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# **Social Media in Rural China**



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# Social Media in Rural China

*Social Networks and Moral Frameworks*

Tom McDonald

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## Introduction to the series *Why We Post*

This book is one of a series of 11 titles. Nine are monographs devoted to specific field sites (including this one) in Brazil, Chile, China, England, India, Italy, Trinidad and Turkey – they will be published in 2016–17. The series also includes a comparative book about all of our findings, published to accompany this title, and a book which contrasts the visuals that people post on Facebook in this same English field site with those on our Trinidadian field site.

When we tell people that we have written nine monographs about social media around the world, and that they all have the same chapter headings (apart from Chapter 5), they are concerned about potential repetition. However, if you decide to read several of these books (which we very much hope you do), you will see that this device has been helpful in showing the precise opposite. Each book is as individual and distinct as if it were on an entirely different topic.

This is perhaps our single most important finding. Most studies of the internet and social media are based on research methods that assume we can generalise across different groups. We look at tweets in one place and write about ‘Twitter’. We conduct tests about social media and friendship in one population, and then write on this topic as if friendship means the same thing for all populations. By presenting nine books with the same chapter headings, you can judge for yourselves what kinds of generalisations are, or are not, possible.

Our intention is not to evaluate social media either positively or negatively. The purpose is educational, providing detailed evidence of what social media has become in each place, and the local consequences, including local evaluations.

Each book is based on 15 months of research during which time most of the anthropologists lived, worked and interacted with people, always in the local language. Yet they differ from the dominant tradition of writing social science books. Firstly they do not engage with the academic literatures on social media. It would be highly repetitive to have

the same discussions in all nine books. Instead discussions of these literatures are to be found in our comparative book, *How the World Changed Social Media*. Secondly these monographs are not comparative, which again is the primary function of this other volume. Thirdly, given the immense interest in social media from the general public, we have tried to write in an accessible and open style. This means we have adopted a mode more common in historical writing of keeping all citations and the discussion of all wider academic issues to endnotes. If you prefer to read above the line, each text offers a simple narrative about our findings. If you want to read a more conventional academic book that relates the material to its academic context, this can be done through engaging with the footnotes.

We hope you enjoy the results, and we hope you will also read our comparative book – and perhaps some of the other monographs – in addition to this one.

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## Note on the text

### Transliteration

Names and certain words and quotations have been written in Mandarin, and Romanised according to the standard *Pinyin* system. A glossary of selected *Pinyin* terms with their accompanying Chinese characters and English equivalents is provided at the back of the volume.

### Names

All personal and place (below provincial level) names have been altered to preserve the anonymity of participants in this study. A full discussion on anonymity appears in Chapter 1. Chinese personal names are written according to the normal ordering in Chinese (family name, followed by given name), with the exception of those authors of Chinese descent who have chosen to use alternative orderings or versions of their names in publications (i.e. Xinyuan Wang, Mayfair Yang).

### Currency

RMB denotes *renminbi*, the official currency of mainland China. On the first day of conducting field work in China for this project (1 April 2013), US\$1 was equal to 6.2 RMB.



## Introduction and field site: Down to the countryside

I had been living in rural Anshan Town for a couple of months when Li Kang, a local married man in his mid-twenties, invited me to accompany him on a short trip to a neighbouring town to run some errands. As we sat in his car I asked him to add me as a friend on WeChat (a popular Chinese social media platform). He explained that he could not do so, having deleted his own account a few days earlier. In the privacy of his car, he candidly recounted how a few days ago his wife, having (correctly) suspected that he had been using WeChat to meet and flirt with a woman from the nearby city, demanded to see her husband's phone. Li Kang, wishing to destroy any evidence of this, deleted the entire account from his phone and claimed he no longer used the service.

Li Kang's admission was striking as it contradicted other parts of his online profiles that I had seen. We were already friends on Qzone (another social media platform particularly popular among Anshan Town residents), where his profile page was full of family pictures, statements made during trips away saying that he could not wait to return home to his family and memes regarding love and marriage. As I got to know Li Kang better, I realised his social media use oscillated between these two drastically different forms of social encounter: on the one hand, private one-to-one messaging, not only with friends and family, but also strangers; on the other, the family-oriented postings he openly shared with friends and relatives on his social media profile. That people have secrets, and present themselves differently to different people, is no particular revelation. However, social media places these sharply contrasting types of sociality adjacent to one another. This opposition seems even more extreme when it occurs in rural China, where these new modes of interaction are emerging against particularly prescriptive and constraining local moral norms.



Cases such as Li Kang's thus bring into sharp focus social media's effect on the experience of everyday moral decision making in contemporary rural China. It is in the context of these judgements surrounding the appropriateness of such technologies that this volume describes how, despite social media being a global phenomenon, its use always becomes articulated in specific, local ways. A key area for this book is the ongoing tension between two seemingly opposed types of relationships: 'friends' and 'strangers'. The first involves closed 'circles' of personal friends from familiar, established and enduring offline social spheres (i.e. family, village, school and work), while the second allows users to find and interact with complete strangers for a variety of reasons, from romance to platonic friendship and sometimes just for relief from the intense familiarity of rural social life. As such, social media can be seen as a medium through which individuals extend and deepen a range of contrasting social relations, in addition to – on occasion – experimenting with ways to rework and redefine the boundaries of such relations.

While this opposition between relationships of 'circles and strangers' constitutes a major focus of this volume, its broader objective is to provide a detailed ethnographic account of the use and consequences of social media in contemporary rural China. The majority of existing studies on internet and social media use in China have primarily focused on urban settings. This study aims to redress this imbalance, exploring not only the differences and commonalities of social media use between rural and urban China, but also how these platforms increasingly challenge such distinctions in the first place. The evidence for the analysis was collected during 15 months of ethnographic field work while I lived in Anshan Town and participated in its residents' lives. This allowed me to witness – and be part of – everyday rural Chinese life for myself.

As part of the field work, I befriended my research participants and sought to understand their online activities in the context of their offline lives, including their social relationships, work, how they spent their free time and their broader views and beliefs. This sustained engagement often gave participants the confidence to share intimate details of how their lives were being reshaped through their use of social media (as seen in the above case of Li Kang), with many transformations being directly related to the town's changing social landscape. This approach differs from many other studies of social media and the internet which attempt to understand the impact of such technologies purely through what happens online. Instead, I have tried to 'treat internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces'.<sup>1</sup>

This volume describes the role social media plays in contributing to, reflecting and allowing rural Chinese individuals to think through some of the major transformations occurring in their everyday lives.

## Chapter outline: from circles to strangers

The book consists of seven chapters. As the volume progresses, the focus gradually shifts from profiling interactions with family and ‘circles’ of friends on social media to describing the growing frequency of encounters with strangers on the same platforms. Following this outline of the book, the current chapter sets the scene by reviewing existing scholarly approaches to the internet and social media in China, explaining the methodology of this study and introducing Anshan Town and its inhabitants.

The second chapter then moves on to examine how people in Anshan Town access the internet and the social media platforms they use. Two key discoveries are presented. Firstly, it is shown that the most frequent users of social media among townsfolk are students, young people and younger adults. Secondly, it is shown how periods of migration to urban areas result in users adopting a more diverse range of social media platforms. This chapter thus emphasises the breadth and variety of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the town, and shows how social media use (and preferences toward using specific platforms or features) often corresponds to particular social groups. A key factor determining the appeal of different social media platforms is the level of visibility they offer, something which is conducive to online sociability among both circles of known friends and with strangers.

Chapter 3 considers what people in Anshan Town actually post on their social media profiles. It demonstrates that the most popular kinds of visual postings relate to the topics of raising children or the romantic ideal of love and marriage. These postings therefore work to reproduce and reinforce idealised family relationships, which is especially significant given that the audience of these posts primarily consist of closed circles of familiar friends. This is an indication that the townsfolk attempt to use social media in ways they feel are in keeping with their existing moral frameworks and which communicate common sets of ethical values within one’s own circle of friends.

Chapter 4 describes the dominance of non-kin relations based on principles of familiarity within these circles, highlighting the classmate group as a defining feature of such associations. This chapter also notes

how, in contrast to these familiar social groupings, young people in particular are increasingly using social media to interact with strangers, including as a means of forming romantic relationships. The growing popularity and ease with which these stranger finding services can be accessed is shown to result in some married couples also interpreting the stranger as a threat, fearing that social media use will lead to adultery, and ultimately resulting in couples generally avoiding such platforms as communication channels. The evidence indicates that social media challenges accepted understandings of the principle of familiarity as central to social relationships in rural China. In so doing, Chapter 4 also demonstrates how individuals use social media to conceptualise and respond to broader social change.

Chapter 5 examines the various systems that award points and levels to users, which are prevalent on many Chinese social media platforms. Young students in the town's schools find these systems particularly appealing, as they offer opportunities for distinction and progression. Level accumulation means users often have to draw on the help of others from their own circle of online friends, despite this being at odds with the distinction such systems create within circles. Here the popularity of accumulating levels takes on a moral dimension, and is explained in relation to a broader Chinese cultural orientation associated with entrepreneurialism. In this context, in addition to level accumulation being seen as an outward-facing status accumulating activity, users also describe the practice as having an important inward-facing aspect of self-improvement. The diligence, perseverance and even manipulation demanded of users to successfully accumulate levels therefore becomes an ethical activity. The chapter also notes the important role of physical money in these systems, which offers an accelerated route to higher status. This demonstrates how townsfolk see social media reflecting and embodying the broader changes in material consumption that have taken place in Chinese society in recent years.

Chapter 6 focuses on how the town's social media users view and interact with broader sets of relations through these platforms, most notably local, regional and national levels of government. Censorship and propaganda are discussed from the perspective of how they are experienced by participants, who seek to understand them in relation to their own moral frameworks. This control over social media is then contrasted against the growing desire of some users to exploit its economic potential – again drawing on the virtuous nature of entrepreneurialism, albeit this time oriented towards exchange with strangers. Finally the chapter asks whether moral concerns

regarding the consequences of social media use in the town may be partially addressed by reconfiguring the monetised nature of social media platforms.

The final chapter of this volume will discuss the broader significance of the study in three areas: circles and strangers, the morality of media and ‘the Chinese internet’. It will be argued that highlighting this study’s focus on sociality and the social relations occurring with circles of friends and of strangers online points towards the growth of individualistic ideals in the management of social relations in rural China. Secondly, it is asserted that a consideration of morality in relation to communication technology use can provide a particularly fruitful way to understand the ethical dilemmas facing ordinary Chinese citizens. Finally, the implications of the case of rural China on our understanding of the impact of the internet and social media more broadly are discussed, arguing that this specific case provokes us to challenge accepted ways of framing studies into technology use.

## Ways of understanding social media in rural China

The chief aim of this volume is to provide a rounded account of how social media affects the lives of Anshan Town people. The separate comparative volume in the series discusses many of the theoretical debates that surround social media in general, including a detailed discussion of the specific approaches to carrying out ethnographies of social media.<sup>2</sup> For that reason, the focus of this literature review is confined to an overview of three key themes central to understanding social media use in China to date: the concept of ‘the Chinese internet’, studies of specific online services and platforms, and internet use in rural China.

The problem of ‘the Chinese internet’

The dramatic growth in the number of Chinese internet users – reaching 649 million people in 2014<sup>3</sup> (more than any other country in the world)<sup>4</sup> – has inspired an increased interest in documenting and understanding this expansion, resulting in the publication of thousands of academic publications on internet and ICT use in China.<sup>5</sup> This literature review does not attempt to survey the entire range of these publications, as other scholars have already conducted extensive analysis of these bodies of literature.<sup>6</sup> These ‘meta-reviews’ have highlighted several key

trends of research about the internet in China, including preferences towards specific themes of study, approaches and a focus on particular social groups and organisations.

Many studies have discussed China's online environment in national terms, often referring to '*the Chinese internet*'. As early as 2004, one review article noted how scholars generally concentrate on 'the demographic, operational and evaluative dimensions of internet developments at macro levels, attempting to reach conclusions about the Chinese nation or even entire human society as a whole'.<sup>7</sup> The danger of generalising about China's internet use is indicated by statistical data which emphasises disparities in penetration rates between users in different provinces (Beijing has the highest penetration rate at 75.3 per cent, while Jiangxi province in China's interior has only 34.1 per cent) and between urban and rural settings (72.5 and 27.5 per cent respectively). Differences also exist between users of different genders (56.4 per cent male users, 43.6 per cent female users) and ages (78.1 per cent of users are aged between 10 and 39 years).<sup>8</sup> Although these figures indicate differing levels of uptake between populations, they remain of limited use for describing why this may be the case, or how users in these different groups actually use the internet. Such information would make challenging generalised accounts more straightforward.

The tendency for research into internet use in China to jump to the macro level means that historical, regulatory, infrastructural factors and online discourses are frequently ignored,<sup>9</sup> with the analysis tending to view the Chinese internet 'in isolation from its social, political, and cultural contents and contexts'.<sup>10</sup> A focus on the macro level means that, with certain exceptions, local and regional issues surrounding the adoption and impact of the internet in China have received comparatively less attention. This book attempts to address such issues by focusing on a single rural town and the population's everyday practices of social media, including the ramifications it has for households, families, social relationships and existing linkages people have with surrounding urban areas and networks.

In addition to the disproportionate emphasis given to national or global level analysis, a further imbalance exists in the chosen themes of research into internet use in China. International scholarship has typically prioritised issues such as telecommunications infrastructure, censorship and social control.<sup>11</sup> A strong correlation has also been noted between the themes covered in popular media reportage surrounding the Chinese internet and those researched by academics.<sup>12</sup>

A final theme in these review articles regards *who* constitutes the 'subject' of China internet research. One review article notes that most international publications focus on the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and other state authorities as the 'owners' or decision makers of the internet, with commercial businesses and generic 'internet users' (assumed to be young, male and urban) being another strong focus.<sup>13</sup> The same article notes that relatively few studies have researched how students and young people (5.3 per cent in total), farmers (1.4 per cent), migrants and 'left-behind' groups (1.3 per cent) use the internet. These groups constitute a major proportion of internet users in Anshan Town.

It is also worth comparing how international scholarship on the Chinese internet compares with domestic scholarship conducted by Chinese researchers within China. Qiu and Bu have noted that domestic scholarship predominantly adopts technocentric frameworks, often neglecting to discuss the role of people and instead focusing 'on larger contexts, the technologies per se, organizational structures, or online content'.<sup>14</sup> In common with international scholarship, the 'left-behind' user groups are similarly overlooked by many studies, while domestic Chinese scholars are more likely to focus on actors such as the media, websites and journalists than their international counterparts.<sup>15</sup> By examining the appropriation of the internet into everyday life in rural settings, my own study aims to contribute to an area that has been largely under-researched by both groups. A focus on social media adds further definition to the scope of the study.

### Social media on 'the Chinese internet'

A second effect of the generalising discourse surrounding '*the* Chinese internet' has been that it has resulted in surprisingly few studies dedicated to discussing the specific platforms, their features and the practices of use they engender. This is particularly concerning given the variety of unique social media services found on the internet in China.

One notable exception to this general avoidance of discussing specific platforms comes from a cluster of publications that emerged between 2007 and 2011, which examined the use of blogs in China<sup>16</sup> and reflected the popularity of blogging services among Chinese users at that time. This set of studies included arguments that blogging created new fora for the discussion of competing viewpoints and so might expand a sort of 'unofficial democracy'<sup>17</sup> among citizens, increasing political discussion and personal expression.<sup>18</sup> Others claimed blogging in China constituted a form of playful subversion of authoritarian discourse,<sup>19</sup>

for example highlighting how rhetoric, code words and humour were employed to challenge power.<sup>20</sup> A counter argument claimed that rather than being activist in nature, blogging practices in China had become increasingly mundane and trivial.<sup>21</sup> Taken as a whole, these discussions about blogs can be seen as reproducing many of the arguments that had already featured in the generalised discussions regarding ‘the Chinese internet’.

Beyond blogs, the arrival of social media platforms have brought further change to the internet in China and several scholars have attempted to address this change, albeit within a similarly constrained set of themes and methodologies. One paper attempts to describe the evolution of social networking sites in China; however, here too analysis centres on general discussions of whether social media as a whole has negative or positive consequences, supported by a number of isolated national and regional events.<sup>22</sup> Longstanding debates on censorship, social control or free speech have been transplanted on to the novel form of social media.<sup>23</sup> Other papers analyse factors shaping the adoption<sup>24</sup> and continued use of<sup>25</sup> social networking sites; these have tended to rely on online surveys with limited contextual information from which to draw their conclusions.<sup>26</sup>

Microblogs (*weibo*) – specifically the platform Sina Weibo – have attracted the greatest level of scholarly attention of all social media platforms in China. Here, too, there has been a strong tendency for academic researchers ‘to oscillate between seeing information and communications technologies (ICTs) as “liberation technologies” and emphasising the Chinese state’s authoritarian resilience and adaptive use of ICTs’.<sup>27</sup> Scholars, particularly those working outside China, have frequently sought to understand how censorship operates on these microblogs through automated collection and analysis of the types of posts deleted and searches blocked,<sup>28</sup> and commentary on users’ strategies in response to these constraints.<sup>29</sup> Other methods have tried to analyse the postings that appear on these platforms on the assumption that they are indicative of public sentiment.<sup>30</sup> While these discussions have been valuable in helping to understand how microblogs have reformulated both public expression and authoritarian control on the internet in China, they have provided little insight into how these platforms fit into individual lives beyond the domain of public political participation. Furthermore, the focus on microblogs has meant that many other popular platforms have received comparatively less attention.

