

Reconstructing Interpersonal Ethics in the Digital Urban Society: A Perspective on the “Familiar Strangers” Phenomenon

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Abstract

With the rapid development of information technology, urban interpersonal interactions have gradually shifted from face-to-face engagement to virtual interactions mediated by digital media. In this context, “familiar strangers” are becoming increasingly common in digital urban society. These relationships are often marked by superficial and fragmented interactions, making it difficult to form stable emotional bonds and ethical commitments. Through normative ethical and comparative analysis, this paper examines the underlying logic of this phenomenon from four dimensions, namely virtue ethics, the structure of modernity, traditional Chinese ethics, and the ethics of science and technology. First, the speed of information transmission and the expansion of communication do not necessarily improve the quality of interpersonal relationships. Rather, platformization and the logic of capital have contributed to the instrumentalization and superficiality of interpersonal relations, as well as the erosion of trust. Second, the decline of situational communities has weakened the mechanisms through which virtuous friendships are cultivated, thereby reducing the ethical role of friendship in interpersonal life. Third, the modern transformation of Confucian and Daoist thought can provide a framework and paradigm for rebuilding deeper social connections. Fourth, a technology ethics grounded in “restrictive design,” understood as design that limits addictive, manipulative, or excessively immersive platform mechanisms, and “protection of subjectivity,” understood as the preservation of users’ agency, attention, and capacity for self-direction, can guide platform operators to observe “people-centered” ethical constraints. Based on these discussions, this paper proposes a path for reconstructing interpersonal ethical governance in digital urban society.

Keywords

Digital Urban Society, Familiar Strangers, Interpersonal Ethics

1. “Familiar Strangers” in Urban Spaces: Formation and Ethical Dilemmas

Change often occurs unnoticed. The current information age has brought profound changes to the lives of most people. In particular, the advancement and widespread application of various information technologies have restructured the patterns of human interaction at the level of communication mechanisms. Unlike traditional modes such as postal services and letter-writing, instant messaging enables individuals to exchange information and interact with anyone in a rapid, efficient manner that transcends time and space. In particular, the rise of new technologies such as social media has significantly “amplified” people’s social behaviors, social circles, and public opinion spaces. Science and technology are often a double-edged sword. Increases in scale and efficiency do not necessarily lead to improvements in the quality of interpersonal relationships, and behind this high efficiency lies a series of “new phenomena” in the realm of ethics. Among these, the concept of the “familiar stranger” has become increasingly prominent.

To understand the concept of “familiar strangers”, we must first revisit the notion of a “stranger”, whose defining characteristic is “here today, gone tomorrow”. The so-called “familiarity” actually imbues this relationship with the characteristics of a modern “community of shared destiny”. Therefore, the term “familiar strangers” is used in this article to describe a type of relationship marked by repeated visibility or contact without deep mutual understanding, stable emotional attachment, or clear ethical commitment. More specifically, it includes three related but distinct situations. The first refers to online-only repeated contacts, such as users who frequently encounter, comment on, or follow one another within virtual communities but remain emotionally distant in real life. The second refers to offline acquaintances whose relationships are increasingly maintained through digital media, such as classmates, coworkers, or neighbors who know one another in everyday life but whose interaction remains largely limited to messages, likes, and brief exchanges. The third refers to urban co-presence without meaningful ties, in which people share the same residential area, workplace, campus, or public space but rarely develop sustained communication or mutual responsibility. These three situations differ in their spatial and communicative forms, yet they share a common ethical problem: familiarity exists at the level of visibility, frequency, or information exchange, while genuine understanding, trust, and responsibility remain weak.

Recent studies on digital interaction and platform-mediated relationships provide an empirical background for this concern. Research on weak ties shows that weak connections can expand access to information and opportunities, but they

do not necessarily produce strong emotional bonds or durable ethical commitments (Rajkumar et al., 2022). Studies of online social relationships also suggest that many such relationships are mediated by shared interests, platform functions, and technological infrastructures rather than by stable face-to-face communities (Hatamleh et al., 2023). At the same time, research on social media and trust indicates that trust in online environments is complex and shaped by platform design, perceived authenticity, and users' expectations of others' behavior (Zhang et al., 2023). These studies do not imply that digital interaction is inherently harmful. Rather, they show that the quality of interpersonal relationships depends on whether digital interaction can move beyond repeated visibility and weak connection toward sustained understanding, reciprocity, and trust.

If this trend is not properly addressed, it may give rise to certain social and ethical issues. First, the superficiality of interpersonal relationships may erode social cohesion and the foundation of trust, thereby weakening community solidarity and cooperation. This concern has also been reflected in studies on the decline of American communities (Putnam, 2018). Second, the cultivation of morality at the individual level is weakened, as virtues such as “loyalty, friendship, and honesty” lack the necessary practical contexts of interaction in which they can be honed and internalized. Finally, social models centered on the internet inherently possess a high degree of “anonymity.” At the individual level, people exist in “three states of the online self” (Turkle, 2014). Some individuals exploit this anonymity and escape from reality to exhibit irresponsible behavior, while others find themselves in a “dual experience” or “multitasking state” that straddles the real and virtual worlds. As a result, negative aspects of human nature are objectively magnified, and the development of a sense of responsibility and empathy is compromised. Therefore, how to reconstruct interpersonal relationships with a solid moral foundation in the information age has become an urgent issue that contemporary ethical research must address.

