# A Brief Scan on "Community" as an Academic Concept[1]

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**Abstract**

*The word "community" occurs frequently in papers, academic works even important speeches, which show the highlights on the concept "community" shed by the scholars and leaders. On such an issue, this paper will draw a brief map of the changes of the concept "community" through etymological method at first, and then search the various semantic interpretations and usages in different fields so that an extending route of the concept "community" will be charted out. At last, the values of "community" as an academic concept will be summarized, and the new research prospect will be discussed.*

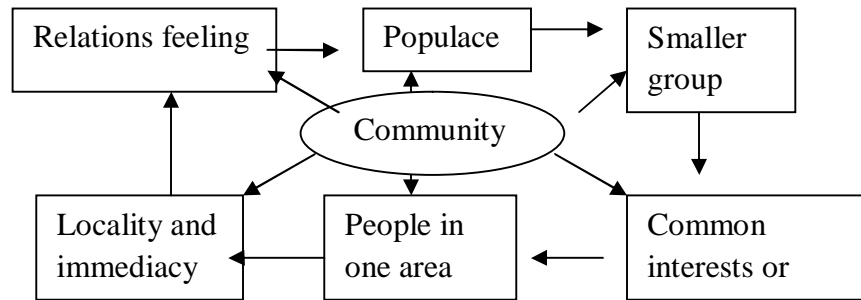**Key Words:** Community; Academic Concept; Key Word.

## 1. Introduction

"According to the statistics of Yang Qingkun in 1981, the word community occurs in all kinds of papers and works for over 140 varieties." [1] Now, after more than 30 years have passed, "community" makes its appearances in various nominations: imagined community, Confucian community, practice community, academic community, destiny community etc, even mentioned in the speeches of president Xi, which makes people confused and ignorant of its reasons. "Community" has come to the limelight of scholars and leaders, as it reflects a kind of expectation for belonging and security of the group. As opposed to the freedom and individualism in 19th century, "community" seems more attractive in 20th and 21st century. Nevertheless, many discussions centering on "community" may result in some confusion and misunderstandings over varieties of "community". Therefore, it is necessary to summarize and clarify the usage and concept of "community" in different fields.

### 1.1, the History Semantic Analysis on "Community" of Raymond Williams [2]

According to Raymond Williams' research, "community" exists since 14th century. The closest etymologic ancient word "comminute" (latin: communitatem) refers to the community of close relations and feelings. Then he explores the changes of this word meaning through historic semantics from 14th century to 19th century, which can be shown by a drawing as below:

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From the etymological semantic chart of "community", we can see that the lexical meaning changes of "community" are full of social meaning representations. Populace differ from smaller organization in connotation, overlaps with it in some extension, for populace are compared with aristocrats and small organizations imply the spontaneous and equal societies, deleting hierarchical class meanings. It indicates that the rising capitalists come to the history stage and as a result social groups are thriving since 14th century. With the rise of the renaissance and the launch of enlighten movement, the capitalists as a class play an important role in the ideology. In 16th century, the word "community" is more tinted with capital colors: "common interests" and "properties" become the denotations of "community".

With the advent of 18th century, regional meaning is involved in that it begins to refer to the people of a region. It reveals that protection awareness for the local is aroused because the capitals expand toward countryside and the globalization begins. In 19th century, such meaning becomes more apparent and outstanding on account of the foregrounding of the meanings of locality and immediacy. The faster fluidity of capitals brings about overall globalization, which in turn leads to the expectation for local and direct contact. In a word, from 14th century to 19th century, the semantic evolution of "community" reflects social power shows and feeling structures in different times. But the changes centers around the root "com"(common). The base "com" means together. The emphasis of different meanings shift in different historic phase, which reflects the moving tendency and "collective consciousness": the rise of bourgeoisie, the flow of capital, the impact of globalization, the enhancement of regional awareness, the return of feelings, etc. All the extending and adding of meaning of "community" in different fields are based on the historical semantics.

## 1.2. The Derivations of "Community" in Different Fields

"Theorists choose them for a variety of reasons or chances. However, they use the original meaning of these words as measures to breed consistently new meanings." [3] Culture critic Wang Ming'an's observation illuminates that key words play an essential role in push forward thinking progress. Likewise, as an important academic concept, "community" stimulates the lively thoughts of scholars and theorists. It may originate from sociology. In 1887, Tönnies uses this word to denote Gemeinschaft, distinguished from Gesellschaft. "Tönnies thinks that community is mainly realized in the groups (family, clan) based on natural relations, or in small and historically-formed combinations (village, city) and in thought combination (friendship, apprenticeship etc)." [4] in contrast, Gesellschaft " results from the well-planned coordination of individual minds and behaviors of crowd, for the individual expects the benefits from fulfilling some aim collectively, and gather to act coordinately." From Lin Rongyuan's analysis on Tönnies' social theory, "community" emphasizes natural common will while Gesellschaft focuses on "man-made" individual interests.
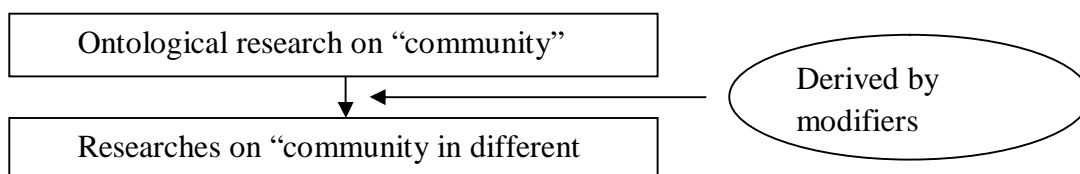
From the perspective of social division of labor, Emile Durkheim [5] classifies "community" and "society" into mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity respectively. The former is "based on the similarity of individuals" while the latter "is on the base of differences". Durkheim brings into light the distinction of "common unity" and "individual differences", believing that the social division produced by capitalism can lead to efficiency. Max Weber re-defines "community": " on some occasion, and in an average or pure mode, only if the base of social behaviors orientation is the feeling of belonging to a unity, felt by participants, such a social relation should be called community".[6] In this way, he distinguishes common sensibility from rationality. All the above dualistic social thoughts implicate a kind of diachronic developing opinion: modernization or capitalization brings about re-division and re-combination of social groups. It is also true in Anthony Giddens' view on "disembedding". [11] In short, "community" ignites the thinking sparkles of modernization in sociology.