In summary, although the internet in China has undergone substantial change in the last decade in terms of platforms, access and use,

scholarship has tended to apply established theoretical frameworks and modes of analysis to these new communication technologies. This study advocates an alternative approach: to actually engage with users of these technologies in order to understand why the platforms appeal to them. Such an approach will allow analysis of the way internet users frequently move between a range of platforms, devices and online and offline environments in the course of their daily lives, consuming, producing and sharing content in the process.

## Internet use in rural China

Rural internet users have frequently occupied a marginal space in many studies of Chinese internet use<sup>31</sup> on the assumption in press, public and even some academic accounts that ICT use in the countryside is either non-existent or is substandard when compared to urban areas.<sup>32</sup> This is despite the fact, as previously mentioned, that 27.5 per cent of the country's internet users – some 178 million people – are rural residents.<sup>33</sup>

One of the most exemplary areas of existing scholarship that partially covers the issue of rural citizens is the study of China's migrant populations. Since the majority of China's internal migrants originate from the countryside, this group arguably represents an 'uprooted' rural population whose ICT use is characterised by very particular needs and behaviours. One comprehensive account notes how migrant populations rely on a new generation of affordable communication technologies, a phenomenon which has helped to sustain and shape the migration process,<sup>34</sup> while noting that other complex economic and non-economic factors are also at play.<sup>35</sup> Another detailed study emphasises the unique experience of mobility for Chinese rural migrants who, despite having undergone rural-to-urban migration, find that the nature of their employment often restricts their physical mobility, requiring them to stay in the same place for long hours.<sup>36</sup> As such, ICTs – especially smartphones – become incredibly important by allowing migrants to expand their social networks. These accounts manage to situate users' online practices within the specific offline world they experience as migrant labourers, and in so doing provide an illuminating description of the relationships between the two worlds. While the above examples provide valuable insight into the unique aspirations and priorities of rural individuals resettling in cities, they cannot be assumed necessarily to apply to rural populations who remain in their place of origin.

Aside from this literature on rural migrants, other approaches to understanding ICT use include technical literature on the systems



designed for use in rural areas and the limited quantitative and (particularly) qualitative work on actual use of ICTs in rural areas. An important step forward came in a recent special issue of the *Chinese Journal of Communication* which highlighted the general lack of attention afforded to rural internet use,<sup>37</sup> and showcased the range of qualitative and quantitative methods that could be applied to understanding specific rural contexts of use.<sup>38</sup> While this helpfully acknowledges the need for Chinese internet studies to address rural perspectives, what is still missing are those accounts that emerge from long-term sustained ethnographic engagement of the type in this study.

A further issue identified as clouding discussions of the impact of the internet in the Chinese countryside comes from a continuing tendency to treat the rural as a domain that is the opposite of the urban, and completely separate from it. Wallis challenged the term 'Chinese countryside' pointing out that places considered to be rural in China can differ drastically, ranging from areas 'almost indistinguishable from the city in terms of transportation and communication infrastructure' to especially remote settings 'where nobody had computers or Internet connections'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, part of the reason why many urban Chinese may believe that the rural environment has no internet comes from a romanticised understanding of the Chinese countryside.<sup>40</sup> However, rather than being frozen in a timeless past, numerous anthropological accounts have emphasised changes in the material culture of the countryside,<sup>41</sup> and a new form of the 'modern everyday'<sup>42</sup> has been proposed as a way of describing the experience of life in contemporary rural Chinese. In a Chinese village one may now reasonably expect to meet 'a variety of consumer goods and means of communication, including TVs, mobile phones, and internet' in addition to rampant house construction, increasing integration with regional and national market economies, growing levels of literacy, and an awareness of and participation in modernist discourses.<sup>43</sup>

The concept of the modern everyday is especially useful when framing a study of social media use in a rural setting. It allows for the internet and social media to be viewed as a modernising influence bringing with it social change and possible types of translocal connections, while also acknowledging that these technologies find themselves embedded into everyday practices and contexts.

This review has described the pervasiveness of a narrow set of themes and methodologies that has defined research into Chinese internet use, a general lack of focus on the specificities of different social media platforms and their use, and a need to see social media

as embedded in the everyday lives of rural Chinese citizens. It is these areas of social media use in Anshan Town that this study attempts to address.

## Locating Anshan Town

This book describes the use and impact of social media in a single rural township called Anshan Town. Although the townsfolk clearly identify themselves as being rural – as does the government, which assigns rural category household registration permits (*hukou*) to its residents – the character of the town, its residents and its deepening links with surrounding urban areas conform to the experience of the ‘modern everyday’ as described in the previous section. Anshan Town is located in east China’s coastal province of Shandong. The province’s wealth is largely concentrated in the manufacturing-heavy coastal regions; however, as one moves further west inland towards the provincial capital of Jinan and nearby Anshan Town (Fig. 1.1), the amount of industry decreases and the landscape becomes comparatively more rural.



**Fig. 1.1** Location of Anshan Town in China

Jinan city is divided into four districts and the surrounding suburban and rural area (which still falls under the city's administrative remit) is divided into six 'county-level' areas, comprising a mixture of districts, counties and one further city. Anshan Town is located in Bai County, which is administered from a large, central county town – Bai Town – with a population of around 100,000. Nestled within Bai County's hilly landscape is the valley township of Anshan Town.

The township has a total area of around 90 square km, in the centre of which lies Anshan Town. The administrative town consists of just a few government offices, although in practice when people refer to Anshan Town they mean four relatively contiguous villages (Baige, Heige, Huangtian and Xintian) that have grown to form an almost unbroken built-up area of around 1.5 square km. Official figures place the combined population of this central town area at 6,000 persons. The remainder of the township contains a further 37 scattered villages, with populations in each village ranging from around 125 to 2,500 persons. The total population of the entire township stands at around 31,000 persons.

The main town is laid out along three main streets running north to south and another three east to west. The southernmost east–west street is referred to by locals as 'commercial street', as it contains the majority of the town's shops and supermarkets, as well as the police station and a small number of residential buildings. Running parallel to this is a street containing the town's government offices, taxation office, family planning office, middle school and a sizeable factory for heating systems, which is the town's largest employer.

While townsfolk continue to identify Anshan Town (and themselves) as rural, the urban is encroaching on the edge of the township. A luxury golf course has been built just outside the township, and a cluster of universities relocated from Jinan have established a new 'University City' development between Anshan Town and Bai Town. Within the town itself, many roads are newly surfaced and four lanes wide, which, when combined with the scarcity of vehicles on them, acts as testament to the government's ambitious plans to build capacity for future use. Large engineering projects, such as the construction of wind turbines in the mountains surrounding the town, make modernisation a concrete reality for townsfolk, and are reflected on a smaller scale by their own house building projects. As this book will show, social media appears as one among these and numerous other manifestations of modernity in the town. Townsfolk experience modernisation as a source of problematic change, while simultaneously seeing it as increasingly

integrated in, and essential to, many aspects of their everyday lives. In this way, social media technologies become a significant point around which multiple moral issues arise and are reflected upon.

## Moral frameworks in Anshan Town

A number of scholars have provided accounts of the changing moral and ethical values present in rural China during the reform era.<sup>44</sup> Many of these accounts have emphasised that the transition towards a market economy, along with a growing sense of consumerism, has combined with the retreat of the state from many areas of public life, and resulted in increasing concern among rural people of a perceived breakdown of moral principles in society. Scholars have emphasised growing individualism<sup>45</sup> or the absence of a clearly defined moral economy<sup>46</sup> in society as the source of such decline. Steinmüller provides a convincing critique of accounts of the ‘loss of morality’, noting that individuals still retain some form of moral code on which they are willing to base ‘strong’ moral judgements, but it is just that these moral codes differ from those held in the past.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor,<sup>48</sup> Steinmüller argues for an understanding of how ‘moral frameworks emerge in action’, rather than presupposing there exists a specific ‘Chinese self’ or a universal normative ethics.<sup>49</sup> Instead he proposes a need to understand the emergence of these moral frameworks not through unusual moments of moral crisis, in which ethics become a ‘second level reflection of morality’, but rather by paying attention to the ‘everyday ethics’ of rural life, acknowledging that the modern is now present in daily life in the Chinese countryside, and demonstrating how rural people respond to the moral challenges of this transformed life.<sup>50</sup> I have found this concept particularly useful as I sought to understand how the people of Anshan Town handled social media in their everyday lives.

Although I share Steinmüller’s aversion to assuming there is a specific ‘Chinese self’, the specific geo-cultural location of Anshan Town, and this region of the Shandong province more generally, adds a unique aspect to this case, as both its residents and outsiders view the area as making a special contribution to China’s cultural heritage. Chinese people from outside Shandong province generally characterise its inhabitants as being especially ‘friendly’, ‘good hosts’ (*haoke*) and ‘sincere and honest’ (*pusu*). These stereotypical traits are often attributed more broadly to the region’s cultural and historical heritage,<sup>51</sup> which is seen

to have influenced the entire country's civilisation. Shandong's cultural history was also a source of pride for people from Anshan Town. Townsfolk often proudly explained to me that they were influenced by Confucius, the Chinese philosopher who was born close by in 551 BC<sup>52</sup> and whose teachings emphasised the nurturing characteristics of filial piety, duty, sincerity, wisdom, honesty and courage.<sup>53</sup>

An additional contribution to this cultural milieu is spiritual. The hills around Anshan Town are home to a significant number of Daoist and Buddhist temples (Fig. 1.2), and slightly further afield are religious sites of national importance. Townsfolk relate to these religious traditions pragmatically. While many families visit the Daoist temple during the bi-annual temple festivals,<sup>54</sup> few formally study *The Analects*, *Dao de jing* or other religious texts. When townsfolk were asked to identify their religion in a questionnaire, around 85 per cent left the answer blank; 9 per cent responded with none; a single person each identified themselves as being either Buddhist, Christian or Islamic; and one individual (in jest) listed their personal religion as 'the Communist Party'.<sup>55</sup> These figures are roughly similar to larger national level surveys.<sup>56</sup> However, even though they do not identify with a particular religion, a significant proportion of townsfolk regularly cited the influence of these traditions to account for the good-natured character of local people.



**Fig. 1.2** A Daoist temple in Anshan Town

## The town and its people: an outsider's view

The moral qualities attributed to Anshan town people can be perceived through the opinions of outsiders living in the town. Peng Lei was a 25-year-old male engineer from China's Hebei province who was temporarily living in Anshan Town, working on a utilities construction project for a large national company. Peng Lei and four colleagues lived in a rented house on the edge of Huangtian village, and typically spent much of each working day in the town's outlying villages overseeing onsite work.

Peng Lei considered Anshan Town to be a backwater. Having grown up in rural China himself, he had hoped his career would have brought him to more exciting places than this. In the evenings Peng Lei lay on his bed with his laptop or phone, browsing the social media profiles of former university classmates, envious of their 'exciting' lives in large cities. Peng Lei complained of Anshan Town's blandness and lack of amenities:

The people in our company all think this place is too poor. Only the roads are wide, but really its spending power is just not yet present... There are no *real* shops... the town ought to have a big supermarket.

Peng Lei and his colleagues would drive to Bai Town at least once a week to shop in the large supermarket there, or to eat at one of its many restaurants. By contrast, while in Anshan Town, Peng Lei spent his free time mainly using his Lenovo laptop or one of his two smartphones to keep in touch with his former classmates and his girlfriend (who was in another city in China) or to watch films. Despite Peng Lei finding life in Anshan Town to be tedious, he was able to acknowledge some merits regarding how townsfolk organised their lives:

As far as China goes, Anshan Town isn't that bad. Let's say you compare it with other [places]. There aren't many people, spending power is low, but they do have their own factories which increases people's salary, and helps to resolve China's [family] 'harmony problem' (*hexie wenti*). Nowadays, so many people leave their hometown to find work, spending long periods of time living apart from each other. The divorce rate is high, and it is impossible to look after the children. This creates many problems for society, for example children who lack their parents' love, and only get to see them once a year. I'll try my hardest to avoid getting into this kind of situation.

Peng Lei's description notes how, unlike many parts of rural China where people abandon their villages to search for work in cities, Anshan Town's local industry creates local economic conditions that are favourable enough to persuade some residents to stay. Local government figures indicate that around 60 per cent of people living in the township's villages chose to remain in their home villages rather than migrating to either Anshan Town centre or nearby urban districts. In this climate, local development is made apparent to townsfolk through the increasing adoption of a range of new technologies, consumer goods and infrastructures appearing in the town, including social media, which allow people to participate in modernity while remaining in their place of origin.

One of the questions that emerges from the relative rootedness of Anshan Town people is how their social media use interacts with the moral frameworks, as outlined above, that they confront on a daily basis. The impacts of technology on tradition in China are often framed by scholars in terms of whether new 'foreign' technologies such as the internet are compatible with Confucian values, or whether they will have a 'good' or 'bad' effect on China's development.<sup>57</sup> This approach not only ignores the fact that far from being an alien technology, internet use in China now occurs on local platforms using domestic brand smartphones and other technologies, but it also assumes that a given technology will cause people to act in a certain way (this way of thinking is known as techno-determinism). For this study, rather than assuming that traditions are fixed, constant and rooted in the past and thus challenged by the presence of new technologies, I have instead used the term 'moral framework' to emphasise the way that moral norms are in fact distributed throughout any society, and are constantly being constructed and challenged by its members.

Thus, rather than treating society and technology as separate from each other, this study takes the approach that social media use needs to be understood within the context of broader shifts in these moral frameworks (which were already occurring in the town prior to the arrival of social media). This book will consider not only how these frameworks may be challenged by the advent of such media, but also how the social media platforms provide new spaces where moral positions can be reproduced and reinterpreted.

## Households and families

The moral frameworks referred to here often related to concerns regarding family, so it is worth noting the enduring importance of living in

**Table 1.1** Household size distribution among survey respondents

Household size (persons)	Frequency	Per cent
1	7	6.3
2	25	22.5
3	42	37.9
4	30	27.0
5+	7	6.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100.0</b>

multi-generation families in a single household. Our initial survey questionnaire, carried out at the beginning of the field work, helped to provide a general feel for household composition, and also highlighted how townfolk generally avoid living on their own (Table 1.1).<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, 86 per cent of those surveyed were nuclear families, with only 6 per cent living in a stem household (i.e. a family in which three generations, including one or more grandparents on one side live together under one roof); 3 per cent lived in extended or other family arrangements. These figures align with other research on rural China that documented a transformation in rural family structure in reform-era China as growing numbers of newly-married couples choose to live separately from their parents, or elderly parents were housed separately.<sup>59</sup> For the vast majority of persons in the town, family still constitutes a major presence.

Family structure was also shaped by the family planning policies of the area. While in Jinan or Bai Town, where couples with a household registration category of 'urban' have been restricted to having only one child,<sup>60</sup> in rural areas such as Anshan Town, in an effort to accommodate the preference for male offspring, if the first-born child was a girl couples were allowed to give birth to a second child. Few townfolk contravened these restrictions:<sup>61</sup> of 312 middle school students surveyed, only 2.7 per cent reported having an older brother (see Table 1.2).<sup>62</sup> However, if the first-born child<sup>63</sup> were a girl, she would almost inevitably have a younger sibling.

The issue of educating their offspring constituted a major concern for families, reflecting its perceived importance for family prosperity and moral cultivation.<sup>64</sup> Anshan Town has both a large elementary and a middle school. A further eight elementary schools operate in key villages. Government policies to consolidate the delivery of education in larger 'standardised schools' has resulted in the closure of many small



**Table 1.2** Survey results showing reported types of sibling relations among middle school students

<b>Sibling of which respondent indicates having at least one</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Per cent</b>
Older brother	8	2.7
Younger brother	49	16.4
Older sister	71	23.8
Younger sister	35	11.7

elementary and middle schools in the township. Recent years have seen a proliferation of expensive (and illegal) private tuition classes that operate during the summer holidays, the popularity of which reflect the willingness of parents to invest in their offspring's education. The town's only high school also closed in 1994, forcing many young people to migrate to urban areas on graduation from middle school in order to continue their formal education.

## Employment

Anshan Town people overall are very hardworking, with individuals often balancing several different jobs. For instance, Tang Xiaoguang, a teacher of 'ethics and morals' (*sixiang pinde*) in the local middle school, supplemented his income by running two lottery ticket stalls in the town, in addition to selling photo printing services. Despite such moonlighting being commonplace, there are nonetheless several main types of employment, many of which are highly gendered in nature. These occupations play a major role in determining individuals' social and physical mobility, which in turn affects their social media use. Some of the main occupation types are described in the following subsections.

### Manual workers: from farms to factories

Manual workers are largely males between 20 and 40 years old, who either work on their family's own farm, as temporary unskilled labourers in construction or (increasingly) are employed by several factories that manufacture pressurised heating systems for apartment and office complexes. These few factories are major contributors to the town's economy, employing around a thousand predominantly local labourers,

including welders, electricians and machine operators. The average factory labourer earns around 3,500 RMB (\$564) per month which exceeds the town's average monthly salary of 2,820 RMB (\$454). This compares favourably with families who depend solely on farming (often from outlying villages), and who earn only around 1,500 RMB (\$242) a month.

Factory work is gendered by industry. A small number of adult females work on the factory floor of the largest heating factories; however factory management typically considered them unsuitable for especially 'heavy work' (*tili huo*). The town also has two small garment factories that produce clothes for the domestic market, both of which employ only female labourers.