In response to these issues, existing research has analyzed the problem from multiple dimensions and perspectives and proposed corresponding solutions. For example, Cheng Lesong compared Confucian interpersonal ethics with the dislocation of modernity and explored the concept of the “stranger” (Cheng, 2023). Feng Qingxu analyzed the ethical perspectives of a “society of strangers” from the angles of freedom and trust (Feng, 2022). Zhang Hongxia, meanwhile, conducted an in-depth study of the micro-mechanisms of interpersonal interaction from the perspective of the new generation of migrant workers (Zhang, 2019). In recent years, the process of urbanization has led to the disappearance of deep interpersonal connections, making “strangers” the norm in modern life. These strangers exist outside traditional kinship and geographical ties, adhering to different moral codes. Concepts such as “alienation” and “atomization” are often used to describe modern interpersonal relationships, reflecting the gradual disintegration of the traditional “familiar-person society” revealed by Fei Xiaotong.

However, systematic discussions grounded in ethics remain insufficient. Par-

ticularly in the context of the “Two Integrations” policy, which refers to integrating the basic tenets of Marxism with China’s specific realities and with China’s fine traditional culture, there has been limited exploration of how to draw upon China’s excellent traditional culture to identify pathways toward resolution. This paper aims to ground its analysis in “cultural roots,” using traditional Chinese values as a central link and drawing on cutting-edge ethical research to analyze the phenomenon of “familiar strangers” in the information age, while attempting to propose ethical solutions. First, taking virtue as the entry point, this paper analyzes virtuous practices in digital social interactions and the dilemmas they face. Second, drawing on Marx’s theories regarding urban and spatial justice, it explores the deep-seated roots of this phenomenon from the dimensions of social structure, cultural elements, and the logic of capital. Third, by applying the Confucian ethical system and the Daoist concept of the “Way of Nature,” we will explore pathways for reconstructing contemporary interpersonal relationships. Fourth, by introducing a perspective from the ethics of science and technology, we will examine the impact of information technology and fragmented lifestyles on individuals, society, and interpersonal interactions, thereby addressing the construction of the ethics of interaction in the digital age.

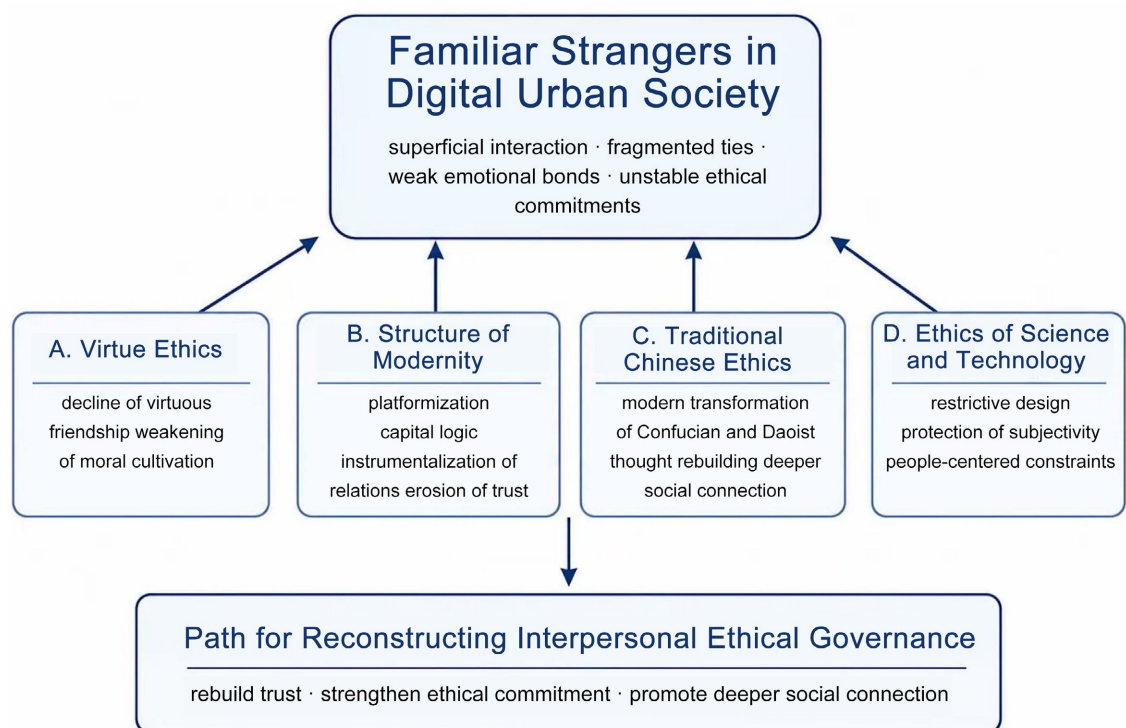


Figure 1. Analytical framework.

