

## **Being Creative in the Post-Pandemic World:**

### **Reflections on Preliminary Fieldwork in a Chinese Maker Community**

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During the summer of 2022, I managed to secure regular video chats with people who might identify themselves as local “makers” in Shenzhen, many of whom are acquaintances that I befriended in my mid-20s back in Shenzhen, a period that somehow, with the pandemic and everything else going on in the world, now seems like another lifetime. Dubbed “China’s Silicon Valley of Hardware,” Shenzhen is a burgeoning cosmopolis abutting Hong Kong. As the first “special economic zone (SEZ)” of China that opened itself up to foreign trade and investments in the 1980s, this mega city attracts young and ambitious talents from around the world to pursue their dream in the world’s “Silicon Valley of Hardware.” As part of the “Reform and Opening-up” plan devised by the then-paramount leader DENG Xiaoping, the development of this mega city carries significance in post-Mao China’s modernization. On January 4th, 2015, during his visit to Shenzhen, China’s incumbent Premier LI Keqiang dropped by a “makerspace” (创客空间 chuàng kè kōng jiān) that facilitated tools and machinery for tinkerers and open-source tech enthusiasts who identify themselves as “makers” (创客 chuàngkè). According to news reports by a variety of media outlets, the Premier interacted with robotic arms created by makers there with great interest. “Your creativity and accomplishments have demonstrated the vitality of mass entrepreneurship and innovation,” says Premier Li: “This kind of vitality and creativity will be the ever-running engine for China’s future economic growth!”<sup>1</sup> For those who are well-versed in governmental discourse in China, this particular visit by the Premier gestures a whole new direction that Beijing attempted to take on to stimulate the economy: to encourage technological entrepreneurship by the ordinary people whose projects are being incubated by type of peculiar co-working spaces - the makerspace. This stimulus plan was later on deemed as China’s adaptation of the so-called “Maker Movement” that originated in the U.S.

Ever since that visit, coworking spaces that branded themselves as “makerspace” started to spring up like mushrooms all over the country, partially incentivized by government subsidies and preferential policies. Shenzhen, with its mature supply chain and relatively low labor costs, has been attracting engineers and tech startups from around the world to kick off the pilot run and the subsequent mass production of their products in the factories located on the outskirts of Shenzhen. Venture capitalists started to converge in Shenzhen, on a mission to sniff out the next tech unicorn. The Shenzhen Maker Faire in 2015 marked the highlight of China’s maker movement, attracting attendees from all around the world to come to this city to see and share what is open-source technological innovation promoted by the maker movement. Looking back, the years from 2015 to 2018 seemed to be the prime time for young professionals who quit their day jobs in big corporations and spontaneously devoted themselves to the nationwide momentum of “mass entrepreneurship and innovation,” until the gradual wear-off of this “maker fever” since 2018, compounded by the negative impact of the pandemic on the domestic and global economy, starting from 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://www.szns.gov.cn/bsfw/zfw/kjcx/kjdsj/content/post\\_8133022.html](http://www.szns.gov.cn/bsfw/zfw/kjcx/kjdsj/content/post_8133022.html)

Little did I know back then what it means to be an unknowingly participant-observant of the maker movement. As a 20-something young person back then who dreamed of making waves in the technology industry, I have always been oddly drawn to the story of how the misfits, the rebels, and the underdogs who were once marginalized yet somehow miraculously caught the mainstream's attention - there's something about the identity and lifestyle of being a "maker," living at the edge of neoliberal capitalism that appeals to me. Since 2014, I had the privilege to observe and interact with these techno-utopian subcultural groups in virtual or physical spaces in both China and the US. With the training I received as a sociologist, I started to notice intriguing similarities and differences between the maker culture in China and the U.S. These fascinating universalities and particularities prompted me to seek knowledge, to borrow from Skocpol and Somers (1980), on what and how "unique features affect the working-out of putatively general social processes." That's how this research project started to unfold.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly posed many challenges for ethnographers, especially for those who aim to conduct in-person field research across the Pacific Ocean. Not only do the makers in Shenzhen that I remotely interacted with from New York have to be creative about carrying on their technological innovations and entrepreneurial ventures with the ongoing constant lockdowns and the worsening economy, but I also need to be creative about my own methodology even as we are, hopefully, approaching a post-pandemic world. Being stranded on Manhattan island this summer, I used WeChat, China's most popular social media messaging platform, to virtually attend maker meetups in Shenzhen and conduct preliminary interviews with makers with whom I've already acquainted before coming to New York to pursue my Ph.D. This seeming make-do approach during this summer has actually yielded rich knowledge on the application of an emerging ethnographic methodology - digital ethnography.