Official local government figures from 2006 suggest that industry and agriculture contributed to the town's GDP in roughly equal measure. Since then, more and larger factories have opened, although agricultural labour still remains significant. As men have increasingly taken on profitable factory work, women have been left to perform an ever-greater share of agricultural work. Men still participate in farming when required, most notably around the autumn harvest (*qiushou*) and spring planting periods. The factories accommodate this by ramping down production at this time, allowing their workforce to return home during busy agricultural periods. These local factories – employing local labourers – thus reflect an aspect of industrial China that differs from the established portrayal of migrant labourers in factories far from their place of origin.<sup>65</sup>

The main crops of the area are wheat, corn, peanuts, sweet potatoes and increasingly fruits such as cherries and peaches. Most farmers continue to grow produce largely by hand. Families who depend solely on farming earn noticeably less than those who diversify. For young people, and particularly for males with few qualifications, factory work thus represents a route to a fairly stable salary, despite its physical demands.

I'm at home studying, but I don't know *what* to study. I would like to learn the skills necessary for the kind of job that involves lying in bed at home, but in which you can still earn money. Does anybody have this kind of job? It doesn't matter if the money isn't very much. Whoever has it, let me know. Thanks everyone.

*Status update on Zhao Xun's Qzone page*

Zhao Xun, a 24-year-old, had never been good at studying, in fact he never successfully graduated from middle school. This limited his choices for further study and while there was the option of a factory

job in Beijing or Shanghai, everyone he knew was in Anshan Town, so he started working as a labourer in a local factory. Despite the salary being lower than in Jinan, living at home meant ultimately he could save more money.

Zhao Xun enjoys his job because his girlfriend, also from Anshan Town, works in the same factory workshop as he does. Her picture sometimes appears on his status updates, dressed in the factory uniform. Zhao Xun has been using social media since 2000, and currently uses it for about three hours each day, mostly during lunch breaks or in the evenings after work. Zhao Xun's other love is football. He plays in the town's informal football team, and helps to administer the team's social media chat group.

### Service jobs: small-private traders, government and enterprise

Service jobs in the town can be divided into two main types: small private traders and 'desk jobs' in government, state-owned and private enterprise employees. The town's service sector is predominantly made up of female workers.

The first category, 'small private traders' (*getihu*), are mainly concentrated on the town's commercial street and provide a range of basic necessities, including a solicitor, stationers, beautician, make-up store, alcohol wholesaler, two petrol stations, furniture stores, glaziers, bakeries, steamed bun makers, photocopy shops, butchers, food staple stores and home appliance stores, three hairdressers, small supermarkets, and pharmacies, and several clothing shops and small corner shops. There are ten restaurants in Anshan Town itself, with several others in the countryside around the township.

Many small traders operate as family-run businesses, with a married couple typically working together. In such cases, the husband tends to be more mobile, doing deliveries or picking up goods, while the wife spends a greater amount of time watching over the store. Some stores, such as clothing, make-up supplies and small supermarkets, are almost entirely staffed by women.

'Desk jobs' in official work units comprise a second type of service employment.<sup>66</sup> They are found in the government offices and state-owned and private enterprises operating in the town. In these organisations, males often occupy higher status positions. For example, the post office and two banks mainly employ female bank clerks, although the bank managers are invariably male. In the town government women

tend to spend more time in the office performing administrative tasks and dealing with public enquiries, while their male counterparts, normally leaders who occupy higher positions, spend more time outside the office meeting people. The majority of employees in these organisations live in Bai Town rather than Anshan Town and commute each day on a free coach provided by their work-unit.

In comparison to factory positions, small-trader and public service jobs frequently involve long periods of time sat in shops or offices waiting for customers or visitors. People who occupy these jobs often have ready access to computers or smartphones with internet connections in their place of work. As such, they are comparatively heavy users of social media.

Dong Lihua, at 23 years of age, is the intelligent and astute daughter of successful local factory owner Dong Guoqiang. Dong Lihua had chosen to study accounting when she went to university in a nearby city. She wanted to continue with a postgraduate degree, but failed the graduate entry examination and decided to come back to Anshan Town, spending several months at home.

Finding herself back in Anshan Town was less than ideal for Dong Lihua, who would rather have been in an exciting city. Dong Lihua's father used his connections to find her a job as a teller in one of Anshan Town's banks. Although Dong Lihua remained frustrated at being stuck in Anshan Town, the branch was part of a larger provincial bank, and she hoped that on completing her training she might be reassigned to a city branch. The office's air conditioning made the job relatively comfortable. Plus, during the quiet periods at lunchtime and in the afternoon, Dong Lihua could message her friends discreetly by using her phone out of sight of the bank's security cameras.

This group of service employees, working in a large variety of professions, are thus defined by the fact that they have relatively easy access to internet connections and social media (for those who desire to use them).

### Travelling educated workers: from the town and from elsewhere

The town has a small group of travelling workers who are typically young males in their twenties or early thirties, often holding some higher education qualifications (i.e. vocational qualifications or university degrees). The town's factories employ most of these workers. However, rather than manual labour, their work involves a significant

amount of travelling throughout China pursuing potential sales, overseeing installations and providing after-sales support for the heating systems. Earnings are commission-based and top salesmen may earn tens of thousands of RMB in a single month. In addition to spending long periods away from their families in Anshan Town, these highly mobile young men have their own cars and multiple smartphones with expensive contracts that allow for inter-province roaming, national calls and increased data usage. This group make extensive use of social media in both their personal and professional lives.

In addition to educated workers from Anshan Town travelling outside, there is also a small group of people who come to Anshan Town from other areas in China – for example, personnel managing highway and utilities engineering projects (such as Peng Lei, described above) and a number of steel merchants who visited the town to sell raw materials to the factories. This group forms a tiny part of the township's population (informal sources within the local government placed the town's floating population at 1 per cent). However they too are typically heavy users of social media.

### Elite: leaders and businesspeople

Anshan Town's small local elite of government officials, business and factory directors command most of the recognised power and wealth. Many prefer to live with their families in apartments in Bai Town, commuting to Anshan Town for work, although a few business directors have also built new houses in their villages.

Dong Lihua's father, 50-year-old Dong Guoqiang, ran a small but profitable factory in Huangtian village, where his family had lived for generations. When Dong Guoqiang was a child, Huangtian was one of the poorest villages in the township. The construction of a new road and subsequent building of several factories close to the village meant that it is now one of the best-connected and wealthiest settlements in the township, and Dong Guoqiang is one of its most successful residents. Dong Guoqiang makes his accomplishments manifest through constructing ambitious factory buildings and is often seen driving around town in his distinctive Audi car.

Dong Guoqiang's mobile phone was another indication of conspicuous consumption. He used a domestic-brand BBK (*bubugao*) smartphone, which commanded a price tag of several thousand RMB and featured ostentatious gold and black casing. Despite its high cost, the BBK phone was poorly suited to social media use. The phone used a

custom Chinese-made operating system, and although apps for Chinese social media platforms were installed as standard, the system remained clunky and lacked many capabilities compared to modern smartphones.

The limited functionality of Dong Guoqiang's phone mattered little to him. He felt no desire to use social media, and had no accounts on any platform. His mobile phone was instead primarily used for voice calls – around 20 per day – through which he managed all aspects of his business. Like many other people of a similar age and background, he found it easier and quicker to resolve issues directly through phone calls than by messaging. He would use an SMS message only if it was impossible to make a call, sending around three messages each day. His apathy towards social media was compounded by the fact that writing Chinese characters on his phone was difficult for him. He had never learnt *pinyin*, the Romanised system for writing Chinese, so instead had to draw the characters manually into the phone. The BBK had a stylus and large display for this purpose, and despite its other flaws, the phone was quite good at recognising characters.

In July 2013 Dong Guoqiang replaced his BBK with a white iPhone 4S, and took great pleasure in showing it to his friends and business partners. However, he soon complained that it was difficult to use as the area for drawing Chinese characters was tiny compared to his previous handset, and using his finger instead of a stylus to draw Chinese characters was cumbersome. Within a couple of weeks, he had reverted to his BBK, and given the iPhone to his daughter. Dong Guoqiang's case was similar to many of the other elite in the town who showed limited enthusiasm towards social media.

## Homes, wealth and possessions

The vast majority of the housing in the township has been constructed by villagers themselves. As is common throughout China, houses are concentrated within continuous villages, which are surrounded by farmland that is divided into plots. This results in spatially intimate villages where people live together as close neighbours, forming a particularly intense social environment both supported and challenged by social media.

The four villages surrounding Anshan Town all have 'old' and 'new' parts. The old villages contain courtyard homes constructed with dark, concrete-faced walls and separated by small alleyways (Fig. 1.3). In contrast the new villages feature uniform houses with tiled exteriors



**Fig. 1.3** Houses in the ‘old’ part of a village



**Fig. 1.4** Houses in the ‘new’ part of a village

and ample space for cars to pass and park (Fig. 1.4). Wealthier households were the first to build new houses, and wealthier villages tended to have more new homes.

The poorer outlying rural villages in the rest of the township consist of a mix of concrete and claybuilt homes (Fig. 1.5), again reflecting



**Fig. 1.5** Mixed housing in an outlying village

the varying affluence of different households in each village. Although here, too, there were occasional new homes being built.

There are only three apartment buildings in Anshan Town. Two have been built by the elementary and middle schools providing around 20 modest apartments for teachers and their families. One factory also has a single block of flats, built to accommodate a number of employees and their families; however, the majority of the factory employees preferred to live in their own villages.

A look at the contents of homes also demonstrates the varying prosperity of households within the town. Television remained a *de rigueur* home appliance, with all but one of the 111 persons surveyed indicating that they have at least one television in their home (see Fig. 1.6).<sup>67</sup> Most televisions are located within the main 'guest hall' area of the home.<sup>68</sup> Desktop computers are also common, with 76 per cent of respondents having one or more desktop PCs in their home. Laptop computers are less common, with 39 per cent of persons claiming to have at least one machine at home. As the majority of respondents surveyed came from the four wealthier villages surrounding Anshan Town, these figures do not represent the entire township. Visits to homes in the outlying villages suggested that ownership of computers in particular is far lower there. This data indicates that, in contrast to the ubiquitous television,



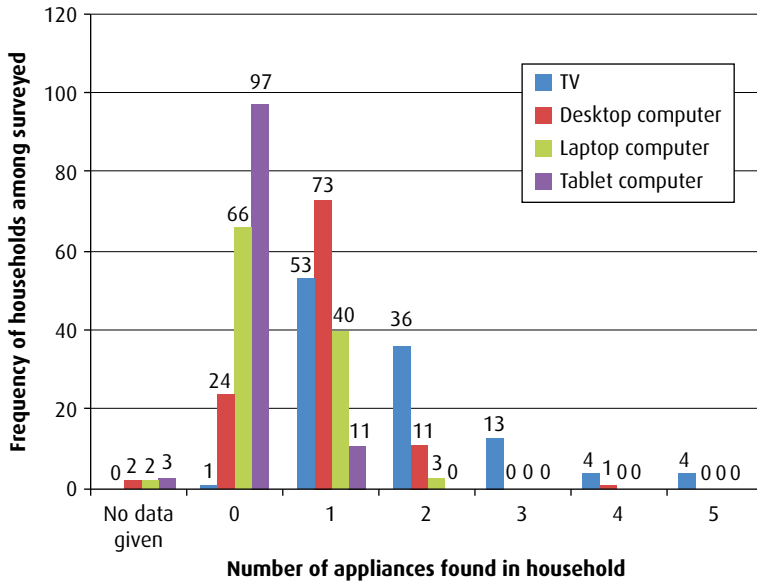


Fig. 1.6 Frequency of households owning typical electric appliances

computers remain an emerging technology within households, a fact that obviously impacts upon social media use.

## Urban connections: mobility and gender

Anshan Town is by no means an autonomous entity, cut off from the rest of the world. The town's connections to nearby urban centres and other regional and national infrastructure have an important impact upon the concepts residents are exposed to, and the educational, work, leisure and consumer opportunities available to them. However, ease of access to urban areas remains largely dictated by the availability of transport. One of the most significant aspects of transport connections is their gendered use; many adult males experience high levels of convenience and mobility, while for females mobility is comparatively less practical. This differential is noticeably reflected in differing attitudes towards and use of social media between genders, as will be explored later in this book.

Despite being physically near Bai Town and Jinan, public transport to both these places was limited. Coaches and minibuses carried

**Table 1.3** Popularity of vehicle types in Anshan Town

Vehicle type	8:30 am	4:00 pm
Minivan	7	0
Sports utility vehicle	2	1
Car/light vehicle	11	7
Three-wheeled agricultural vehicle	14	6
Electric bike	42	54
Bicycle	5	4
Motorcycle	25	24
Light goods vehicle	3	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>100</b>

passengers to Bai Town and Jinan for 6 RMB (\$0.96) and 10 RMB (\$1.61) respectively. Although affordable, the buses were limited to roughly one per hour for a few hours per day. Furthermore, the lack of a published timetable meant that waiting on the roadside for considerable periods was not uncommon. There were no licensed taxi services in the town, leaving residents relying on a number of small minivans that congregated at each end of the commercial street waiting for passengers. These were comparatively costly, with journeys into Bai Town and Jinan priced at 50 RMB (\$8) and 100 RMB (\$16) respectively.

The inconvenience of public transport was one factor that made ownership of private vehicles attractive. Table 1.3 provides the results of a simple count, conducted at two different times on a typical weekday in May 2013, which showed the different vehicle types that drove along the town's commercial street.

While this count shows that around three-quarters of vehicles were two wheeled, over the field work period it also became obvious that there existed a clear gender segregation in the use of different forms of transport: while women generally rode electric bikes, men normally drove cars or motorcycles. The popularity of electric bikes owed much to their low cost, with the best selling models priced around 2,850 RMB (\$459). They were also convenient: their batteries could be charged using a domestic electricity connection, and they achieved a respectable speed of around 20 km per hour. Unlike cars and motorcycles, which required expensive driving licences and insurance, anybody (including children) could drive an electric bike on the road.<sup>69</sup> This was ideal because many women in their thirties and above had never had the opportunity to obtain a driving licence.<sup>70</sup>

However, even a well-maintained electric bike struggled to cover the distance between Anshan Town and Bai Town on a single charge, and would require double the time of the same journey in a car. Recharging the vehicle's batteries took several hours, making electric bikes impractical for journeys to anywhere other than within the township, and making it difficult for the women who relied on such vehicles to travel outside the area without assistance.

The majority of car and motorcycle drivers were men. Falling costs and increasing reliability were making ownership of these vehicles a reality for ever-greater numbers of townfolk. Half of those surveyed<sup>71</sup> said their home had at least one car. By contrast, all except one of the 111 persons surveyed said they had access to at least one electric bike or motorcycle in their household (Fig. 1.7).<sup>72</sup> Cars were more practical for transporting groups of people. Cars also afforded men with easy access to urban areas such as Bai Town, Jinan and elsewhere.

This gendered differentiation of preferred transport methods results in men and women having significantly different geographies of accessibility and reflect deeper gendered inequalities in society. While women often lack easy access to towns and cities (without receiving lifts from car-driving males), for men such trips tend to be run-of-the-mill,

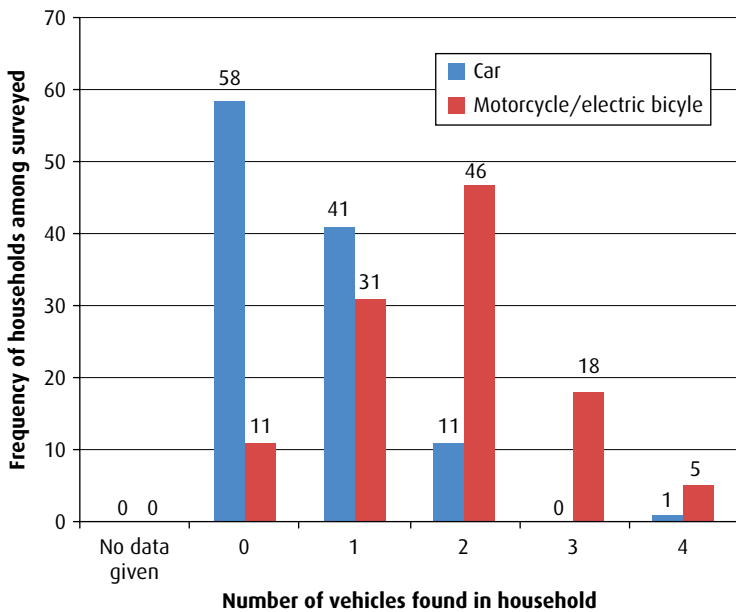


Fig. 1.7 Frequency of households owning vehicles

with plenty of opportunities to travel (often accompanied by their male peers). These are reinforced by a cultural expectation (shared by both men and women) that trips away from home ought to feature in the life of successful men. Chapter 4 will demonstrate how, when social media use is combined with the differing mobility of men and women, new concerns arise regarding fidelity and the potential impact of social media on the institution of marriage.

## Doing field work

I first arrived in Anshan Town in April 2013, having spent several weeks searching for a suitable field site with the help of Professor Zhang Ying at the Minzu University of China in Beijing.<sup>73</sup> Professor Zhang had kindly arranged for me to be a visiting scholar at Minzu University of China for the duration of the field work. Being attached to a well-regarded domestic institution was useful in establishing my credentials to local people as a legitimate researcher.