Methodologically, this paper adopts normative ethical analysis and comparative analysis. Normative ethical analysis means that the paper does not merely describe the phenomenon of “familiar strangers,” but evaluates it in terms of the quality of interpersonal relations, the cultivation of virtue, the formation of trust,

and the possibility of ethical responsibility. Comparative analysis means that the paper places different ethical traditions and theoretical resources in dialogue with one another. The main texts and traditions compared include Aristotle's virtue ethics, Marx's theory of alienation and critique of modern social relations, Confucian concepts of Ren and Li, Daoist ideas of ziran and wuwei, and contemporary discussions in technology ethics. The comparison is organized around three criteria: how each tradition understands the person, how it explains the formation or weakening of interpersonal bonds, and what normative resources it provides for reconstructing ethical relations. On this basis, the paper first clarifies the concept of "familiar strangers", then diagnoses its ethical problems, compares possible theoretical resources, and finally proposes a multilevel path for ethical reconstruction. The analytical framework of this paper is shown in **Figure 1**.

2. Superficial Interactions and the Erosion of Virtue Cultivation in the Digital Age

Virtue ethics is a crucial theoretical framework for understanding interpersonal interaction and moral cultivation, and Aristotle is an indispensable figure in this field. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he classified virtues into two categories, namely "intellectual virtues" and "moral virtues", emphasizing that the cultivation of moral virtues requires practical training and must be rooted in social life, friendships, and real-world situations that give rise to ethical connections (Aristotle, 2017). The statement "Man is a political animal" fully illustrates the social nature of human beings. To attain the good and happiness, people must live within a healthy community and engage in social interaction with others. "Friendship" plays a crucial role in this process. Friendship in interpersonal relationships not only brings joy to both parties but also promotes the practice of virtue, thereby shaping a social atmosphere of "friendliness" and fostering the community's development toward the good (Zhao, 2023). Aristotle classified friendship into "utilitarian friendship, pleasure-seeking friendship, and virtuous friendship," considering virtuous friendship to be the most perfect. It is founded on mutual appreciation of virtue, character, and conduct, and requires sincere, long-term interaction and companionship. Thus, virtuous friendship constitutes the form of interpersonal relationship with the highest moral value. However, technological innovations in the information age have turned this ideal moral paradigm into something of a "castle in the air." This is because, on the one hand, technology has altered the fundamental patterns of interpersonal interaction, and on the other hand, the digital age is characterized by "acceleration," making superficial interactions the predominant form of social engagement.

Social media has become a vital communication tool in the information age, with platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin boasting hundreds of millions of users. The rise of social media signifies a restructuring of interpersonal relationships. People's social behaviors have shifted, increasingly moving online. Social apps are generally divided into two broad categories, namely "socializing

with acquaintances” and “socializing with strangers.” Platforms like WeChat and Moments, which focus on private networks, belong to the former, while Weibo, Douyin, and others are more firmly rooted in the public sphere of the internet. However, overall, online “friendships” tend to follow a shallow social model characterized by utilitarian, entertainment-oriented, and casual interactions. Even the act of “adding a friend,” which is common in offline social settings, is often based on building professional networks or adhering to social etiquette. Such interactions fall far short of the virtue-based ideal. Fragmentation is a defining characteristic of the Internet information age. People are increasingly drawn to online interactions and instant messaging rather than traditional forms of socializing and engagement. While letter-writing was once a vital means of communication, it has fallen into disuse in the Internet era. This shift in interpersonal interaction patterns has eliminated shared face-to-face contexts, thereby reducing both the opportunities and the motivation to practice virtue. Interpersonal relationships are quantified by the frequency of online interactions such as “likes,” comments, and shares. While these convey certain emotions, they also involve an element of performance, making it difficult to truly foster appreciation, affirmation, and moral understanding. Over time, individuals’ moral sensitivity and understanding of virtue will decline, and interpersonal interactions will become increasingly superficial.

Second, human nature has two sides and requires appropriate restraint and guidance. Superficial digital interactions may foster negative tendencies in human nature and are not conducive to the cultivation of moral values and virtues. The virtual online environment easily induces excessive self-presentation, which runs counter to the virtues of humility and prudence. Although efforts to implement real-name registration on the internet are steadily advancing, the internet’s inherent tendency toward anonymity, coupled with the fast-paced nature of digital social mechanisms, erodes the value foundation of trust between people. Since online relationships can be easily “exited”, this weakens the sense of responsibility, obligation, and loyalty inherent in interpersonal interactions. From a spatial perspective, while the internet has expanded people’s social sphere, the lack of genuine face-to-face contact strips virtues such as benevolence, empathy, and compassion of their emotional foundation. Interpersonal communication has been reduced to interactions through digital symbols, and the other person may inadvertently be abstracted into a “digitized other” rather than an “other who bears moral expectations,” making it difficult to cultivate human virtue. The weak ties found online cannot form a stable foundation for relationships (Levinas, 2016).

