their significant diversification in different social-cultural settings. In the process, numerous conceptual tools such as "decoding," "reconfiguration," "domestication," "de-inscription" and "co-construction" have been suggested to illuminate the nuanced interactions between technology and its users and between technology and society (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003).

This pool of analytic concepts may allow us to argue that the Chinese peasant entrepreneurs "decode," "reconfigure," "domesticate," "de-inscribe," or "co-construct" the technology in terms of their appropriation of the Internet for their own purposes. They manipulate the sign values of the Internet as an icon of modernity while using its technical utility "as a bill-board or old-fashioned newspaper advertisement" (Bray, personal communication), leaving aside the interactive functions inscribed by the normative "scripts" or "user scripts" of the Internet. Strictly speaking, however, *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs are not exactly the kind of users who "consume, modify, reconfigure, and resist technology" (Oudshoorn and Pinch 2003: 1), living in a society furnished with a full panoply of technical utilities and knowledge bases. Although these sophisticated conceptual tools were devised to encompass the diversity of users or non-users, and to explore the implications of this diversity for analyzing technology–user relations, it seems that the Chinese peasant users (or non-users) do not really belong in any of these categories. Within the conceptual frameworks of STS they become a sort of self-contradictory subject, that is, "non-using users, using non-users" in terms of their paradoxical connection to the technology. To examine this problem, it is necessary to further extend our attention from the individual peasant entrepreneurs' adoption of the Internet and its immediate venues to the broader dimension of the society they live in.

Despite the low degree of access to computers and the Internet in Lotus Pond, the village committee and the township government tend to take the guesthouses' subscriptions to NIA web services as critical proof of the village's high degree of "*xinxihua*" (informatization) which they report up to the district government of Huairou. Not only through the local TV station and newspaper but also through its official announcements and documents, Huairou district government actively propagates the high degree of "rural *xinxihua*" in the district, based on exaggerated reports from its administrative villages and townships, as a key index of its development and successful modernization. The well-known practice of accumulating national statistics in China requires Huairou figures to be reported upward to "the center" (*zhongyang*) by way of Beijing city government; this process is basically the

same throughout Chinese society. Based on exaggerated statistical data collected from innumerable localities, the Chinese central government maneuvers all possible media into announcing an increasing degree of "rural *xinxihua*", along with the development of *nongjiale* tourism industry, not only as key icons of the development and modernization of rural China but also as a crucial index of the success of political campaigns for "*jianshe shehuizhuyi xinnongcun*" (building a socialist new countryside) which Chairman Hu Jintao and his regime have promoted with passion over the last few years.

Careful observers might be able to see an interesting structural resonance between this political appropriation of the Internet by the Chinese government and its symbolic appropriation by peasant entrepreneurs. In line with the discursive formation of China's modernity, both rely on manipulations of the sign values of the Internet rather than on real uptake of its technical utilities. This resonance between peasants entrepreneurs and the Chinese government must be channeled by what Oldenziel and her colleagues call "mediation junctions," a concept through which they address the significance of "the interaction between the state, the market, and civil society in determining the nature and scope of mediation between production and consumption in Europe" (Oldenziel *et al.* 2005: 120). If China's mediation junctions are the social locus and nexus that inform and mediate the at once ruptured and connected "lines of communication" between the peasant entrepreneurs and what Appadurai (1996) calls "the technoscape" in Chinese society today, the scripts, which direct the Chinese peasants' "use" of the Internet, must have multiple dimensions and layers written by the complex process of crisscrossing and intertwining of numerous socio-economic and politico-cultural forces. Thus, it is first of all necessary to capture the operation of China's mediation junctions by specifying the characteristics of the state, the market, and civil society in China in order to make legible the peasant "non-using users, using non-users" and illuminate the resonance between them and the Chinese government in their connections to the Internet.

This is a very complex project far beyond the scope of this paper and therefore the questions of what the script is and who its writers are in *nongjiale* entrepreneurs' adoption of the Internet cannot be fully addressed here. One thing that is obvious is that "the state, the market, and civil society" in China are significantly different from those in Euro-American consumer societies, and so too is the operation of China's mediation junctions. The series of revolutionary trans-formations that Chinese society has experienced since the collapse of the old imperial regime around the turn of the 19th century and the "semi-post-colonial" formation of modernity in contemporary China must have constituted the mediation junctions in significantly different ways. As many have pointed out, scholarship on the articulation of technology, consumer-user, and society has been largely limited to Euro-American contexts (see Belk 1995; Campbell 1995; Bray 2007). Located primarily in these societies, in their approaches to the issue of consumption and to the technology–user relationship researchers tend to "simply take for granted the material conditions and mental dispositions of a liberal consumer society with all utilities laid on" (Bray, personal communication). It is this Euro-American or "liberal

consumer society" bias in the scholarship that presents significant difficulties in dealing with different kinds of users in different kinds of societies, here exemplified by *nongjiale* peasants entrepreneurs in China.