Initially I had been interested in the possibility of selecting a remote inland province for this study, similar to the place where I had previously conducted research for my PhD project in 2009–2011.<sup>74</sup> However, Professor Zhang was concerned about my safety in what she perceived as the dangerous inland provinces. For my part, I also knew that the comparative project of which this book is part demanded a more structured field work period in comparison to that of my doctoral studies. Professor Zhang steered me towards her home province of Shandong, citing the honesty of its people and their willingness to help strangers as the reason why it would be easy to conduct field work there. After visiting several towns through Professor Zhang's network of contacts in the province, I was taken to Anshan Town. The town immediately appealed to me, and it seemed to offer a relatively discrete and well defined field site in which I could understand how people experience their lives. On my first visit, I was introduced to the town's mayor and secretary (its highest level officials), to whom I explained my project. My integration into Anshan Town was, in retrospect, greatly assisted by these introductions from trusted individuals.

That did not mean that the authorities in Anshan Town greeted me with open arms. Although the town's mayor and secretary were welcoming and cordial the first time we met, they remained distant and non-committal during my research. This was likely driven by a desire to limit exposure to a potentially disruptive foreign researcher and

concerns that I might publish negative reports about the area, which could involve severe repercussions for their own careers. This conscious distancing was perhaps exacerbated by the aggressive anti-corruption drive in progress at all levels of government during the period of my field work, instilling a palpable paranoia among many officials of being accused (rightly or wrongly) of any wrongdoing. Early on, I attempted to ingratiate myself to the local government by accepting their request to appear in local media coverage of the town's inaugural cherry-picking festival; however, I was not subsequently asked to participate in similar events.

Despite their coolness, the authorities allowed me to conduct my daily life and field work unsupervised throughout the duration of my study. I moved freely around the entire township, and nothing prevented me from speaking to anyone I chose. It was only in the final weeks of the field work that I became fully aware of the level of anxiety felt by the town's officials concerning my presence. One of my best friends in the town explained to me that he had been interviewed by the local police on several occasions regarding the precise nature of my activities in the town, with officers from the county level supervising the investigation. My friend informed me that a Chinese-language article I had published in a Shanghai magazine regarding my research in the town had helped to convince the police of the authenticity of my intentions.<sup>75</sup>

The caution of the officials contrasted with the attitude of the majority of townsfolk, who – true to Professor Zhang's word – were incredibly welcoming, confirming the reputation of Shandong people as excellent hosts and eager to help wherever possible. People showed intense interest in my activities. They were generally keen to share their views regarding social media (and all manner of other topics) with me, to complete questionnaires and to participate in recorded interviews. Townsfolk often found it difficult to understand the point of my ethnographic research, and would frequently ask why I would choose to live in their town (especially given that urban people tended to be heavier users of these platforms) and what the utility of my study was. This can be partly attributed to a lack of understanding regarding anthropology and its ethnographic research method. Furthermore, local researchers in anthropology or other social science disciplines generally undertake far shorter periods of field work, or those undertaking more extended stays do so in what are considered more distinctive places, such as ethnic minority regions. Many townsfolk thought my decision to spend 15 months in Anshan Town made little sense.

When I started to conduct questionnaire surveys it helped allay these anxieties, as their contents confirmed to participants my legitimacy as a ‘proper’ researcher, and my genuine focus on their social media use. Undertaking questionnaires was perhaps more useful as an exercise in meeting people, gaining trust and engaging in conversation about social media than in generating rigorous and reliable data. Participants were recruited for the initial questionnaire largely through visiting local businesses and workplaces, as well as in the homes of people I already knew in the town. Many participants, eager to assist me in my research, subsequently introduced me to other people who helped to complete the questionnaire, some of whom I would end up visiting regularly to discuss their internet use.

I was also fortunate to have worked with Li Yinxue and Liu Zhixian, two outstanding Masters students in anthropology at Minzu University of China, who came to Anshan Town to assist me in my field work for the months between June and August 2013. Both were incredibly helpful, assisting in establishing relationships with many participants. Although my Mandarin Chinese was proficient, Li and Liu were able to explain to the townspeople my goals and needs with a greater degree of eloquence than I could myself, which helped enormously in putting the townsfolk at ease. These two students were also of particular help when it came to administering questionnaires. Additionally, their status as outsiders (both were from another province, and had spent many years studying in Beijing) meant that life in the town also seemed somewhat alien to them. I learnt much about organising field work in rural China through working with them, in addition to gaining valuable insights every evening when we returned to our accommodation and discussed the interactions with townsfolk we had shared together that day.

At the end of the summer of 2013, Li and Liu returned to Beijing to continue their studies, leaving me to conduct research on my own for the remaining 12 months of field work. During this time, I continued to carry out some recorded interviews and questionnaires, albeit at a slower pace. My research methods now shifted towards participant observation. I spent longer amounts of time sitting and talking with people, engaging in their lives, assisting them wherever I could (hoping they would reciprocate by participating in questionnaires and surveys). My research topic also meant that people viewed me (incorrectly) as a computer expert, and often called upon me for help in this regard, tackling problems such as uploading photos from a digital camera to a hard drive, using online shopping platforms or changing a profile picture. I learned much about their own ICT needs in this way.

During my field work I lived in a house in Huangtian village rented from Dong Guoqiang, the factory director mentioned earlier in this chapter, who had previously constructed and lived in this family home in the 1990s before moving into a new building nearby. Townsfolk were concerned about me living on my own, and constantly dropped by my house to find out what I was doing.

I soon understood that the best times for meeting people were during the late morning and afternoon period, so I would make sure to leave the house during these times to meet people in their house, shop or place of work. For meals, my neighbours kindly allowed me to join their table whenever I did not have an invitation to eat elsewhere. I soon established particularly close bonds with some people, and I spent longer amounts of time with these families. I participated in the town's football team (despite my abysmal soccer skills), making a number of good friends this way. I became involved with the local middle school, helping its teachers to practise their English and giving talks to the students. All of these ways of getting involved helped to create friendships with participants, allowing me to join in and learn about other aspects of their lives.

This participant observation method was combined with more formal research methods such as semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. In total I conducted 108 recorded interviews, gathering over 84 hours of recorded audio material. In addition, I conducted three questionnaire surveys over the course of the field work, all of which are detailed in the appendix. Perhaps most importantly for a study of social media, these methods were combined with extensive online research. I asked participants to friend me on social media, and followed their account activity so that I could understand what they were posting against the context of their everyday lives. I also dedicated an entire month of field work to a systematic visual analysis of their social media postings (Chapter 3).

Attempting to implement this diverse combination of methods in the testing conditions of rural China was far from simple. Since leaving the field, I have spent many months working through the data, and remaining in contact with my participants via social media has helped in this process. Nonetheless, the core of this study is the 15 months of ethnographic engagement in Anshan Town, and the direct observations and encounters that emerged during that period. As such, I hope that this volume will offer some original insight into the conditions there, and the changing live of its townsfolk.

A final note on anonymity. In order to protect research participants' identities, and in line with the conventions of ethnographic writing,<sup>76</sup>

all names have been altered – personal, business and place (below the provincial level). Occasionally, it has also been necessary to change certain particulars regarding individuals' circumstances, although wherever this occurs care has been taken to avoid omitting details that would impact upon the argument of the book. However, this project sought to go beyond purely textual descriptions of social media and its use by allowing audiences actually to see the field site, its inhabitants and the kind of social media postings they make for themselves through the use of photography, film and actual social media postings. This visual material can be seen in the subsequent chapters of this book, as well as on the project website.<sup>77</sup> The use of such visual media can, however, be a delicate issue and somewhat at odds with efforts to conceal participants' identities. In each instance, permission to use the images was negotiated with the owner or subject of the image.

The majority of individuals I asked for permission were extremely happy to contribute their imagery so that their way of life could be seen by a wider audience. However, making them fully aware of the implications of sharing their images (and postings, many of which were previously only shared among their friends) posed a particular challenge, especially given people's limited understanding of the tenants and aims of anthropological research. Therefore, I feel it is important to recognise that participants' generosity and trust in agreeing to allow visual insights into their lives to be reproduced creates a responsibility, both on myself as author, but also on readers of this book, to avoid narrow concerns regarding the reputations of specific individuals. I would ask readers to focus instead on the educational aim of this material – the intention is to facilitate an understanding of social media's impact upon people's social relationships and their experience of being human – and accordingly to respect the role anonymity plays in creating the space to allow this to happen.

## **Conclusion: the ideal life of Anshan Town**

This chapter has shown what makes Anshan Town unique. It is a small rural town where agriculture remains an important part of life, while a small but healthy manufacturing industry means it avoids desperate poverty. The town's reasonable proximity to Bai Town and Jinan enables its residents to take advantage of connections with urban areas, without having to entirely surrender their rural lifestyle. In this way, Anshan Town is defined by its sustainability. The townsfolk do not have



to migrate to other cities to find work in factories – the factories have migrated to them. This is in direct contrast to the other book in this series regarding social media in Industrial China, which describes life in a large factory town in the south of China that caters almost exclusively to migrant labourers.<sup>78</sup>

Anshan Town's distinctive characteristics also impacted upon its inhabitants' values. The town's enduring rurality and positioning in the centre of the rich cultural and religious environment of Shandong appears to have instilled many of the classic ideals – even stereotypes – of Chinese society upon its inhabitants. They work hard, value education, respect laws, care about family and desire to be acknowledged as good, respectable citizens. This adds further import to the rest of this study, allowing us to examine how social media impacts on this particularly archetypal form of Chinese-ness.

## 2

# The social media landscape: Visibility and economy

Having introduced Anshan Town and its residents in the previous chapter, this book now moves on to describe how these people generally communicate with each other, and to illustrate the different social media platforms they use. One of the most important aims of this chapter is to catalogue the variety of different social media platforms available for people to choose from. The chapter will show that, when faced with this choice, the type of visibility that each platform offers becomes a key factor in determining its popularity, with Anshan Town users generally only opting for platforms that, under ordinary circumstances, limit their visibility to their small group of friends.

Broader factors that shape and constrain these decisions are also considered, for example the availability and affordability of communication technologies in the town and the infrastructure in place for connecting to the internet. Understanding this relationship between choice and constraint, and how it dictates social media use, forms the basis of our examination of online relationships with circles of friends and with strangers that appears in subsequent chapters.

## Changing communications and rural informatisation in Anshan Town

The introduction of social media in Anshan Town is the latest stage in a series of transformations in the town's communication technologies that has occurred over recent decades. Prior to telecommunications, the town largely relied on postal letters for non-urgent communication with other regions. Zhang Lin, a store holder in the town, could recall the later cultural importance of the telegram when he was a child in the late

1980s. At that time telegrams were very expensive. Charges were calculated on the number of Chinese characters in the message. Incoming messages would be hand delivered to the recipient by the town's Post Office. Their cost and rarity meant telegram deliveries would arouse an entire village's interest. Zhang Lin commented that the prohibitive cost of sending these messages meant that their use was restricted to important events such as births or deaths: 'If it wasn't very bad news, it was incredibly good news,' he explained.

Around 1977 the town's first telephone, a black wind-up machine, was installed in the town's government building. At that time it cost 2,000 RMB (\$322), meaning that the town's government was the only institution that could afford one. The Post Office was next in line, installing a phone for public use not long after; however, townsfolk found the charges to be prohibitively expensive. Eventually calling costs dropped and payphones began to be installed more widely in shops. It was not until the early 1990s that fixed-line telephones began to become common in people's own homes.

Since the mid-2000s, rural China has seen increasing rural 'informatisation', with the state actively supporting the expansion of new ICTs into rural areas with the intention of driving economic and social change.<sup>1</sup> Improving mobile telecommunications was a major part of these efforts, although distribution throughout China's countryside was anything but uniform.<sup>2</sup> In many ways Anshan Town was already ahead of these policies, reflecting its proximity to urban areas. The town first received mobile phone coverage in 1996, although mobile phone ownership did not start to become common until the following decade. Equally, authors have noted that the dispersion of ICT infrastructures does not always occur through 'top-down' state interventions, and that provision and adoption also needs to be understood within the context of personal relationships in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> Relatives and friends frequently provide vital parts of the communications infrastructure from the 'bottom-up', for example researchers have noted that adult children returning from urban areas will often give used mobile phones to their older parents.<sup>4</sup> Similar practices of gifting or borrowing mobile phones from relatives were also commonplace in Anshan Town.

When ADSL connections first came to Anshan Town in the year 2000 (according to the China Unicom store manager), the town's government was once again the first premises to have it installed. This reflected a general trend for the town's government to be at the forefront of adopting expensive new communication technologies (however, Chapter 6 will describe their reluctance to appear on the social media platforms

themselves). Once again, there was a considerable delay between initial adoption and these technologies becoming commonplace in people's homes. China Unicom introduced internet access through 3G mobile phone connections to Anshan Town in 2003. In terms of internet access, such as mobile phones, Anshan Town was a relatively early adopter of the technology (on an official level, at least) in comparison to other areas of rural China where policies of informatisation have had only minimal impact.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, while new media arrived early to Anshan Town, wider uptake only really occurred from 2005 onwards owing to the convergence of three trends: the increased availability of affordable handsets and computing technology; reductions in telecommunications costs; and the increasing affluence of Anshan Town's population. Although this has been a positive move in many ways, it has not been without significant concerns that the quality of communications may be declining.

## **Anshan Town's social media platforms: affording visibility**

In much the same way as social media in other parts of the world, China's social media is made up of an ever-growing number of different websites, applications and apps. The vast majority of these services are owned and operated by Chinese companies. While some platforms appear to share particular characteristics with other non-Chinese platforms (which leads some commentators to accuse the former of being copies of the latter), significant differences in features and use almost always exist. Close examination and comparison of different social media platforms help to reveal their specificity in comparison to non-Chinese platforms, and also to each other.

The key factor shaping a preference for particular social media platforms among Anshan townsfolk is the level of visibility afforded by each platform. This section aims to introduce the range and specificity of social media platforms to the reader, but limitations of space make it impossible to describe every feature in detail. Instead the focus will remain on the type of visibility desired from these platforms, which in turn substantiates the argument that social media use in Anshan Town is dominated by relatively closed groups of familiar friends.

The most popular social media platform in Anshan Town during the field work was QQ. An early survey<sup>6</sup> of participants' general communication practices was conducted in which people were asked to

**Table 2.1** Popularity of social media platforms in Anshan Town

Social media platform	Respondents with at least one account (persons)	Average length of use (years)	Average time spent online per day (hours)
QQ (incl. Qzone)	93	5.32	5.93
WeChat	49	1.31	5.11
Renren	22	3.56	1.32
Sina Weibo	15	1.98	2.25
Tencent Weibo	18	2.00	1.93
Momo	3	0.83	2.05

**Table 2.2** Popularity of Chinese social media platforms worldwide

Social media platform	Worldwide monthly active users (millions) <sup>a</sup>
QQ (incl. Qzone)	625
WeChat	355
Renren	45
Sina Weibo	129
Tencent Weibo	220 <sup>b</sup>
Momo	40

<sup>a</sup> We Are Social. 2014. Social, Digital & Mobile in China 2014. Retrieved 4 January 2015, from <http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/social-digital-mobile-in-china-2014>.

<sup>b</sup> Simon, K. 2014. Tencent: The Growing Giant. Retrieved 15 December 2014, from <http://wearesocial.net/blog/2014/05/tencent-growing-giant/>.

self-report their usage of different platforms.<sup>7</sup> QQ ranked highest in terms of account ownership, history of use and daily usage (see Table 2.1). This corresponds with other research that has highlighted the continued dominance of QQ in rural China and among users from lower class backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Aside from these figures, everyday interactions within the town also confirmed that use of both QQ and WeChat dominated people's everyday interactions and communication habits. The ranking of platforms by account ownership also roughly corresponds to the ranking of each platform's monthly active users (see Table 2.2).<sup>9</sup>

The strong preference among Anshan Town people for using QQ and WeChat informed the focus of subsequent field work, it making sense to concentrate on the platforms that local people were using most. As such, a considerable portion of this volume is devoted to these platforms in particular. However, less popular social media platforms are also considered, as understanding how they differ from the two

dominant platforms (particularly in terms of the visibility they offer) helps to account for their limited popularity.

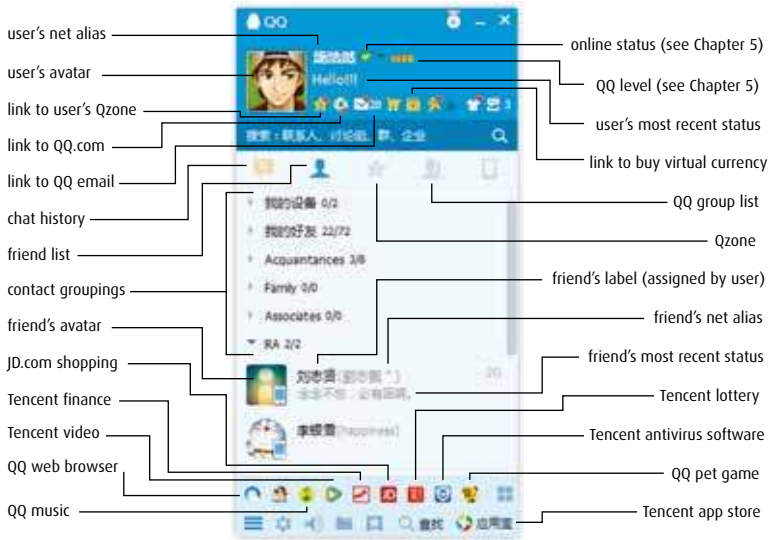
## QQ

QQ, the most popular platform in Anshan Town, is notable in offering its users almost every service imaginable: instant messaging, social networking, email, video sharing, online search, anti-virus software, television and film streaming, cloud storage, news, weather, online shopping,<sup>10</sup> gaming and numerous lifestyle portals covering a plethora of themes such as old age, health, women's issues, education, study abroad.