Furthermore, moral education requires moral role models and the support of collective practice, yet online society exhibits a tendency toward “atomization.” With the waning of kinship and geographical ties, as well as the shifting nature of professional relationships driven by changes in economic foundations, traditional moral communities are gradually disintegrating. In Aristotle’s theory, virtue must flourish within the life of the city-state, and citizens can only become virtuous

through the practice of virtue. Although today's social structure differs from that of the city-state era, especially because virtual cyberspace represents an entirely new social space, it is difficult for people to form close-knit communal city-states. Rapid information dissemination is a hallmark of the information age. Media elements such as news, opinions, and trends have fostered the emergence of diverse social values. These factors, along with the fragmentation characteristic of our era, weaken the unified demonstration of virtue within communities (MacIntyre, 1995). Consequently, the moral context of contemporary society has lost its unified foundation, and individuals find themselves adrift in a sea of "moral fragments" that are difficult to integrate. This phenomenon is even more pronounced in the Internet age. Internet users are constantly exposed to fragmented information sources and lack the sustained moral guidance rooted in real-world communities, thereby rendering them unable to construct a stable moral system.

In summary, the interaction patterns of the information age, characterized by superficiality and fragmentation, tend, to some extent, to erode the foundations of virtue ethics. Whether it is Confucius's advocacy that "a gentleman cultivates friendship through culture and uses friendship to foster benevolence," the interpersonal ethics frequently mentioned in Confucian classics, such as "the benevolent love others" and "benevolence lies in self-restraint and the restoration of ritual propriety", or Aristotle's concept of virtuous friendship, all require a foundation of long-term, stable, and sustained interaction and mutual understanding. These prerequisites are all lacking in the context of digital, fragmented interaction. The emphasis in virtue ethics that "virtue must be grounded in practice" has, to a certain extent, become a vital pillar for the moral cultivation and happy lives of community members. It is evident, therefore, that to resolve the phenomenon of "familiar strangers" in the Internet information age, we must establish stable mechanisms for deep interaction, with friendship serving as the cornerstone of moral significance.

3. Modernity, Alienation, and the Structural Roots of Interpersonal Estrangement in the Digital Age

Research on the "familiar strangers" phenomenon is relatively cutting-edge, and no broad consensus has yet been reached within the academic community. Its boundaries and connotations must be precisely defined, requiring not only an examination of morality at the individual level but also an analysis of the underlying socioeconomic structures and the roots of modernity.

The "familiar stranger" phenomenon is distinctly tied to its era. Previous research on this topic is interdisciplinary in nature. Determining its boundaries and connotations requires not only reference to individual virtue but also an examination of the underlying social structures (economic base) and the roots of modernity. In his study of capital, Marx keenly observed how industrial transformation altered human relationships. Peasants who had lost their land entered factories to earn a living, giving rise to the labor-capital relationship characteristic of

modern society. Through the concept of “alienation”, Marx revealed the exploitative nature of the capitalist system (Marx, 2018). In traditional societies, people formed the foundation of communities based on “kinship, geographical ties, and shared living,” with close connections between individuals and groups. Capitalist society has dismantled the communal bonds of traditional society, “extracting” individuals from the economic sphere and the old production structure, and “removing” them from their former communities. With industrial transformation and urbanization, more and more people have flocked to cities to live and work, shifting from traditional forms of labor to a “wage-labor” status (Marx, 2018). At the level of labor, the capitalist mode of production has accelerated production efficiency but has also led to the alienation of labor. Workers’ autonomy is stripped away by the production structure. The products of their labor, in turn, become the very things that control their freedom, and individuals become appendages of the production machinery. The economic base determines the superstructure. Economic alienation in the realm of labor often spills over into social life, as exemplified by the Foxconn case. Interpersonal relationships are also alienated. In the course of social interaction, people gradually lose their autonomy and independence, becoming servants to specific types of relationships.

First, the market economy has gradually shifted interpersonal relationships from being centered on ethics and morality to being primarily bound by “money and self-interest.” As stated in *The Communist Manifesto*, “All that is solid melts into air,” revealing the impact of modernity on stable interpersonal bonds and traditional ethical norms (Marx & Engels, 2012). When the exchange of interests gradually becomes a key principle of social interaction, others are easily viewed as means to achieve certain goals, rather than as ends in themselves deserving of care and respect. Consequently, interpersonal interactions increasingly exhibit tendencies toward instrumentalization, utilitarianism, and “rationalization.” The “familiar society” in the traditional sense is gradually disintegrating, and the “society of strangers” has become the new norm of urban life. As a result, the warm emotional bonds and ethical connections that once existed between people are gradually fading.