Attentions are also paid to more practical or philosophical issues, e.g. with the urbanization, the traditional village community begins to decline; a new village community must be built by means of administration and law to coordinate the individual interests. Proposals are put forward to create regional community and to foster "disembedded community" so as to bring the combining function of "community" into full play.

Additionally, an exploration on re-building ethical community is carried out mainly by Georg Hegel's government interferences. [13] In short, the alienation of relations in the process of modernization becomes a focus of attention. Therefore, they strongly suggest that "community" be rebuilt to recover the close social relations and ensure the harmonious social development. Looking back, Hong Yuanzhi[7] explores the ways of Confucian community extending: in space, it extends to society and nation through cultivating Confucian morality; in time, family relations are tracing back into ancestor through blood connections. This insight shows clearly the social connecting significances of "Confucian community".

At the same time, traditional civility and filial piety play an essential role in maintaining Confucian community in the opinion of some scholar. Hanfei's "political community" also enters the discussion: interest is the connection of community [12]; power is the key to community security. Combined with western concept of "community", all these Chinese thinking of "community" is very illuminating for social issues and theoretical researches. The historic or practical thinking (back or forward) contributes to the diversity of community explorations in various fields. In addition, J.Gumperz [8] put forward "speech community" formed by frequent using of some common words and sentences by a group, differing from other groups. J. M. Sales [9] comes up with "discourse community" defined by a common communication goal and mechanism. Both "communities" emphasize the outer distinction and inner unity of "community".

"Academic community" is also named to involve seminars, academic meeting or project etc. From above listed "communities", we can see "immediacy" or "sameness" is their common ground. Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" [10] breaks through the immediacy, for he believes that nation must be imagined through various cultural forms (museum, publishing, films, TV, historic relics etc）, so the concept of "community" extends to thinking or feeling area. Along this thinking route, The concept of "imagined community" spreads in the fields of media, education and literature etc, i.e. through watching TV or film, reading literature text and learning culture, the relevant communities can be imagined, e.g. nation, teacher, town etc , to be more detailed, the writers can imagine the community of hometown in the regional writing. Professor Yin Qiping's research on "communities" in British literature is a case in points, for he explores town of Casterbridge and friend community in a series of papers. Lastly, to sum up all kinds of "community", the variables of "community" can be classified into two categories in terms of its modifiers. First, the way to realize "community": political community, imagined community, network community, speech community, feeling community, destiny community, etc. Second, the content or components of "community": family community, teacher community, friend community, ecology community, business community, nation community etc. Both kinds of "community" are derived from ontological research on "community" in sociologic field, which can be seen as the research extending route as below drawing:



Although the listing of researches on "community" can't be complete and finalized, the research route chart is clear and obvious in its way of derivations. However, more potential academic values on "community can further be developed.

## 1.3. The Academic Values and Research Tips of "Community"

"Community" grows from a common word into a key academic word, going through the defining of sociologists or theorists and discussions of scholars or experts in different fields. It is endowed with increasing connotations and thinking for several reasons: "individual freedom" becomes a past page of history book. In 20th and 21st centuries, "community" comes into the focus of common aspiration, as the word is filled with the meanings of security, warm care in the fluid uncertain world brought by commodification, capitalization, technicalization and globalization. In practice, "community" takes different forms: clubs, network chatting group, spontaneous social group of same interest, etc.

This is also the proof that "community" comes back, representing a "collective consciousness" in the new era. Naturally, "community" enters into the attention of scholars and theorists in different areas. The awareness of traditional morality loss leads them into making it up by re-building various communities.

One way is to re-evaluate "traditional community" through the lens of western "community" so that modern thoughts values may be regained in "community". Confucian community, Hanfei's community, etc are explored; another way is seeking for all kinds of social connective resources or feeling means in attempt to re-build "community". Family, government, network, feeling, Confucianism, etc all become useful resources to create "community". The underlying motivation for the researches on "community" can give a vivid expression to the thought depth and social responsibility of scholars. However, to be a research reminder, rather than breeding the meanings of "community" by derivations, the exploration on "community" can be furthered by placing "community" into broader "relationship network" such as the interacting relationship between "individual" and "community".

To be more specific, the identification phenomena can be probed into through studying individual's relationship with the "community" he or she belongs. An identifying hierarchy can found in the individual's relationship with "community" through proof demonstrations: complete voluntary identifying, forced identifying, partial identifying, complete resistance or replacement. The tension between "individual" and "community" can also be exemplified in small-town literature. Those "individuals" whose behaviors are deviant from the ethical codes of small town are usually named "outsiders" or "others" by townspeople. In turn, as a community, small town is often symbolized as "prison" or "iron house". In short, putting "community" in broad social relations, we can tap its more potential social significances, which will unfold a dynamic academic scene before our eyes.

From the brief scan on "community" a key academic concept, we can see that "community" has been rooted in the thinking minds of scholars and theorists for a variety of reasons. But there is no doubt that "community" plays an essential role in activating philosophical or social pondering or arguing. And it will continue to function in academic researchers in a promising future.

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