However, QQ Instant Messenger (QQ IM) is arguably central to many users' experiences of the platform, in addition to being the tool through which they most frequently became visible to other users. When QQ launched its initial service in 1999, then named OICQ, it consisted solely of this instant messaging service, closely modelled on internet chat platform ICQ.<sup>11</sup> Today, QQ IM still exists as a Windows application, now complemented by Mac, Android and iPhone versions. QQ IM is also used to add or delete 'QQ contacts' (one's friends on the network),<sup>12</sup> and to access and receive notifications relating to other QQ services.

Many Anshan Town users configure their home PC to automatically open the QQ IM application and log in to the network on start-up, and will then leave their account logged in whenever the computer is running. In this way, the application becomes a relied upon fixture in many user's software ecosystems, and field work participants were observed using this application not only to locate and communicate with contacts, but also to access the numerous features offered by QQ (Fig. 2.1). As such, for many users QQ IM constitutes the main point through which users' contacts are made visible to them, and they become visible to these contacts.

Users became visible to other users on QQ IM through a number of avenues, each of which offered a slightly different kind of visibility. Messaging itself was the dominant form, and was mostly conducted on a one-to-one basis. This messaging was largely text-based, albeit complemented by a handsome repertoire of both approved and user-created emojis. QQ IM also offered the possibility for users to set up and communicate within 'QQ groups', either as a managed conversational group or in an announcement list. Finally, users also became visible through a feature that allowed users to search for and add other users. Although most users were visible to the rest of the network through this feature,



**Fig. 2.1** QQ Instant Messenger main window

many concealed their identity and thus limited their visibility through the use of avatars and aliases.

Qzone (QQ kongjian, literally ‘QQ space’) is a popular predominantly web-based<sup>13</sup> social networking site where users are made visible to other users by adding information on their own profile pages, which are generally viewable by all a user’s QQ friends.<sup>14</sup> Interactions between users also occurred on user’s profile pages, again generally only visible to friends of the page owner.

Within Qzone, several features allow users to make different types of information visible (to a greater or lesser degree) to other users. A Facebook-like ‘timeline’ called ‘happenings’ (*ta de dongtai*, literally ‘his/her<sup>15</sup> happenings’) displays an aggregated news feed of several elements of a user’s profile.<sup>16</sup> Qzone’s ‘Speak speak’ (*shuoshuo*) function is similar to Facebook’s shelved ‘Wall’ feature, giving users a space to share their thoughts or images (although on Qzone a user can create new posts on their own wall only, with friends only able to comment on the account owner’s posts). Qzone also features a ‘diary’ (*riji*) for more extended entries and a ‘gallery’ (*xiangce*) function for sharing images. Other features include a ‘message board’ (*liuyan ban*) where visitors to one’s Qzone are permitted to make postings, which, although visible to a user’s friends, do not appear on the prominent ‘happenings’ section. Qzone also allows its users to give gifts (both free and paid for) to their

friends on the network. While these Qzone features vary slightly in terms of prominence on the platform, they are all generally visible to all of a user's friends.

The way that users are able to make themselves visible to others on Qzone is also far more visual than on QQIM. Users are able to customise their Qzone profile to a large degree, including colours, typefaces, positioning of navigation menus, background images and music. It is even possible to set an animated introduction sequence to greet visitors to one's own Qzone. A large selection of templates allows users to achieve customisation with minimal effort, although these often need to be activated through spending money or points accumulated by extended periods of Qzone use (to be discussed in Chapter 5).

QQ's extensive gaming network is also extremely popular, and offers users a form of visibility that entails a very specific mode of communication and experience. QQ has a number of flash-based games found inside Qzone, and a large number of downloadable games. These include international games such as World of Warcraft, League of Legends and Guild Wars, as well as locally developed games such as 'Dream of Three Kingdoms' (*meng sanguo*) and 'Crossfire' (*chuanyue huoxian*). Many games are online multiplayer, allowing users to play with their friends.

These games are strongly linked with QQ's social media platforms. QQ IM is frequently used for organising multiplayer gaming sessions among classmates, and screenshots of users' achievements within such games are frequently posted on Qzone profiles. Playing online games together is an important way for friends to socialise and bond in Anshan Town, especially among elementary and middle schoolchildren. As such, rather than gaming being an isolating experience, it tends to be highly group-oriented.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, these games can also be understood in terms of visibility: they make players visible to other users' in a form quite distinct from typical online communication, and one that also privileges specific types of skills and abilities.

The four elements of QQ described above – QQ IM, Qzone, Tencent Weibo and its gaming – are those most frequently used by people in the town, with each providing subtly different ways of making users visible to other users. However, this constitutes only a part of the extensive total offering of services provided within the QQ network.

Schoolchildren in Anshan Town (especially elementary and middle schoolchildren) were particularly enthusiastic users of QQ. In a survey of 312 students from the town's middle school, 85 per cent of



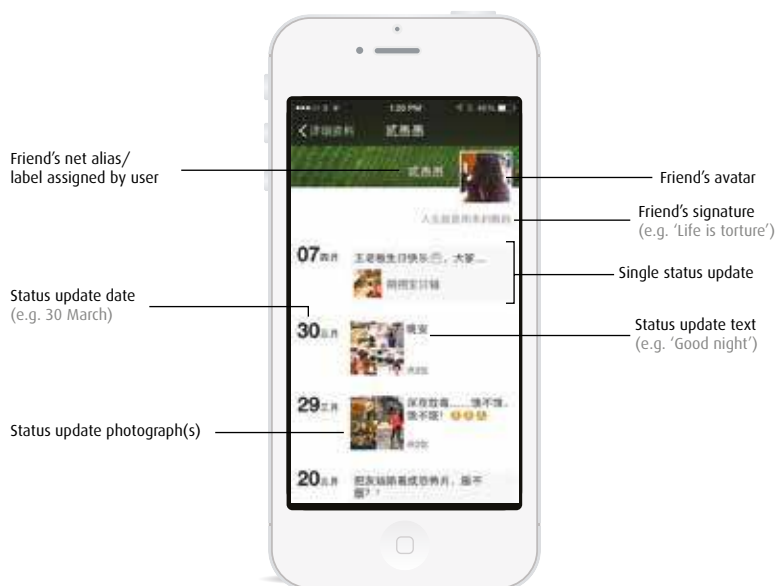
respondents indicated they had a QQ account, the most popular of all platforms.<sup>18</sup> They particularly valued the ability to converse with classmates in QQ groups, being able to customise their own profiles and the gaming features offered by the platforms. QQ could be accessed through almost all internet-connected desktop PCs or phones. The popularity and heavy use among school students led to parental concerns over the impacts of social media on education. Some young adults and university students did not appreciate the particular aesthetics of visibility offered by the platform, commenting that the network was ‘childish’ (*youzhi*) or ‘troublesome’ (*fan*), provoking them to move to other networks such as WeChat. However, even for these users QQ often remained indispensable for activities such as transferring files and storing photographs.

## WeChat

The second most popular (in terms of reported users with one account) social media platform in the town was WeChat. WeChat is a newcomer in comparison to QQ, having only been launched in 2011. Although WeChat is owned and operated by Tencent, the same company that runs QQ, there was initially only very limited crossover between the two (i.e. it was possible to use one’s QQ account number to register for the account). During the course of the field work, connections between the two networks were gradually increased, as it became possible to receive and reply to QQ messages within WeChat, but to all intents and purposes they remained largely autonomous spheres.

WeChat distinguished itself from QQ in requiring users to have a smartphone to login to the network. The app made use of the phone’s contact list to allow people to find friends. This meant that those who lacked a smartphone (typically school students and adults in their forties and above) were effectively barred from using the platform. Because exchanging phone numbers was a sign of relative trust between individuals, the network was perceived by many to be more intimate than QQ.

WeChat was primarily used by persons in the town as an instant messaging chat client, and in this sense the visibility afforded by the platform was similar in some respects to QQ IM. One-to-one messaging dominated everyday use, although it was also commonplace to have group chats featuring several people. Unlike ‘QQ Groups’ which included limits on the number of groups that could be created by a user and required authentication and a designated administrator, WeChat



**Fig. 2.2** An individual user's WeChat Moments profile

groups were often smaller in size and could be created more spontaneously and informally, allowing one to add individuals drawn from one's friend list.

The 'Moments' (*pengyou quan*, literally 'friend circle') feature in WeChat is arguably the most 'social' element of the platform, and as such is the area where users were typically most visible to others. Moments allows users to post photographs or video accompanied on one's own Moments page (Fig. 2.2), which by default can be viewed by all of one's WeChat friends. Users can also make text-only postings to their own moments page; however, this is achieved through a hidden feature in the app marked as being 'an internal function for testing', and which not all users know about. As such, Moments is designed to encourage WeChat users to adopt a particular form of visibility, by posting original, primarily visual content. In the same vein, this function also serves to discourage the sharing of memes by users. For example, it is not possible to 'share' another user's posts on one's own timeline without cumbersome copy-and-pasting (unlike QQ, where a 'share' (*zhuanfa*) button makes this possible). Like QQ, users also experience restrictions on where they can become visible. WeChat users cannot post directly on to another user's Moments timeline, and can only post comments in response to a user's own posts.

A further significant feature of WeChat is ‘Subscriptions’ (*dingyue*), which allows users to follow WeChat announcements from various life-style channels, celebrities, brands, businesses and government bodies that have registered for an enhanced ‘official’ WeChat account. These official accounts allow the entities that utilise them to be hyper-visible to users via the network, while restricting the visibility of the users that subscribed to the channels. For instance, 21-year-old Li Yan is studying for an undergraduate degree in art at a university in Shanghai; however, she returns home to her family in Anshan Town during the university holidays. She subscribes to 25 channels within her WeChat account, including the ‘Chinese University Student Fellowship’, ‘Chinese Film Competition Network’, ‘A piece of art every day’, ‘Global fashion’ and the official account of her university’s Students’ Union. These subscriptions reflect many of the interests she has started to pursue more intently following her migration to Shanghai.

WeChat also contains three features that are specially designed to allow users to make themselves visible to, connect with and chat with strangers. Firstly, ‘People Nearby’ (*fujin de ren*) uses the phone’s GPS function to display a list of users who are close by at that time; this can also be filtered by gender (Fig. 2.3). Secondly, ‘Drift Bottle’ (*piaoliuping*)



**Fig. 2.3** Neighbouring users listed on WeChat’s People Nearby feature



**Fig. 2.4** WeChat Drift Bottle feature

is a novel feature enabling users to write a message (or alternatively record an audio message) to be randomly sent to another Drift Bottle user, who can either reply directly to the original sender or cast the bottle back into the ‘sea’ to be re-assigned to another user (Fig. 2.4). Thirdly, the ‘Shake’ (*yaoyiyao*) function allows users to vigorously shake their phone to reveal a list of other users on the network who are shaking at the same moment. All of these features gave WeChat an important dual nature, allowing users to complement their messaging and sharing with friends with a function that made them visible to strangers, who might be around the corner or on the other side of the world.

Social media’s potential to allow users to connect with strangers captivated many people’s attention, even among non-users, and it is for this reason that it forms a major focus of this study. For example, Song Bing, a university student from Anshan Town who was studying for a Master’s degree in engineering in a nearby city, explained how his male classmates made use of WeChat’s ‘Shake’ function:

In our dormitory they use WeChat, Shake, to make friends...in our school there are very few female students, and no chance to chat with girls. My classmates want to use this as if it were a wedding matchmaker, in order to communicate with female students.

In this case, Song Bing appears to value social media's ability to make his classmates visible to university students of the opposite gender, in face of the lack of opportunities to meet female students on campus.

While QQ and WeChat both have ways to add strangers, there is a slight difference between the two. In QQ, it is typical to directly add strangers using the QQ IM's search function in the same way one would add a normal friend. Because the feature generally makes users visible to other users, this sometimes results in unwelcome friend requests by strangers. By contrast, WeChat's users know that People Nearby, Drift Bottle and Shake were specifically designed for meeting strangers, and as such there is an assumption that users found on these features are expecting to engage in dialogue to strangers. These features of WeChat appear to be designed with the intention of making users who appear to seek such actions visible to each other.

The arrival of WeChat as a viable alternative to QQ had presented smartphone-owning users with a choice of platforms to conduct specific social relationships. While many of the friends on WeChat were people from urban areas met during periods of migration, this was not always the case. One example was Xu Liqin, who runs a hair salon in the town with her husband Han Peng. Xu Liqin is an Anshan Town native, and has lived there her entire life. For Xu Liqin, WeChat represented a valuable new blank space that was completely separate from her cluttered QQ account, which had many friends from her schooldays and some people she did not know. On WeChat she only added close family members and a few best friends from within the town.

## Renren

Renren was the third most popular platform (in terms of users with a single account) among survey respondents. Renren is a predominantly web-based social networking site, although it did also have smartphone apps.

Renren was rarely mentioned by participants during field work, suggesting it was of minor importance to the town's internet users. Current university or recently graduated university students used the network slightly more often. This was possibly because originally (just like the original Facebook) the network was limited to those who were students.

Peng Lei, the engineer from out of town who was living in Anshan Town on a work posting (introduced in Chapter 1), was one of the few people in Anshan Town who actually made use of the Renren platform. The majority of his Renren friends were former university classmates.

However, Peng Lei did not view Renren as useful for contacting them or sharing photos (QQ and WeChat were better suited to those activities). Instead, Renren was his preferred destination for viewing ‘funny videos’, which were often widely shared films of practical jokes or television blooper shows.

One of the most distinctive features of Renren was the fact that it made visible each user’s contact lists to their friends on the network, allowing all users to view who their friends’ online contacts were. While this is a common feature of non-Chinese social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, its presence on Renren distinguished it from both QQ and WeChat. Zhang Jie, a middle school student in the town, was keen to point out this feature as something that made the platform unique.

On Renren it is possible to find your friend’s friends, and then you can add them! . . . But I only use it to get in touch with my classmate’s friends. We’ve never met face-to-face.

Despite the convenience of being able to view friends’ contact lists, the thought of making one’s own social networks visible to others is likely to be a key limiting factor of Renren’s appeal. Firstly, by allowing users to keep their contact lists private, as in the case of QQ and WeChat, it becomes possible to friend strangers without such relationships being revealed to other online friends. Secondly, this concern with privacy extends beyond strangers: even making one’s ‘circle’ of friends from offline life visible to others can be undesirable within the context of a competitive and close-knit society. While one may desire to make oneself visible online, it was generally felt that one’s network of social relationships should remain concealed.

### Microblogs (Sina Weibo and Tencent Weibo)

Microblogs are social media platforms that allow users to share short messages online; these are typically made visible to the entire internet. These messages are predominantly text-based, and are restricted to 140 characters in length. Users can include images, film and geolocation information in microblog posts, as well as mentioning other users of the network. The dominant microblog platforms in China are Tencent Weibo and Sina Weibo.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, microblogs dominate coverage and analysis of Chinese social media, a phenomenon that can largely be

attributed to two factors. First, the rapid growth of Chinese users with microblog accounts in the years prior to 2012 led many to believe that microblogs were becoming the dominant social media platform. For example, between December 2013 and June 2014 43.6 per cent of Chinese internet users were active users of these services (although this represents a decrease from a high of 56 per cent in 2012).<sup>19</sup>

The second reason rests in the open – and highly visible – nature of much microblog content. In contrast to both QQ and WeChat, where content is largely shared exclusively with one's friends on the network, both Weibo platforms make posts visible to the entire internet by default. This is highly convenient for researchers who wish to conduct analysis of postings made by users, offering easy access to and extraction of data from multiple users. By contrast, QQ and WeChat accounts required the acceptance of friendship requests before postings became visible to others.

It was this visibility that made microblogs less appealing to social media users in Anshan Town, and made their use relatively rare in comparison to urban areas. This reflected the tendency for 'most microblog users [to be] mainly young, urban, and middle class, and geographically concentrated in the coastal regions'.<sup>20</sup> A separate study showed that only 5 per cent of microblog users in China live in the countryside, despite the fact that 27.9 per cent of internet users are rural residents.<sup>21</sup> Many registered their Tencent Weibo account just because they had a QQ account, and did not feel the need to use it.

For those in the town who did use Weibo, its main attraction lay in the ability to follow celebrities and organisations they liked, rather than being able to share their own thoughts to the internet. Here a comparison can be drawn with WeChat's Subscriptions feature, described above, which served to provide 'official' sources with accounts. Zhang Lili, who was 31 years old and ran the town's only beauty parlour, explained the appeal of the Weibo in these terms.

I'm always free with nothing to do. WeChat, Weibo, I've nothing else to do, so leave them logged in all day. But I don't really go on [Weibo]; I just leave it logged on 24 hours a day... I don't really post... I follow things about beauty treatments, but I only want to follow, that means I can see whatever they post.