Second, China’s urbanization process has been accompanied by a “dual expansion” of spatial growth and population concentration, which has, to a certain extent, intensified the sense of alienation among members of the urban community and accelerated the loosening and disintegration of various traditional communities. As Simmel revealed, amid skyscrapers and surging crowds, individuals are more likely to become tiny, lonely “atoms”, maintaining a subtle yet constant psychological distance from others. This is not the kind of isolation found in traditional societies, where people “live and die without ever interacting,” but rather a modern form of alienation characterized by “being in the midst of it all yet having no sense of belonging.” On the one hand, people frequently “converse” in urban life. On the other hand, they find it difficult to truly engage in deep “communication.” “Familiar yet unfamiliar” thus becomes a vivid portrayal of modern urban

interpersonal relationships. From a Marxist perspective, this alienation is not a coincidental indifference toward human connections, but rather the result of the restructuring of social relations within the institutional framework of modernity. Highly market-oriented forces and social stratification have jointly shaped the organizational structure of the city. Individuals are integrated into vast networks of strangers through the “workplace” as a connecting link, and their identities and roles are increasingly defined by “job, function, and code”. Consequently, interpersonal relationships are now governed more by the dictates of “institutions and efficiency” rather than primarily by the moral sentiments and ethical bonds of traditional society.

Furthermore, informatization has further driven the evolution of alienation. Digital social platforms have constructed a “virtual urban space” that appears to transcend the constraints of time and space, capable of bringing together vast numbers of users in a short period. In essence, it often serves the interests of a small group of technology capital holders who control data assets and platform resources. Through recommendation algorithms and the newsfeed business model, “likes”, comments, traffic, followers, and popularity are constantly transformed into new forms of “social currency,” while individual images and “personal brands” have, without people realizing it, become “commodities” that can be displayed, managed, and even sold. This logic of digital capitalism perpetuates the phenomenon of fetishism criticized by Marx, in which relationships between people are quietly transformed into relationships between people and objects, namely relationships between people and data, traffic, and tags. Meanwhile, platform operators extract new surplus value through data, causing genuine and concrete interpersonal relationships to give way to the instrumental logic of capital accumulation. This resonates precisely with Marx’s proposition that “the essential powers of man are alienated into independent existence and, in turn, rule over man.”

In summary, the emergence of the “familiar stranger” has deep structural roots in modernity. It is not merely a superficial phenomenon of moral and cultural change, but rather a new form of interpersonal relationship shaped by the new social structure. The atomization of social relations brought about by modernity, coupled with interpersonal alienation under the dominance of capitalist rationality, has collectively created an urban environment lacking the support of traditional “human warmth.” In such an environment, it is difficult for individuals to alleviate feelings of loneliness, rootlessness, and relative deprivation merely by expanding their social circles. Therefore, it is important to recognize that reconstructing genuine communities cannot rely solely on general moral exhortations. Rather, it requires sustained reflection on contemporary urban systems, platform mechanisms, and social value orientations, as well as rational guidance of their development. Only by confronting and gradually dismantling the structural factors of modernity’s “alienation” can we provide a more solid ethical foundation for interpersonal interaction within the framework of information technology.

4. Interpersonal Ethics in the Chinese Ethical Tradition and the Confucian Ren-Li System and the Daoist Notion of Ziran

In the face of the alienation of interpersonal relationships in the information age, traditional Chinese ethical thought is not a ready-made solution that can be directly transplanted, but it does provide important resources for reinterpreting human relationships. Confucian culture occupies a central position in the development of Chinese civilization, and the Confucian concepts of ren and li have long shaped Chinese understandings of human relations, modes of interaction, and social order. At the same time, the Daoist notion of ziran offers another perspective from which to reflect on interpersonal relationships marked by excessive utilitarianism, tension, and pretense. While Confucian ethics emphasizes concern for human relationships, Daoist thought advocates a return to simplicity and authenticity. Together, these two traditions provide distinct yet complementary perspectives for rebuilding interpersonal relationships in digital society.

The core of Confucian ethics lies in “Ren.” In Confucius’ view, Ren can be summarized as “loving others” (Confucius, 1980). Here, “loving others” is not an abstract moral slogan, but rather a call for people to acknowledge and empathize with others within concrete relationships, viewing them as individuals with emotions, dignity, and a need to be treated with seriousness. “Extending one’s own feelings to others” is an important way to realize this care. By gradually extending “love for one’s relatives” outward, a moral network is formed that radiates from the family to society. Mencius’s maxim, “Honor the elderly of others as you honor your own elders, and care for the young of others as you care for your own children,” emphasizes precisely this extension of care for one’s own elders and children to others (Mencius, 2015). In this way, interpersonal relationships are not confined by narrow, self-serving affection but instead form a community characterized by warmth and care.