Since the mid-20th century, with human civilizations entering into the Information Age, sociologists started to look beyond the physical world and switch their attention to social activities and human interactions in the virtual world (See Robinson and Halle, 2002; Robinson, 2007; Turkle, 2005, 2011; Ikegami, 2017, 2019, 2020). This turn has led to methodological innovations in ethnographic fieldwork, from which emerged the approach of "digital ethnography." This approach, as defined by the sociologist Dhiraj Murthy, consists of "digitally mediated fieldnotes, online participant observation, blogs/wikis with contributions by respondents, and online focus groups" as digital ethnography (2011:159). By teletransmitting myself to maker meetups in Shenzhen from New York through the aid of social media messaging apps, I realize that the norm of our social life and our social relationships have changed in the context of epidemics and of digitalization, and we ethnographers, especially those in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), should adapt and accept that the fact that there's more than one way to engage with social life, of which the digital and the virtual worlds are becoming increasingly the central part.

Where ethnographic methods are concerned, a turn towards gender dynamics started to emerge, corresponding with greater reflexivity with respect to the contexts of knowledge production (Hjorth et al., 2015). In my own attempt at digital ethnography this summer, I constantly notice the detachment generated by my remote presence and the unique lens it offers me to observe the group dynamics of maker meetups. Noticing the lack of female engagement in these meetups, I could not help but wonder why there are so few females active in the tech world. Does it reflect the entrenched gender inequities in our society? I do not want to arbitrarily assume, without long-term in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, that this lack of female participation is simply due to male chauvinism prevalent in male-dominated communities and industries around the world, in which female professionals are oftentimes first and foremost judged by their appearances and sometimes having to endure stereotypes and uncomfortable interactions. I'm fully aware that my identity as a Ph.D. student who studies technology might

inevitably offer me some epistemological credentials to legitimize my virtual presence in these meetups. And I certainly acknowledge that this pattern of lacking female participation has emerged in some tech events here in New York. This remote preliminary fieldwork, I reckon, might not be able to provide me with the embodied experiences and sensory experiences that in-person interactions could offer. Moving forward, I want to go beyond simple stereotypes and convenient claims and truly engage with the subjectivity of my prospective participants to produce invaluable insights about the lives, experiences, environments, and values of these people in a collaborative way. Reflexive practice, considered an ethical practice, will be the pillar of my future fieldwork, be it “digital” or “physical” ethnography. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of my prospective participants, photos will not be shared in this field note.

Another emerging theme I have noticed is that this particular maker community is switching their interest from open-source hardware to the concept of Web 3.0. Losing a regular physical space to work on hardware projects, this grassroots maker community is now facing challenges without external funding to continuing in-person meetups in the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, they are running their community based on blockchain technology, using cryptocurrencies as the incentives for autonomous and decentralized community management, instead of appointing one particular member as its manager. My current hypothesis, to account for this switch of attention, is that apart from concerns of spatial constraints, there exist some commonalities between maker culture and the concepts of Web 3.0, which are decentralized authority and democratized technology.

More long-term ethnographic fieldwork and innovative methodologies will be required for me to dive deeper into this world of makers, to understand how they demarcate alternative ways of being and living in the omnipresent neoliberal capitalist logic in different political regimes based on the techno-utopian promise of open-source and decentralized technologies. I appreciate the support of India China Institute, which allowed me to overcome many challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to continue my research in creative ways.

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