Although Anshan Town's users displayed little desire to make themselves visible on social media, even if they had, the utility of these platforms for achieving this is questionable. In a study exploring who possesses 'voice'

on China's microblogs, it was shown that verified users – 'Big Vs', who tend to be influential celebrities, scholars, public intellectuals, journalists and media organisations – attract users to the platforms, but they can also help to shape user opinion on the same platforms, and most notably act as transmitters of voices of the weak.<sup>22</sup>

Other users in Anshan Town stressed concerns that messages posted online might not necessarily be visible to friends, rather than the same messages being visible to the entire internet, as a detracting feature of microblogs. For example, Zhang Guobao, who ran a pharmacy in the town explained:

If you post to your Qzone then everyone [you know] will see it, but on Weibo only some will know. Like Tencent Weibo, only if you follow will it give you new message, but if you don't follow anyone, then you will not get anything. [If this is the case,] it is very possible that only if you look at it [that person's page] at the right moment, then you'll know.

## Momo

Only three questionnaire respondents reported having a Momo account, and it was perhaps one of the social media platforms where issues surrounding the appropriateness of being visible on the platform were most highly charged. Interviews with high school and university students, and adults in their twenties in particular, revealed the peculiar reputation that Momo was afforded. The app was associated with 'one night stands' (*yi ye qing*) and its mention often provoked a wry smile from participants.

Momo was a smartphone-only app possessing similarities to WeChat's 'People Nearby' feature mentioned above. Momo used the phone's GPS to display a contact list of people sorted by distance from the user, which could also be filtered by gender. One person explained the main difference between Momo and People Nearby was that Momo gave a more accurate indicator of proximity showing distances to the nearest metre, while WeChat claimed only to offer results to 100 metre accuracy.<sup>23</sup>

Experimenting with Momo during the early stages of field work in Anshan Town revealed clear differences in terms of the visibility between different genders. When the app was set to display nearby females only, the closest individuals displayed were over 5 km away from the location of use in the town centre, suggesting female users were outside the



township. By contrast, when the app was operated from the same location but set to display males only, then it was possible to see that many males within the immediate vicinity were using the app.

Of the three survey respondents who reported using Momo, two were young men from Anshan Town, aged 17 and 19. The third was a young, unmarried woman in her late 20s from Bai Town who worked in a state-owned enterprise in Anshan Town. This woman explained that she only ever used the app in Bai Town, and would never open it in Anshan Town as she did not wish to be visible to people in the town. This situation underwent some change as field work progressed. Most notably, during the summer holidays when significant numbers of students returned to Anshan Town from their universities in urban areas, many more people (of both genders) appeared on the app within distances indicating they were inside the township. Nonetheless, some doubted the authenticity of the people it was possible to meet on the platform, as one male explained:

What you see on Momo is so fake. Everyone on it is really a guy. When a man shaves his head, then you know whether he's really handsome or not. When a woman removes her makeup, then you know whether she is really beautiful. I haven't added a single friend on Momo.

While participants had clear opinions regarding the authenticity of Momo users and the reputation of the platform, this may simply represent a widespread conservative discourse among Chinese internet users. An anthropological study of the use of Momo in mainland China has highlighted the importance of the platform's group functions, which challenges the assumption that the app is used predominantly for arranging one night stands.<sup>24</sup> In Anshan Town, however, those who did use Momo spoke little of the group function. Instead the stigma surrounding Momo resulted in a high degree of anxiety around being visible on, or implicated in using the platform. This is perhaps felt especially acutely by women.

### Non-Chinese social media

While the Chinese social media platforms compared so far have afforded their users' varying degrees and forms of visibility, non-Chinese social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) are also significant as state controls have rendered the majority of these platforms entirely

invisible to the town's internet users. Typically, attempting to access these platforms will result in server timeout or page not found errors. As such, there was almost no use of non-Chinese social media within Anshan Town.

Furthermore, knowledge of non-Chinese social media platforms was limited, and few had any idea of what the platforms did. While a small number of people could name some of these platforms (having become aware of them through media reports or from elsewhere), many had little reason to use these services because none of their friends used them, nor did they know how to circumvent the controls on the internet that prevented access to these networks. Nonetheless people were intrigued to know what services were used outside China.

By describing the different social media platforms used in (and absent from) Anshan Town, one starts to get a grasp of the complexity of the townfolks' patterns of use, including the use of multiple platforms by some individuals. Furthermore, it is apparent that the distribution of people on these platforms is not a matter of happenstance, but rather is strongly linked to the modes of visibility that are afforded by each platform. While QQ has a broad base of users of all ages, its most avid consumers in the town are elementary schoolchildren. Teenage males may be more enthusiastic about playing online games, whereas girls typically have preferences for maintaining Qzone. University students enjoyed using WeChat and Momo because it gave them the opportunity to talk to strangers, while these same features made some married couples consider these platforms to be unsuitable (to be discussed in Chapter 4).

However, the preferences for particular platforms were not solely determined by membership of any specific social group. Rather, townfolk had developed different attachments to particular social media platforms and features within these platforms. For many (both at school, and those who had graduated) QQ had strong associations with the school group, and the shared solidarity and pleasure of that group. WeChat may be more strongly associated with urbanity, modernisation and migration. By contrast, WeChat's People Nearby feature and Momo had garnered a certain notoriety with regards to using these platforms for romantic relationships, a fact that served to attract some to the platform while repelling others. This highlights the importance of choosing the appropriate platform for specific activities, and shows how social media platforms themselves become morally inscribed.

The theory of polymedia is useful in understanding why Anshan Town people relate to different platforms in different ways. This theory proposes that rather than simply assuming that the affordances of

a particular platform are destined to shape communication in a specific way, we should instead acknowledge that the relationships that individuals have with different communication technologies is also a key factor in determining use.<sup>25</sup> The model argues that it is impossible to understand the significance of individual platforms in isolation, because the meaning and use of each platform is only ever understood in relation to all others. In the instance of Anshan Town, different social media platforms (and features within these platforms) come to be seen as representing different levels of cosmopolitanism, openness, maturity and different modes of sociality. These values are not uniform among all persons, but rather form a point of identification, contestation and challenge.

A key condition under which polymedia is said to occur is that access and cost no longer dictate individual communication acts.<sup>26</sup> However, examining the way in which people access social media in the town shows that participants often also face significant constraints in terms of both technology and means of access to social media, which suggests that states of polymedia can also flourish in less favourable conditions and also shape users' behaviour on these platforms.

## Economies of access

Contrary to the beliefs of many urban Chinese from large cities, who often thought that nobody in the countryside used social media, ICTs and the internet have permeated the lives of many Anshan Town residents. Increasingly low-cost smartphones and connections have made access a possibility for ever-increasing numbers of persons in China. While this is certainly the case in the town, and while most social media accounts themselves are also free, participant observation revealed a high degree of variability regarding how easy it is for individuals in Anshan Town to gain access to both the devices and connections required to use social media platforms. As such, the economies surrounding access impose a real constraint on people's use of social media (both as a whole, but sometimes in relation to different platforms), and the modes of online visibility available to them.

### Smartphones and mobile broadband

Smartphones are the most popular means of connecting to the internet and social media platforms for adults within the town (and indeed the

whole of China).<sup>27</sup> Only one person from the initial survey of adults said they did not own a mobile phone of any kind.<sup>28</sup> Around a quarter of the initial survey group said that they owned only a (2G) feature phone.<sup>29</sup> The majority – around three-quarters – indicated owning at least one brand of smartphone including Apple, Nokia, Blackberry, Motorola and a range of Chinese brands including Lenovo, Huawei, Xiaomi, BBK, Jinli, Xiapu and Benmai. The high proportion of Chinese brand mobile phones is indicative of the importance of these cheap, domestically produced phones. Around 5 per cent of people surveyed indicated that they regularly used more than one mobile phone, although observations of people moving between different mobile phones during the course of interactions suggest the true figure might have been even greater than this. Often, rather than being an extra cost, multiple devices are used with the aim of saving money (for example, by using one phone for voice calls, and a second with a different SIM card for data).

Phone ownership is also an important issue for schoolchildren in Anshan Town, creating an important means for students to gain easy access to the internet. Despite an almost universal desire for phone ownership among schoolchildren, in a separate survey carried out among 312 students from Anshan Town's middle school, just over half, 56 per cent, of students actually indicated having a mobile phone.<sup>30</sup> Of these phone-owning students, 77 per cent specified that their handset was a smartphone, as opposed to 23 per cent who indicated they owned a normal feature phone. These figures suggest that while smartphone ownership is becoming more common for the town's youth, the majority still lack handsets that allowed them to access the internet and social media.

This transition to smartphone ownership among students seems to conform to broader trends within China, albeit with uptake in rural places such as Anshan Town being somewhat delayed. Two commercial surveys on mobile phone usage among Chinese youth (defined as between 15 and 24 years of age) indicate the radical transition from standard feature phone to smartphone has occurred over only three years (Fig. 2.5).<sup>31</sup> Despite both surveys being largely limited to urban areas of China, comparison suggests that Anshan Town lags only a short distance behind the 2013 figures. While the countryside's youth are 'going mobile' this is at a delayed pace and acts as a further barrier to their use of social media.

While ownership of smartphones and other access devices constituted one form of economic burden related to connecting to the internet, a second came in the form of paying for the connection itself. Additional fees and subscriptions were required to make calls, send SMS messages and use the internet through the mobile networks. Once again, whether

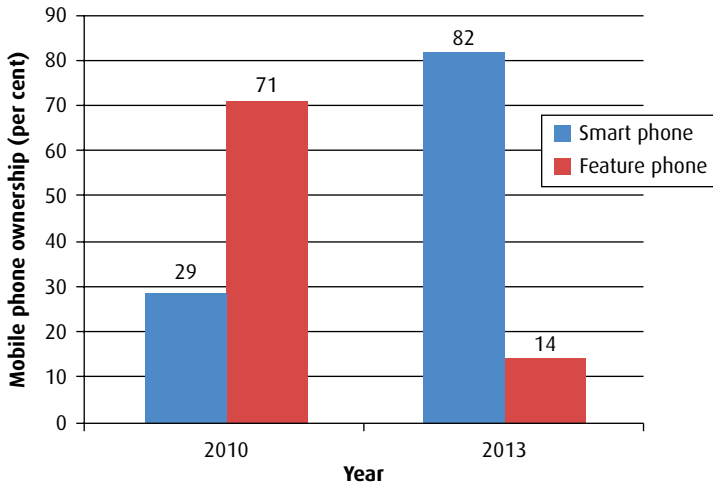


Fig. 2.5 Smartphone/ feature phone ownership rates for Chinese youth

or not these costs represented a burden depended on the individual's own economic situation.

Anshan Town residents can choose from any of China's three mobile phone networks – China Mobile (*zhongguo yidong*), China Unicom (*zhongguo liantong*) and China Telecom (*zhongguo dianxin*) – all of which have signal coverage within the town. Although all the networks are similarly priced, China Mobile clearly dominates the market for mobile phone subscriptions. Data from the initial questionnaire of 111 adults (including non-social media users) showed that around three-quarters of those surveyed hold their only mobile subscription with China Mobile, while one in 10 choose China Unicom.<sup>32</sup> Only one respondent uses China Telecom, and this person also happened to be the owner of the town's struggling China Telecom retail store, which ceased trading toward the end of field work.

A minority of people in the town are also willing to switch between networks, often with the aim of reducing costs. Around one in 10 of those surveyed reported that they had subscriptions with *both* China Mobile and China Unicom. This is despite the fact that only 5 per cent of people surveyed have two mobile phones, suggesting that some of these customers were either using special dual-SIM phones for switching between networks or manually swapping between SIM cards. A significant number of survey respondents who subscribed to both networks used a special China Unicom plan, which offered 300 MB of 3G data for the very low rate of 7 RMB (\$1.12) a month, but had very high call

**Table 2.3** Lowest price-point 3G plans available from China Mobile store in Anshan Town during May 2013

Package name	Monthly fee	Free calling time (minutes)	Free bandwidth for use in-province (Megabytes)	Free nationwide text messages
'Online plan'	48 RMB (\$7)	60 (nationwide)	250 MB	0
'Chat freely plan'	48 RMB (\$7)	150 (nationwide)	40 MB	0
'Local plan'	48 RMB (\$7)	260 (local)	40 MB	0

costs and text message costs. Common reasons for having more than one subscription included the perceived superior quality of voice calls on China Mobile and faster internet speeds on China Unicom. However, for many, having two SIM cards was a response to the expense of mobile bandwidth.

Chinese phone companies tend to offer paltry subscription packages in comparison to network operators in many other countries. The call plans available in Anshan Town offered a generous allocation of either free minutes or bandwidth, but rarely both. Sending text messages almost always incurred a separate charge (see Table 2.3). The cheapest 3G phone packages on sale in Anshan Town, offering a monthly bandwidth quota in excess of 1 GB, cost 288 RMB (\$46) per month. This represented a significant amount, given that a factory labourer was earning around 3,500 RMB (\$564) per month and many families earned significantly less.<sup>33</sup>

People adopted several strategies to reduce mobile bandwidth usage, such as asking for Wi-Fi passwords at their friend's homes or in restaurants. Despite this, many reported regularly exceeding the free quotas on their plans and incurring extra charges. The high cost of mobile access often had noticeable impacts upon social media use for the least wealthy people in town. Some of the users modified the way that they used social media in order to reduce bandwidth usage; for example, by only using QQ on their phone to send text-based messages to friends and avoiding sending images or browsing Qzone, which would use up their data allowance.

The pricing plans meant that, for certain groups of people in Anshan Town, particularly children and middle-aged and elderly people, phone subscriptions with 3G data bundles were unaffordable.

Other factors were also at play, such as perceived utility, although cost remained a major consideration. The idea of spending more than a few RMB on phone charges in a month constituted extravagant excess. Phone companies catered to this sizeable customer base through a number of ultra low-cost plans. One such plan, China Mobile's '0.09 RMB Card' (*9 fen ka*), offered calls within the Bai Town district only for 1.9 RMB (\$0.31) in the first minute, and 0.09 RMB (\$0.15) for each minute thereafter. In exchange for ultra low-calling costs, customers endured restrictions on calling distance, roaming capabilities and lack of data allowances. Older customers in particular felt that these plans were sufficient for their needs, as they had little requirement for data for internet and social media use.

The market for these low-cost calling plans was evidenced when, in October 2013, the town's China Telecom store held an outdoors promotional event. The promoters had shrewdly chosen to organise the event on one of the town's market days, knowing that crowds would be congregating on the town for their regular shop. The event drew over 200 spectators, many of whom were elderly people. A male in his thirties, smartly dressed in a suit jacket with open-collared white shirt, compèred the event using a headset microphone and booming PA system. Over the course of two hours, he wooed the audience with jokes about how virtuous Shandong people were, what good value for money China Telecom offered and how the store in the town was ready and waiting to sign up new subscribers. However, the main attraction for the audience was not the prospect of a new mobile phone, but rather the chance of winning a free plastic washbasin (Fig. 2.6).

Giving away these washbasins was the precursor to two further events of similar duration that occurred over the course of the next two days, in which the organisers introduced a convoluted ticketing system where people could exchange money for temporary tickets (with the promise that these funds would be returned at the end of the event). This would give them the right to claim prizes of ascending value in future promotions, culminating in a 2G handset. As the audience began to doubt the sincerity of the organisers' intentions, and fears grew that they would not get their money back, the number of attendees dwindled. Some alleged that, rather than allowing customers to buy an affordable smartphone, the promotion was designed to trap consumers into purchasing an overpriced handset that they had no need for. By the final event the following day, only a few dozen elderly people remained. This example demonstrates that, although certain groups of townsfolk (young to middle-aged manual and service workers, the town's elite



**Fig. 2.6** A China Telecom promotion distributing plastic bowls among townfolk

and university students), may have had access to smartphones and data packages, elderly townfolk, by contrast, prioritised more limited mobile telecommunication functionality such as voice calls and text messaging – indeed many saw no need to have a mobile phone at all, and were more motivated by ownership of a new washbasin – and accordingly dedicated far less money towards mobile telecommunications. It is therefore worth bearing in mind that mobile phone use in the town encompasses an especially broad spectrum of different needs, expectations and budgets.

### Home broadband connections

One of the defining features of home broadband connections is that, in contrast to the expensive and limited mobile internet plans available in Anshan Town, they do not restrict the amount of bandwidth users could consume. There are two varieties of broadband connection available within the town. The first is China Mobile's WLAN option. This involved powerful Wi-Fi base stations installed on existing telegraph poles throughout the township. Customers are then able to use the Wi-Fi function on their device to connect to broadband internet.