“Li” is not merely an external form, nor is it limited to the ceremonial regulations of ancient society. Its deeper significance lies in providing standards, boundaries, and order for interpersonal interactions. The saying, “To restrain oneself and return to ritual propriety is benevolence,” illustrates precisely that “Ren” cannot remain merely as inner goodwill but must be expressed through behavioral norms. Whether a person truly respects others depends not only on whether they possess good intentions, but also on whether, in specific interactions, they exercise self-restraint, respect boundaries, and treat others in an appropriate manner. In traditional rural societies, various rituals, customs, and mutual aid activities were deeply embedded in daily life. While they certainly had a formal aspect, more importantly, through repeated practice, they continuously deepened the sense of familiarity, responsibility, and moral bonds among community members.

This “Ren-Li” framework still offers insights for interpersonal interactions in the information age. People in the digital space are often reduced to avatars, nicknames, data, tags, or traffic metrics. One can quickly see a person but may not truly understand them. One can interact frequently but may not form stable relationships. In such circumstances, the significance of “Ren” lies first and foremost

in reminding us that every user behind the screen is not an abstract “user,” but a concrete human being. Viewing others with a “benevolent heart” means not readily treating them as targets for emotional venting, tools in the competition for traffic, or subjects for casual judgment.

At the same time, digital society also requires a new form of “li” (ritual propriety). The “li” referred to here does not call for a return to ancient ritual systems, but rather seeks to transform the spirit of “li” into behavioral boundaries and public rules within modern digital interactions. For example, moderation in social media expression, basic respect in public discourse, the requirement for authenticity in self-media content, and a sense of responsibility in online interactions can all be understood as new manifestations of “li” in the digital age. Without this “li,” cyberspace is prone to descend into emotional venting, verbal abuse, malicious spectating, and collective polarization. From this perspective, “ren” provides a moral attitude toward others, while “li” provides behavioral standards for interacting with them. Only by combining the two can digital interactions move beyond superficial connections and gradually foster warmer, more meaningful interpersonal relationships.

If Confucianism approaches interpersonal relationships primarily from the perspective of worldly ethical order, Daoism offers a different vantage point. Laozi’s advocacy of “following the Way of Nature” emphasizes that people should act in accordance with their true nature (Chen, 2006). In the context of interpersonal interactions, “nature” does not imply capriciousness, but rather opposes excessive utilitarianism, artificiality, and calculation. “When the Great Way is abandoned, benevolence and righteousness arise. When wisdom emerges, great deceit follows.” This statement reminds us that when interpersonal relationships rely too heavily on external forms and deliberate arrangements, they may actually stray from people’s true feelings and inner nature. The spiritual freedom pursued by Zhuangzi, as well as the state of “forgetting one another amidst the rivers and lakes,” can also be understood as a state in which people interact naturally, complementing one another without mutual constraints.

Viewed through the lens of the internet age, this philosophy carries a particularly sobering significance. Today’s digital platforms constantly accelerate the pace of human interaction while simultaneously creating new social pressures. People seem able to connect with others at any moment, yet they are also constantly in a state of being interrupted by information, pulled by relationships, and scrutinized by others’ judgments. Liking, replying, sharing, and showcasing one’s life were originally just part of social interaction, but when constantly amplified by platform mechanisms, they can become new psychological burdens. Much of what is termed “familiarity” is not actually a familiarity born of deep understanding, but rather a superficial familiarity formed through repeated platform recommendations and constant viewing.

The “wuwei” (non-action) emphasized by Daoism is not passive avoidance here, nor is it a rejection of technology. Rather, it serves as a reminder not to be completely dominated by the rhythm dictated by technology. Necessary solitude,

silence, and detachment are precisely the ways to restore one's sense of self. "Communing in solitude with the spirit of heaven and earth" points not only to the relationship between humans and nature but also to a renewed encounter with one's own inner self. In the face of information overload, moderate "digital silence," spending time in nature, or temporarily stepping away from social media can all help individuals gradually recover from restlessness and the need to put on a show. Only when people have regained inner peace can they re-enter interpersonal interactions with sincerity and calm, rather than anxiety and pretense.

Of course, reconstructing interpersonal ethics in the digital age cannot be confined solely to traditional thought. Modern urban society differs from traditional rural communities. Digital platforms, interactions with strangers, awareness of rights, public rules, and technological governance all lend new complexity to contemporary interpersonal relationships. Therefore, traditional Chinese ethics must be reinterpreted within the context of modern society and must also engage in necessary dialogue with Western ethical thought.

Western virtue ethics, particularly the writings of Aristotle and MacIntyre on the cultivation of virtue and the community, share common ground with Confucian thought. Neither conceives of morality as the abstract choice of an isolated individual. Rather, both emphasize that individual virtue must be cultivated within communal life. The Confucian concept of "ren" (benevolence) resonates with the friendship, kindness, and altruism emphasized in virtue ethics. Confucian "li" (ritual propriety), in turn, further emphasizes how virtue is embodied in specific norms of social interaction. In other words, true morality is not mere goodwill suspended at the level of abstract ideas, but must be embodied in daily interactions, public life, and concrete institutions.