This being the case, what we urgently need is a more cross-culturally and cross-socially oriented "anthropological imagination" to solve the conundrum of the "non-using users, using non-users" of the Internet in China's *nongjiale* tourism Internet advertisings. Anthropology's methodological relativism and interpretive holism provide a critical perspective attuned to not only different modes of social-cultural formation but also connections and/or disconnections among myriad components and dimensions, both micro and macro, of society and culture (see Peacock 1987). This anthropological perspective may enable us to capture more effectively how deeply and complexly the mundane and daily practices of the consumer-user of technology are embedded in and articulated with the nuanced crisscross and conflation of different social-cultural and political processes in different parts of the world.

6 Conclusion

By exploring the selective representation of destination images and cultural identities of *nongjiale* tourism in NIA web-pages, this paper has made clear that peasant entrepreneurs' involvement with and connection to the Internet and the design of NIA web-pages are complexly articulated with, and informed by, three discursive strands constitutive of contemporary Chinese society: (1) the economic rationality that both the peasant entrepreneurs and web-designers eagerly refer to under the social pressure of "getting rich"; (2) the ambivalent construction of rurality and its unique relations to modernity in China; and (3) the specter of modernity haunting Chinese society in general. We saw that these discursive systems are gate-keepers that control the presence and the absence of the images of peasant bodies and their ambivalent cultural identities in both offline and online venues of *nongjiale* tourism. Complexly intertwined with China's mediation junctions, these discursive systems play a profound role in shaping the interactions between the peasant entrepreneurs and the Internet, and in composing the "user scripts" that inform their involvement with and symbolic appropriation of the Internet.

Many questions still need to be raised and answered concerning Chinese peasants' unique relationship to and interaction with the Internet. The ways in which *nongjiale* peasant entrepreneurs adopt, interpret, and relate to, the Internet quickly change and evolve in line with the shifts in their material conditions and knowledge bases. Although the dazzling speed of social change in China makes it difficult to capture the present and the future of its technoscapes, case studies like this one may provide useful points of reference for extending the theoretical horizon and depth of comparative scholarship on technology–user and technology–society relationships.
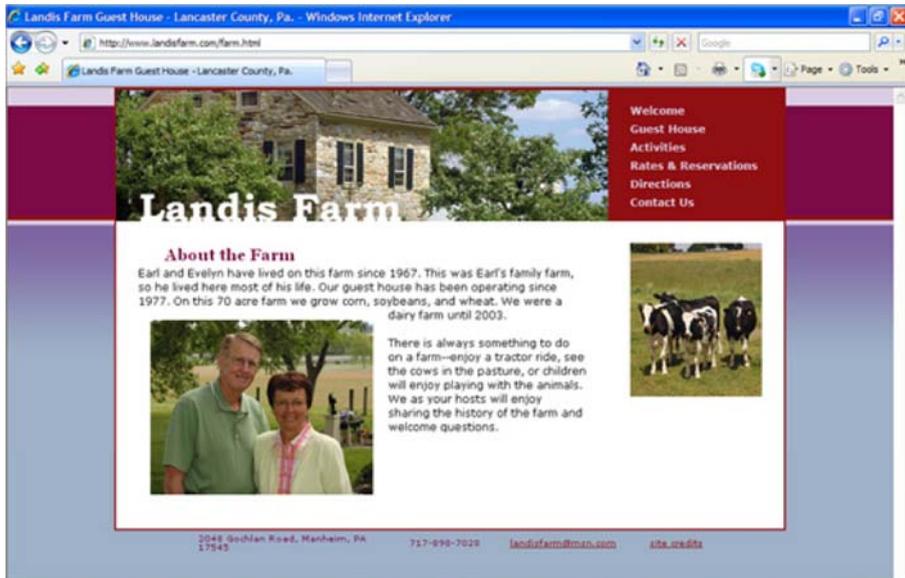
Appendix 1: Offline advertising of *nongjiale* guesthouses

Appendix 2: Farm guesthouse web-pages in Euro-American contexts (accessed June 2007)

Appendix 3: Contrasts between actual farmhouses and *nongjiale* guesthouses

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