Although WLAN has no bandwidth limit, users could nonetheless only access the network for a limited amount of time every month by logging in through a dedicated control panel. Connection time to the WLAN network either came bundled with the most expensive mobile phone subscriptions (for example, the packages listed in Table 2.3 came with 10 hours of WLAN access per month) or could alternatively be purchased as a standalone package. In 2013, WLAN traffic accounted for 73.8 per cent of China's wireless internet traffic growth, which probably reflects the low cost of this connection method in comparison to using 3G bandwidth.<sup>34</sup>

The second, more common option for connecting to broadband was a fixed line ADSL connection from China Unicom. While these connections cost only slightly more than that of WLAN, they offer faster connections and unlimited bandwidth. This service is now available in most villages in the township, and posters advertising the service often appear on the exterior of rural homes (Fig. 2.7). The steady rise in home broadband connections nationwide has been the result of on-going efforts by ISPs and the Chinese government to promote access at home.<sup>35</sup>

The perceived benefits and affordability of ADSL over WLAN made it the preferred mode of home broadband access. Among 111 adults



**Fig. 2.7** Advert for broadband and other telecoms services on village home exterior

surveyed (including non-users) regarding which methods they use to connect to the internet from their homes, around seven out of 10 connected via ADSL broadband, with the remainder split roughly evenly between WLAN connections, mobile phones used at home (via 3G) and those who claimed never to connect to the internet at home.<sup>36</sup> This significant preference for ADSL broadband was corroborated by a later survey conducted among middle school students, in which 45 per cent of students surveyed indicated that their home had a computer from which it was possible to access the internet.<sup>37</sup>

However, the growing availability of home broadband connections did not mean it was affordable or desired by all the families in the town. According to an informal conversation with the town's China Unicom store manager, around one-third of the township's 8,300 households have installed broadband. However, homes with broadband connections were mainly found in Anshan Town proper and the four villages immediately surrounding it, with fewer households from outlying villages installing broadband. According to the manager, the purchase of a separate computer, along with the installation and maintenance of the broadband – which in May 2013 was 610 RMB (\$98) per year – constituted an unnecessary expense for many families in the town. One result of the scattered dispersion of home ADSL connections was that young people whose families lacked these connections often visited the homes of relatives or friends in order to use a home broadband connection.

One group of people for whom home broadband connections are of particular importance are the small-private traders (i.e. shopkeepers, restaurant owners) introduced in Chapter 1. A large proportion of this group operate their businesses from ground-floor shop fronts that faced on to commercial street, which often double as their homes. Living on the premises reduces a family's expenses and enables them to stay open longer (often up to 12 hours per day), increasing opportunities for sales. Because many of these small private traders were effectively stuck at home with little to do, many installed broadband connections and placed computers within the main area of their shop, allowing them to use the internet while keeping an eye on the store (Fig. 2.8). These shopkeepers constituted some of the heaviest users of social media in the town. They were also noteworthy in another sense: many of them were in their late thirties and forties, and so they stood apart from many same-aged peers who spent far less time online. This constitutes an affordable form of entertainment for these persons.



**Fig. 2.8** Computer placed in a hair salon

### Work unit broadband

Many administrative employees in the town's work units (various government offices, state-owned enterprises or private factories) enjoy similar broadband connections in their workplaces. Their circumstances are similar to small private traders in that they are confined to their desks for large periods of each day and computers have become both an important work tool and a diversion from their work. Not all organisations make use of email, so it is relatively common for employees to use QQ IM for both personal and work tasks. However, their personal backgrounds often differ considerably from local small traders. Many of these administrative workers are urban female employees from Bai Town. These low-level administrative employees in state-owned enterprises enjoy relatively relaxed jobs, affording them with not only a regular fixed salary, but also plenty of opportunity throughout the working day to access social media.

### Internet café

Anshan Town has a single internet café which offers metered internet access for between 1–3 RMB per hour (\$0.16–0.48). This café is in a state

of slow decline, marking a radical transition from several years earlier, when the town was able to support three separate internet cafés. There has been a general dwindling of internet cafés around China, owing to the falling price and increasing availability of home broadband connections and smartphones diminishing their appeal. The husband and wife owners of the surviving internet café in Anshan Town are attempting to avoid a similar fate by diversifying its business offerings. The front of the café is emblazoned with numerous hoardings listing a myriad of services – ‘Photocopying. Printing. Business cards. Banners. Flags. Photographs. Closed Circuit Television Installation. Computer Equipment.’ – which aim to supplement the ever-shrinking income generated from café users. The main area of the café contained 28 computer terminals organised into four rows. No more than half of these terminals were ever occupied. Only 2 per cent of surveyed middle school students identified the internet café as the place where they most often accessed the internet.<sup>38</sup> Despite the declining numbers of people using the internet cafés, they are an important ‘commons’<sup>39</sup> for a small number of people in the town, particularly for the ‘information have-less’ youth, many of whom were middle school students from outlying villages where poorer families could not afford (or did not want) home internet connections.

## School

The town’s middle school also constitutes an important point of access for its students. This is particularly surprising, given the school’s disapproval of student internet and social media use. At specific instances, social media use is tacitly allowed within the school. One example of this is during weekly 45-minute-long computer classes (*weiji ke*). Students explained that the computing curriculum closely follows a dated textbook focusing on teaching the use of software packages such as Microsoft Word, Paint, Excel and Access, despite students’ knowledge of this software often surpassing that of their teacher. One progressive ICT teacher responded to this situation by closely following the content of the textbook for the first 25 minutes of class, then allowing students to use the internet freely for the remainder of the lesson. Students had installed QQ IM on the school’s computers so they could chat online during the lessons. One student even reported having installed Counter Strike, a first-person shooter video game on some machines, for use in class. This constitutes a good example of how even the formal education system was responding to students’ desires to access social media and the barriers that some of them faced in doing so.

**Table 2.4** Middle school students' responses to survey question 'Where do you access the internet most?'

Access method	Number of respondents	Percentage share
Home	177	59
Relatives' home	47	15
School	47	16
Friend's home	22	7
Internet café	5	2
Other	4	1

For a significant minority (16 per cent) of middle school students surveyed,<sup>40</sup> computer classes represented the main way that they accessed the internet (Table 2.4). This indicates the importance of providing internet and social media access, especially among students of poorer backgrounds from the outlying villages who struggled to access the internet and social media in their own home, internet cafés or through relatives and friends.

## Conclusion: Choice and constraint

This chapter has demonstrated the impressive dispersal of ICTs in Anshan Town. Rather than internet and social media being scarce, and its population tentative about using it – a view of ICT that frequently emerges in representations of rural China<sup>41</sup> – having social media accounts and at least some way to access the internet (albeit sometimes temporary and requiring social effort and co-ordination) is an established and largely taken for granted reality for significant groups within the town.

The issue of the mere presence of social media, however, has turned out to be the foundation for a much more complex scenario that involves many different varieties of social media and their relationship to the diverse populations found in a small place such as Anshan Town. This chapter has shown how differing levels of visibility account for the appeal of different social media platforms. However, it has also shown that not everyone in the town has an entirely free choice over which platforms to use.

Visibility emerged as a key determinant in the selection of social media platform. Different platforms offered different forms of visibility, with the most popular platforms, such as QQ and WeChat being comparatively closed, while open microblogging platforms such as Sina Weibo

and Tencent Weibo were less popular. However, I argue that this visibility should not be understood solely in terms of the affordances offered by the platform.<sup>42</sup> This discussion has also shown how visibility could be created or erased through users' own practices (for example, the use of avatars and aliases). Qualities of visibility are also heavily dependent on context. For example, features on social media platforms designed for connecting with strangers help to satisfy some people's desires to be visible to others online; however, some of these users did not always want fellow townsfolk to know they were using these services. In contrast to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, on QQ and WeChat each user's contact list remained concealed from other users. Therefore, although the specific type of visibility afforded by the platform was especially important, this was also dependent on the specific context of the user and their social situation. Rather than being an inherent quality of platforms, the nature of visibility only becomes apparent through interaction with and use of a platform.

The concealment of one's own network of social relations as offered by these platforms is especially useful when one is adding and conversing with strangers, mutually shielding the stranger's and the contact's existing friends from each other.<sup>43</sup> It also speaks to broader concerns about concealing various branches of one's own traditional network of friends from each other. For example, the owner of a small store in the town had various different wholesalers from the nearby county town as friends on his QQ account. He felt more comfortable with the fact that the existence of the other retailers was concealed as it enabled him to maintain good relations with each of them and prevent any jealousy. This accords with anthropological accounts that have emphasised how networks of connections (*guanxi*) need to be 'subtly managed',<sup>44</sup> and sometimes concealed to avoid envy or accusations of impropriety (real or otherwise).<sup>45</sup>

While the use of particular social media platforms is strongly influenced by these notions of visibility, this chapter has also shown that the cost of access meant that not all people could exercise a free choice over which platforms to use, and when they could use them. For all but the wealthiest families, connecting to the internet still constitutes a significant expense. As such, for some in Anshan Town social media access should be seen as a scarce resource, and the degree of usage seems to indicate how quickly it imposes itself as a priority expenditure. Affordable ICT's are filling the gap between the information 'haves' and 'have-nots', to create growing numbers of rural 'information have-less'.<sup>46</sup> While this chapter has offered evidence for this, the explanation will be

found in the following chapters when it becomes clear what people actually get out of using these platforms and the pressures upon them to be part of the community of users. However, one reason was immediately evident, which is that social media lies within a much wider framework. There are clear correspondences between these different populations in terms of age, employment, gender and education and their likely connection with particular elements of social media usage.

The dominant variable is age. Young people were among the highest users of social media, especially middle school, high school and university students. Young adults were also frequent users, although sometimes the degree to which they were able to access platforms in the course of a typical day was determined by profession and working environment. Middle-aged and older groups of people were typically less likely to use social media, although once again this was often linked to people's daily circumstances. A middle-aged shopkeeper in the town might be far more likely to use social media than someone of the same age whose main activity was agriculture.

While QQ is the most popular platform in Anshan Town, its use may be as much about a relationship to the news, gaming and entertainment as it is about social networking. As such, QQ seems to represent a more holistic engagement with communication, which becomes clearer if we consider polymedia in relation to the whole range of platforms available, since the majority of internet users in the town are likely to be using more than one social media (e.g. QQ along with WeChat, Weibo, Renren, etc.). However, this sense of engagement seems even stronger when we see that social media do not just spread across into other functions of QQ, they also become associated with other smartphone functions. Therefore, the discussion of the context of a rise in smartphone ownership was as central to this chapter as the discussion of the range of QQ functions. Overall, this chapter tries to give sense of the sheer size and scale of what it is that people are becoming part of when they use social media. Almost inevitably that implicated QQ and, increasingly, smartphones.

So the essence of this chapter is, on the one hand, to portray the breadth and depth of this new engagement with digital communication technologies, while also starting to introduce the issues that will be further explored in later chapters. The same scale of functions allows, as do polymedia, an increasing differentiation of populations, each delineated either by their association with a particular platform or app or by their creation of specific groups and associations within the field of possibilities.

The general trend for social media use to be concentrated among specific groups also encourages further communication and the development of intimacy within these groups, providing the foundation on which 'circles' of familiar friends are constructed. However, maintaining such circles requires not only ongoing exchanges, but also acceptance, and adherence to a shared set of ideals. The next chapter investigates the actual messages shared on the social media profiles of Anshan Town people.



### 3

## Visual postings: Idealising family – love, marriage and ‘little treasures’

Having introduced Anshan Town, its people and the social media platforms used there, we now turn to consider what content townfolk actually post on their social media profiles. Close examination of these postings – many of which relate to family themes – appears to confirm the type of online visibility preferred by the town’s social media users, as outlined in the previous chapter, which generally privileges sharing posts with closed circles of friends.

Rather than attempting comprehensive coverage of all the posting genres, this chapter focuses on some of the most common types of post: photos of offspring, memes related to love and marriage and posts professing gratitude towards one’s own parents. The choice of these three themes is simply an acknowledgement that they are some of the dominant genres of posting, which demand proper contextualisation and explanation in relation to the various moral frameworks present in the town. These popular postings are of particular interest, given that their content appears to differ so markedly from the overtly political postings which, as was discussed in Chapter 1, have largely dominated academic coverage of social media and internet use in China to date.

This chapter argues that because the content of these posts is centred on family themes and the platforms they are shared on allow only limited visibility, the postings function as a way of sharing with friends moral discourses around what idealised ‘traditional’ family relations should be. This argument will be challenged later in Chapters 4 and 5, which will show how people also use social media to explore and rationalise the moral implications of various transformations in society.

The task of examining participants’ social media postings in a systematic way required its own dedicated method. October 2013 was spent recording and analysing the social media postings made by participants

on their own Qzone pages.<sup>1</sup> I asked all 111 participants who completed the initial survey questionnaire<sup>2</sup> to friend me on QQ so that I could view and analyse their Qzone posts. A total of 55 people from this group both friended me and had active Qzone profiles that could be accessed. Collecting data involved taking a screenshot of each individual post on a user profile and saving it into a database, in which each image could be ‘tagged’ with multiple themes. In total, from these 55 profile pages, 1,214 separate photos, diary and ‘speak speak’ entries were examined. Of all the posts analysed, themes relating to offspring – e.g. ‘child’ and ‘baby’ – and posts relating to romantic affection – e.g. ‘love’ or ‘romance’ – were the most significant genres. Both of these themes occupied 151 tags.

As the categorisation was carried out by myself, it was necessarily somewhat subjective. Therefore, the statistics used to determine the popularity of postings are by no means comprehensive or statistically rigorous. Instead they are included to provide a feel for the kinds of posts on the Qzone profiles of Anshan Town people, and they do correspond to the general trends of postings that I observed throughout the field work.

One distinctive advantage of this method was that this analysis of postings was a small part of a long-term period of ethnographic field work, thus allowing me to cross-reference what I saw people post on their social media profiles with everything else I knew about these individuals through my interactions with both them and others in the town.

## ‘Treasure one hundred-day photographs’: a wealth of variety

My little treasure has been born. 3.7kg. Born at 4:48.

—Young mother’s posting on her Qzone page,  
a few hours after she gave birth.

The birth of a child is always celebrated in Anshan Town. These celebrations do not only mark the arrival of a new life, but they also express the new parents’ pride in fulfilling a duty to their own parents by ensuring a new generation.<sup>3</sup> Young parents are often keen to share images of a new baby, often called a ‘treasure’ (*baobao* or *baobei*), with their friends on social media. This is particularly the case for young mothers, most of whom still observe a traditional month of confinement in which they remain inside their home with the newborn child for a period of a month following the birth.<sup>4</sup> However, the mere event of birth does not mean a child is automatically considered to be part of the family. Instead, the

successful incorporation of a child into the family occurs in the period following birth, and its success becomes clearest in the practice of ‘Treasure one hundred-day photographs’ (*baobei baitian zhao*).

The practice of producing and sharing a child’s photos on social media needs to be understood as developing out of older traditions. For example, research carried out in rural north China during the early 1990s identified families marking a child’s one hundredth day as a major event – one among a number of celebrations of a child’s survival that take place during its first year.<sup>5</sup> Banquets were frequently held where friends and family gifted red envelopes filled with money. Such celebrations were said to symbolise long life and mark a point at which an infant truly becomes part of a family, owing to the increased likelihood of a child’s survival.<sup>6</sup> Similar festivities still occur in Anshan Town today, although now in tandem with the production and online sharing of these commemorative photographs.

Advances in affordable technology, the increasing affluence of townfolk and national trends within China have led to photographs of the child being commissioned, and this too has become an integral part of the ritual. The town’s first photo studio opened in the early 1980s and the practice of producing a single black and white baby photo of newborns became commonplace (Fig. 3.1). Towards the end of the 1980s colour



**Fig. 3.1** Black and white baby photo taken during the 1970s



Fig. 3.2 Colour one hundred-day baby photo taken during the 1990s

photography arrived. In the mid-1990s photo studios started overlaying clear transparent sheets featuring adornments and decorations on to the developed colour photos (Fig. 3.2). From 2010 high-quality, professionally produced photo albums for ‘Treasure one hundred-day photographs’ started to become widespread in the town, following trends in nearby urban areas. Anshan Town has four photography studios offering one hundred-day photo services (in addition to wedding photos, their main income source). Today a typical photo album produced by these studios consists of eight double-page spreads featuring approximately 20 different images of the baby (Fig. 3.3) and costs around 200 RMB (\$32). The edited photo albums and mounted pictures produced by photo studios were kept in the home of the new parents (see Fig. 3.4); however, in recent years Qzone has also become an important secondary destination for these one hundred-day baby photographs.

### The desire for a ‘wealthy’ variety of baby photos

Close examination of the one hundred-day baby photos appearing in printed photo albums and on Qzone demonstrates a broadening of the meaning of these images, from celebrating survival to attempting to demonstrate parents’ ability to bestow wealth on their offspring. Parents define a successful photo collection as one that captures their ‘little treasure’ in as wide a variety of poses, clothing and settings as



Fig. 3.3 Spread from a printed photo album, produced in 2013

possible, thereby exhibiting wealth. Because sharing photos on Qzone allowed parents a greater range of poses and costumes, this was felt an even better way to showcase this abundance experienced by the baby.

The timing of these photo sessions reflects concerns around good fortune. Contrary to its name, it is considered inauspicious to hold photo sessions on the exact hundredth day of the child's life, owing to the Chinese for 'one hundred' (*bai*) being a homonym of the word 'white' (*bai*). Major life events are typically divided into 'red events' (*hongshi*), such as births and marriages, and 'white events' (*baishi*) such as funerals.<sup>7</sup> Since one-hundred-day photos are meant to be celebratory, a day or two either side of exactly one hundred days is seen to be more auspicious. Some parents cited a more practical reason for taking pictures at the one hundred-day mark: at this age the baby is able to sit up, recognise people and smile, which contributes to producing the maximum diversity of facial expressions and positions. The material forms of abundance combined with auspicious concerns around selecting the right day for an event are considered instrumental to creating good fortune.