The emphasis placed by modern Western ethics on rights, equality, and individual dignity can also complement any potential shortcomings in traditional human relations ethics. A society of strangers cannot rely entirely on the emotional bonds between acquaintances, nor can it depend solely on moral self-awareness to maintain order. In the face of a vast number of strangers, fair rules, the protection of rights, and public reason are equally indispensable. In other words, interpersonal ethics in the digital age must possess both the warmth of "benevolence" and the boundaries set by rules. It must value both care and equality. It must also inherit the spirit of "the benevolent love others" from traditional culture and respond to the demands of individual rights and public order in modern society. The construction of interpersonal ethics in the new era requires, at a minimum, attention to three aspects. First, "benevolence" should serve as the fundamental value, reaffirming that others are not tools, resources, or traffic, but concrete lives worthy of respect and understanding. Second, "ritual" (li), as modernized, should serve as the form of realization, establishing necessary norms of interaction, standards of expression, and accountability mechanisms in the digital space to prevent interactions between strangers from descending into disorder and harm. Third, we must reaffirm the instrumental role of technology, ensuring that it serves people's genuine needs rather than, conversely, shaping, catering to, or even am-

plifying their alienating desires.

The spirit of traditional Chinese ethics is not a simple supplement to modern society, nor is it a nostalgic return to the past. Rather, it raises anew the fundamental question of “how people should relate to one another” within modern urban digital society. Only by establishing a mutually supportive relationship among traditional ethics, modern institutions, and technological governance, can we reweave the ethical bonds of trust, understanding, and care in the digital age. This ensures that “familiar strangers” no longer remain merely acquaintances confined to screens and information, but can gradually transform into more authentic and responsible interpersonal connections.

5. Ethical Reflections on Digital Technology and Fragmented Forms of Life

The widespread adoption and advancement of information technology have drastically altered the channels, media, and methods of interpersonal interaction, and have profoundly changed the pace of modern life. People today are not lacking in social interaction. On the contrary, they often face an excess of interaction, information, and connections. Cell phones, the internet, social media platforms, and a deluge of information have continuously infiltrated daily life, fragmenting what was once relatively unbroken time into countless pieces. People seem to be constantly online, yet find it difficult to truly settle down. They seem able to contact others at any moment, yet struggle to form stable and deep relationships. This fragmented environment primarily affects people’s attention spans. Some argue that the internet age has led to “superficial” thinking, lacking the support of deep reflection and the patience to delve deeply into matters. This is equally evident in interpersonal interactions. Such scenes are a common sight in daily life. Several people may sit together for a meal while constantly looking down at their phones. A conversation that has barely begun may be interrupted by a new message notification. There may be plenty of “likes” and comments on social media feeds, but few who are truly willing to listen and understand. On the surface, the frequency of human interaction has increased, but in reality, the depth of these interactions has not necessarily followed suit. With diminished attention spans, people find it difficult to listen attentively during interactions and to truly empathize with others’ circumstances. Conversations often remain superficial, never reaching a deeper level of understanding before being replaced by the next message, the next topic, or the next distraction. Over time, interpersonal relationships can easily shift from being emotional, responsible bonds to mere “windows” that can be opened or closed at any moment.

Instant messaging and social media have also reinforced the psychological mechanism of “instant gratification.” Messages must be replied to immediately, emotions must be expressed on the spot, and people must quickly take sides on issues. Even one’s sense of existence often requires validation through likes, shares, and comments. While such a mechanism may seem convenient, it is actually constantly reshaping people’s life priorities. The cultivation of virtue is not an instant

process. It requires patience, self-restraint, repeated practice, and the assumption of responsibility within authentic relationships. Yet as daily life becomes increasingly driven by fleeting pleasures and instant feedback, the practice of virtue may be pushed to the margins of our lives. People have grown accustomed to obtaining information, entertainment, and emotional feedback from the internet, yet they unconsciously neglect real-life interactions with family, neighbors, and friends. Life is gradually shifting from “pursuing goodness” to “seeking pleasure.” This process is not dramatic, and it may even go unnoticed, but its impact is profound. Digital life has also led to the fragmentation of identity and roles. People often present different versions of themselves across different platforms and contexts. The self in a work group chat, the self on social media, and the self on short-video platforms may not be entirely consistent. The boundaries between life, work, and family are also becoming increasingly blurred. Sometimes, people are not intentionally being insincere. Rather, through prolonged expression on various platforms, they have gradually grown accustomed to switching roles, to showcasing one part of themselves while concealing another. Over time, this “discrepancy between online and offline, between outward appearance and inner reality” becomes more than just a matter of image management. It begins to affect the integrity of one’s personality. People may switch identities across different contexts, but they may not necessarily be able to form stable ethical commitments.

From this perspective, the problems brought about by information technology are not as simple as “spending too much time online.” The deeper issue lies in the fact that technology is reshaping people’s attention, emotional patterns, and social habits. It makes it easier to connect, yet also easier to disconnect. It makes it easier to express oneself, yet also easier to remain stuck in a performance. It makes it easier to see others, yet does not necessarily lead to a true understanding of them. This is precisely the key reason why the phenomenon of “familiar strangers” continues to expand in the information age. What we call “familiarity” often amounts to nothing more than seeing profile pictures, updates, hashtags, and snippets of daily life. What we call “strangeness” lies in the fact that this information has not truly translated into understanding, trust, or responsibility. To address this issue, we must critically examine the development, upgrading, and application of technology from the perspective of technological ethics. Internet technology is certainly not a “menace,” nor can we simply attribute all of modern society’s alienation to technology itself. The issue lies in what values govern technology and what kind of lifestyle it leads people toward.

More specifically, platform design contributes to ethical erosion through several linked mechanisms. First, recommendation systems tend to organize visibility according to engagement, retention, and traffic conversion, which means that emotionally stimulating, controversial, or performative content is more likely to be repeatedly exposed. Second, quantified feedback mechanisms, such as likes, comments, reposts, follower counts, and views, transform interpersonal recognition into measurable competition, encouraging users to seek visibility rather than

mutual understanding. Third, anonymity or semi-anonymity weakens accountability by making it easier for users to avoid the moral consequences of their speech and behavior. Fourth, the low exit cost of online relationships allows users to unfollow, block, ignore, or leave a relationship at any moment, thereby weakening reciprocity, obligation, and loyalty. Through these mechanisms, platform-mediated interaction may gradually replace mutual responsibility with calculable attention and replace ethical relation with technical connection.

If platforms focus solely on metrics such as session duration, click counts, and traffic conversion, people's attention, emotions, and ability to interact will be continuously eroded. The concept of "technology for good" is not merely a slogan. It demands that technological development not come at the expense of human agency, a fulfilling life, or meaningful interaction. Therefore, the reconstruction of interpersonal ethics in digital society should proceed at three levels. At the level of individual practice, users need to cultivate digital restraint and media literacy, consciously preserving time for face-to-face communication, attentive listening, and long-term relationships. For example, individuals may limit excessive screen time, reduce performative self-presentation, and maintain regular offline interaction with family, neighbors, classmates, and colleagues. At the level of platform governance, platforms should incorporate ethical review into interface design, recommendation systems, and feedback mechanisms. For example, platforms can reduce manipulative endless scrolling, provide clearer control over recommendation settings, and avoid designs that encourage addiction, hostility, or purely traffic-driven interaction. At the level of public and institutional norms, schools, communities, workplaces, and public authorities should cultivate norms of digital civility, privacy protection, responsibility, and mutual respect. For example, digital citizenship education can be integrated into moral education and community governance, helping individuals understand both their rights and their obligations in online interaction. In this sense, technological development should be guided by the principle of treating users as human beings rather than as traffic, data, or commercial resources.

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the "familiar strangers" phenomenon reflects a deep-seated crisis in interpersonal relationships in the information age. Although individuals exist within highly connected networks, they are not necessarily able to form stable, genuine, and lasting emotional bonds. While it seems increasingly easy for people to encounter one another, such interactions often remain confined to information exchange, symbolic interaction, and emotional response. Behind this phenomenon lie not only the limitations of technological media but also the restructuring of interpersonal relationships driven by modernity, changing social structures, and the logic of capital.

The central normative argument of this paper is that interpersonal ethics in digital urban society cannot be reconstructed through moral exhortation alone.

Virtue ethics reminds us that genuine relationships require long-term coexistence, mutual understanding, and shared practice. The analysis of modernity shows that urbanization, marketization, and capital logic have reshaped interpersonal relations in ways that intensify alienation, instrumentalization, and efficiency-oriented interaction. The Ren-Li system in traditional Chinese ethics and the Daoist Way of Nature provide cultural resources for reinterpreting care, propriety, sincerity, simplicity, and authenticity in human relationships. Technology ethics further requires us to reflect on how platform mechanisms, algorithmic logic, and fragmented lifestyles affect human agency and the capacity for deep interaction.

The paper's main contribution is to propose a multilevel ethical framework for understanding and responding to the "familiar strangers" phenomenon. At the individual level, it emphasizes virtue cultivation, digital restraint, and the recovery of real-world interaction. At the platform level, it calls for ethical governance of recommendation systems, feedback mechanisms, and addictive design. At the public and institutional level, it highlights the need to establish norms of digital civility, responsibility, privacy protection, and mutual respect. A society of strangers is not an inevitable fate of modern life. What we truly need to be wary of is not the emergence of strangers, but the gradual loss of our ability to understand others, care for them, and assume responsibility for our relationships amid high levels of connectivity. Only by establishing a mutually supportive relationship among technological development, institutional development, cultural heritage, and individual cultivation can we reconstruct interpersonal ethics in the digital urban society. Only then will "familiarity" cease to be merely an acquaintance on a screen or contact through information, and gradually transform into genuine understanding, stable trust, and a warm, shared life.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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