Recent advances in affordable digital photography technology have resulted in greater numbers of photos being produced, and have meant these photos undergo extensive post-production, retouching and adding multiple layers, effects, fantastical backgrounds, colours

and patterns (Fig. 3.3). The editing and printing of these albums was not done in Anshan Town, but was outsourced to specialists in the provincial capital of Jinan. QQ IM was essential in this process. It allowed Anshan Town's photo studios to send original images to album producers, and for album producers to share digital proofs with the studios and parents. Poorer families who lacked internet access could visit the studio in Anshan Town to view digital versions of the proofs. The finished printed albums were transported back to the photo studios in Anshan Town on passenger buses for collection by customers.

Photo studios also make extensive use of multiple costumes as another way of diversifying these image collections. For example, Wang Liyao, a 25-year-old mother who worked in one of the town's hotels and had previously arranged these photos for her own child, explained:

There is a feeling, if there are lots of different costumes then you get different styles, if there is just one costume then all your photos will be the same. If the costumes are changed then the photos will all feel different.



**Fig. 3.4** Living room of a young married couple. Above the television is a mounted wedding photograph, while underneath the television are three mounted 'one hundred-day photographs' of their son. The shelf underneath holds a closed wedding photo album.

Photographing the baby displaying as many different facial expressions as possible was also stressed as being important. More expensive photo studios in urban areas such as Jinan and Bai Town employ staff who are said to be ‘experts’ in making babies laugh. By contrast, in Anshan Town, the child’s mother and grandmother typically attend sessions and are given the task of evoking facial expressions from the baby. A further trope is the use of backdrops, basic pieces of miniature furniture and building elements (such as fences or windowsills), which were also changed between different images within a single session.

### From print albums to Qzone sharing of baby photos

One hundred-day baby photographs are increasingly being shared on Qzone, with many parents wanting to upload the images to their Qzone profiles immediately after the photo shoot, often using the photo studio’s own computers to log on to their account. While photo studios in Anshan Town generally offer the raw images to customers free of charge, those in Bai Town and Jinan charge customers for these unedited image files. For example, Bai Qing, a 25-year-old mother from Anshan Town, thought the costumes in local photo studios were of low quality, so she paid 298 RMB (\$48) for a photo shoot in Bai Town, and was willing to pay an extra 300 RMB (\$48) for a CD containing the unedited images.

A further consequence of Qzone being a destination for one hundred-day photos is that it has also provided a new outlet for those photographs that fail to appear in the printed photo albums. During photo shoots, photographers will take double the amount of photos needed to ensure enough suitable images are available for the finished album, and participants valued the fact that these extra images could be shared online. The advent of digital photography also allowed them a comparatively greater level of control in curating their own Qzone album in comparison to the printed album. On Qzone mothers were able to select their favourite images and juxtapose them with other photos, as Bai Qing recalled:

The album photos are all in [my] Qzone, and there are some of the original photos. I think some of them are not very good, so I didn’t upload them, they’re in my computer. A few of the photos are really ugly, but I also uploaded them too, because they’re really good fun!

Mothers gave other practical reasons for posting the photos on their Qzone profiles. Some said they found it helped to share these photos with their friends (often also mothers of a similar age), and receive supportive comments from them; many also spoke of Qzone as a storage device,<sup>8</sup> explaining that Qzone provided a backup should original image files go missing. Wang Liyao explained:

I think there are two thoughts [when posting child's photos online]. One is that by putting the photos online, I can let my colleagues look at the photos; and, if I put them online, if my mobile can't turn on or the photos get deleted, and then if they're online it's safer. And another reason is that I only want my friends to see my baby photos. I've set up restrictions for other people, set up privacy. I am afraid other people would copy the photos, and some kind of situation would occur.

While some mothers uploaded photos as they would appear in the finished printed photo album (Fig. 3.5), it was more common for parents to share the raw, unedited photographs. Fig. 3.6 shows some of an original series of images that were used to create the finished photo album image seen in Fig. 3.5. Even without the vivid effects typically reserved for the printed photo album, these unedited Qzone infant pictures still retain their imaginative and multifarious qualities.



**Fig. 3.5** An infant girl in a one hundred-day photograph (after studio editing). The red-lettered text caption in the image says (using a combination of traditional and simplified Chinese characters) ‘Treasure garden’.



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8月31日 22:06 赞(4) 评论(1) 转发 浏览(4) 更多

Fig. 3.6 Unedited photo studio images posted on Qzone

The drive for as many different styles as possible in baby photos accords with research showing how Chinese parents hope to give their children ‘first world’ conditions to grow up in – often thought of in terms of material plenty.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Anshan Town, one hundred-day photos relate to a major concern around obtaining and providing a respectable level of wealth and prosperity for oneself and one’s family which is present within Chinese culture. Deploying the quality of variety within these images becomes a key ingredient for attaining this. As a female designer of photo albums from Jinan explained, ‘What we are looking for with a single spread is that things should be harmonious

and not monotonous (*dandiao*).’ This position was confirmed by the owner of an Anshan Town photo studio who described what constitutes a successful album:

It’s like, for example, there are two photos, when you design it you have to care about the complementary nature of colours, and if, for example, if she just put these two [unedited] photos here it would be very flat and plain. These things [the props in the photos] they are decorations, like these frames [indicating to frames hanging in the shop], they are just like the furnishings in the room. If you just put only these two photos [in the album] it would be very, very monotonous, because this background is a white background, so once the blue is added, it evokes a dream-like effect. It is just like some sort of decorations have been added, it is not as if there are any particular thing that is definitely required.

In addition to using abundance to attempt to show how well cared for a child is in the present, these images also function as a site for imagining the wealth the child may enjoy in the future. Some parents spoke of creating these photographs with the intention that their child would view them at an older age. One young mother had gone so far as to set up a QQ account for her baby, populating its Qzone profile with their own baby photos for them to view when they grow up. This adds a further dimension to the meaning of these images. Not only are they ways of imagining the prosperity their children may gain, but they will also allow the children to look back in the future at the earliest parts of their own childhood to see the nurture and care they received from their parents.<sup>10</sup>

## Love and devotion

Life is precious, but love is more valuable

—Chinese saying

Dramatic statements of love and affection, often combined with images of anonymous young couples hugging and kissing (Fig. 3.7), dominate the Qzone profiles of Anshan Town residents just as frequently as baby photos. While these postings differ from baby images in a number of ways – a different theme, shared memes rather than original images,



**Fig. 3.7** Meme of couple kissing shared on Qzone. Caption reads: 'I already have you in my heart. Even if there was someone better, I wouldn't want them.'

and originating mainly from the town's teenagers rather than parents – they nonetheless serve a similar function of representing the importance of family-oriented values into moral frameworks. These postings show how Qzone becomes a space where one can fantasise upon and share with one's friends everything that points to the infinite happiness that may be gained through unbridled affection and commitment – often implying marriage – between partners. Qzone thereby constitutes one of the most important places for Anshan Town society to idealise love and life-long devotion.

### Romantic memes: How teenagers talk about love online

The fact that much of the content posted regarding love and devotion is in the form of forwarded memes rather than original content is significant, as it implies that, on this topic, many prefer to communicate online in words other than their own. This suggests that people find it easier to

recycle another's words regarding love rather than write about it at great length themselves. This may reflect issues of possession. While babies (as already demonstrated) are persons that parents are keen to display online as a mark of their own achievement, being in love is something young people often aspire to but may not have achieved, so cannot illustrate it themselves.

Even in cases where young people do have romantic partners, issues of preserving an appearance of decency may be at play. Sharing memes merely implies identifying with something, whereas writing original romantic content suggests one has direct experience. Young people, even into their twenties, were often keen to hide relationships from their parents and other friends. Chapter 4 will discuss in more detail how parents and schools believe that students will be distracted from their studies if they become involved in romantic relationships. Set against this culture of non-permissiveness, romantic memes stood out as being strongly declarative in nature, proudly showing young couples embracing, holding hands or kissing (Figs 3.8, 3.9 and 3.10).

However, while these memes are in one sense transgressive (particularly in terms of imagery), the text that accompanies them emphasises a conformist ideal of monogamous devotion and commitment. All of the memes in Figs 3.7–3.10 feature this common trope of dramatic declarations of love, and images of unspecified couples embracing or



**Fig. 3.8** Meme of couple kissing shared on Qzone. Caption reads: 'When can I finally proudly tell other people, I have a partner that I love so much?'



**Fig. 3.9** Meme of couple holding hands in front of marriage registration office. Caption reads: ‘In five years’ time, will you accompany me to this place, and spend 9 RMB?’ [9 RMB (\$1.45) is the cost of a legal marriage registration]



**Fig. 3.10** Meme of couple embracing on basketball court. Caption reads: ‘One’s own wife. Who you can have a hilarious time with, get so close to and won’t lose face. This is called love.’

holding hands. In contrast to literature which has suggested that ‘traditional’ Chinese society is undergoing an ‘opening up’ towards novel Western forms of relationships and sexuality,<sup>11</sup> online memes shared by Anshan Town youth generally remain focused on promoting conventional views of relationships. Very occasionally these same declarations of love may tiptoe on the border of respectability, such as in Fig. 3.11, which combines saccharine statements of devotion with altogether more tactile imagery (see hand placement).

All of these posts appear to have tens of thousands of likes. The large numbers of likes and shares that such posts attract may be due to the romantic content, but may also be because the postings specifically request that users like and share them (*qiuzan* and *qiuzhuan* respectively). Although the photos look self-made, rather than professionally taken, it is often unclear whether these are ‘real’ couples, or whether such imagery is created to capitalise on the appetite for this genre of



**Fig. 3.11** Meme of couple embracing. Caption reads: ‘The greatest expression of love. Requesting likes and requesting blessings [of this post]. In the days ahead, whether they are good or bad, we can struggle together, we can create our future. You say you can give me a blessed and joyous future, do you know, as the people in love say, I really feel blessed. My future has you! This is definite, Wenguo, we want to be blessed, so blessed that it will make all the people of the world jealous. My future has you, Xu Ziqing.’

postings and in a desire to achieve internet fame. Unusually, the text that accompanies the image in Fig. 3.12 names its two subjects, although again there is no reason to assume these are necessarily the people in question.

For younger unmarried persons in the town a further strong sub-theme of romantic Qzone postings emphasises the importance of waiting patiently in the cause of true devotion (Figs 3.12–3.16). This is exemplified by the following status update shared by a 17-year-old high-school student.

There is a kind of love called ‘letting go’ . . . I am the one that loves you . . . I’ll wait for you.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, young, unmarried people were the main group who posted this type of meme. It appears to be a tacit way to advertise the romantic availability and moral integrity of the meme sharer while also justifying their singledom. Taken as a whole, this genre of posting romantic memes among young people draws strongly on rhetoric surrounding monogamous devotion. Furthermore, the fact that many of these posts use shared memes suggests they correspond to more broadly held values.



**Fig. 3.12** Romantic meme shared on Qzone. Caption reads ‘Single girls please remember, place quality over quantity, waiting for a long time is for a more beautiful chance encounter, it’s after going through the biggest test in life, that God (*Shangdi*) will give you the most precious gift.

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其实我们缺乏的不是足够够对够靠谱的那个人，而是最后的最后，大家变成了彼此都需要的那一个人。如果你给他多一点时间，他也多给你一点时间，多好。来，我们来谈一场不赶时间的恋爱。

- 1、我一直都赤着足在走路，沿着河隔着岸追溯着你的足迹。
- 2、只要向日葵坚持着仰望，就一定会找到一抹属于自己的... [查看全文](#)



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**Fig. 3.13** Meme of series of flowers. Caption reads: 'But the thing we are lacking is not the person who is good enough, right enough, or dependable enough, but in the end of the end, every one will change and end up needing this kind of person. If you give him a little more time, he will give you a little more time, it's better. Come, let us fall in love without worrying about the time.'

Posting about one's own love: legitimised experience of newly married couples

A small number of relatively newly married Qzone users in Anshan Town felt at greater liberty to create their own original postings highlighting their ongoing, committed (and legitimised through the act of marriage) relationship, which they shared on their social media profiles. These postings tended to portray the marital relationship in a particularly



真好

◆◆原班竹筒◆◆：这样的深爱，美到不忍心：

(一) 村上春树说：如若相爱，便携手到老；如若错过，便护他安好。

(二) 梁实秋说：你走，我不送你，你来，无论多大风多大雨，我要去接你。

(三) 徐志摩说：走着走着，就散了。回忆都淡了；看着看着，就累了，星光也暗了；听着听着，就醒了，开始埋怨了；回头发现，你不见了，突然我乱了。

(四) 那澜说：一个笑就取了一辈子，一滴泪就还了一个人。一人花开，一人花落，这些年从头到尾，无人问询。

(五) 徐志摩说：一生至少该有一次，为了某个人而忘了自己，不求有结果，不求同行，不求曾经拥有，甚至不求你 爱我，只求在我最美的年华里，遇见你。

(六) 那澜说：我从没被谁知道，所以也没被谁忘记。在别人的回忆中生活，并不是我的目的。

(七) 海明威说：优于别人，并不高贵，真正的高贵应该是优于过去的自己。

(八) 余秋雨说：你的过去我来不及参与，你的未来我奉陪到底。

(九) 沈从文说：我期待你会来，所以我等。

收起：



5月25日 10:07 成都

“有一种友情叫相濡以沫，逃离中的小少年 转评

5月30日 22:42 来自Android 赞(19052) 评论 转发 浏览(28) 更多

19052人觉得很赞

我也说一句

Fig. 3.14 Meme of cartoon couple embracing. Closing sentence of accompanying text reads: ‘...I know you will come, so I will wait.’

harmonious light. For example, the following post was made by Song Xuebai, a young married mother who worked in the town’s hotel (mentioned previously), who posted the following message on her Qzone profile during her pregnancy:

To see my husband come home every day and gently pat and caress my stomach, it is really so sweet! [I’m] so blessed (*xingfu*)! Really I love him more and more each day!

At times individuals also attempt to pepper these displays of deep devotion with elements of humour, perhaps indicating a degree of reflexivity about these postings. For example, Han Peng is a 26-year-old married



**Fig. 3.15** Romantic meme shared on Qzone. Text above photo reads: ‘Time will tell you who really loves you, and who is just playing.’

male hairdresser who runs a hair salon in the town with his wife. They live and work together each day in the salon with their young son, and always present themselves to customers as a very close pair. Among Han Peng’s public postings was a message that was directed to his wife:

I don’t dare to love you, because there is no medical insurance for lovesickness

A final, and perhaps most impressive, example of this genre of posting comes from Zhang Chaoyue, an unemployed 23-year-old married male who lives in his parents’ house in the town along with his wife. His father works as a salesman for one of the town’s factories. Although Zhang Chaoyue graduated from Anshan Town’s middle school, he never completed his high school education in Bai Town, as he was unable to bear sharing a dormitory with his classmates. One day he suddenly appeared at his parents’ home at Anshan Town refusing to return to high school. Zhang Chaoyue worked as a manual labourer for a spell in Bai Town, but disliked the work. During this time he met his wife, also from Anshan Town. In the end he reduced his working hours to just mornings. Eventually he decided to leave his job, and returned to Anshan Town to live with his parents. He worked in one of the town’s



**Fig. 3.16** Romantic cartoon meme. Caption reads: ‘Wife, if we are to walk apart, reply to me, you will wait in the original place for me to come back. // Mmm. Husband, I will wait for you to come back. Definitely!’

factories for a short period. However, once again, he could not tolerate the manual labour, so he resigned his position and now spends much of his time on his computer at home, playing games, visiting websites and using social media.

For Zhang Chaoyue, Qzone has become an important way of declaring his devotion to his wife. His profile picture features a wedding photo of him and his partner. Many of his status updates on social media take the form of messages of unending devotion to his partner.

I love you to death.  
My wife, I will love you for all of my life.  
Yes, yes, love for a lifetime.

These examples, all of which emerge from newly married individuals, are of particular note as they demonstrate the extent of the poster’s efforts to portray their relationships as the living embodiment of the types of family connections that the memes posted by unmarried

persons allude to. In this case relationships are typically portrayed in a way that emphasises intra-family harmony.

In summary, young unmarried individuals show a propensity to share memes about marriage, love and devotion. Newly married people may also make original status updates regarding their marriage. Older married couples in their thirties and above tend to share far less of these types of romantic postings and memes because, as will be explained in Chapter 4, patterns of social media use generally become more constrained within relationships between married couples in the town.

## Expressions of thanks to parents (or friends?)

Posts that appear to be lovingly addressed expressions of gratitude to parents are another prevalent theme among participants, which also implies adherence to a particularly strong family ethic. These posts appeared less often than baby photos or posts regarding devotion and marriage. An unusual aspect of this practice was the fact that, in the majority of cases, the poster's parents did not use social media<sup>12</sup> and were therefore unable to view these messages. For example, Dong Qiang, a 37-year-old male from Huangtian village who was married with children and whose parents (in their sixties) neither used the internet nor had social media accounts, shared the following online:

Dearest father and mother, I am thankful to you both. Thank you for giving me life, allowing me to have one hundred years of my own in the vast universe, thank you for giving my home warmth, and the care of one's own flesh and blood, for immersing me in the golden nest of love from my youth...

Some younger people, such as 19-year-old Li Na, posted similar messages on her Qzone profile:

Dearest father, thank you that for this life you have treated me with limitless love, I am really very thankful to you.

Xu Jing, a 16-year-old high school student, also made a similar post. In this case her mother and father, both aged 48, did not use any social media even though they possessed mobile phones:

Mother's chatter is the warmest language in the entire world

A further example of a post ostensibly directed at parents came from 27-year-old Liu Yang, a mother from Huangtian village who worked as an administrator in the office of one of the local factories, and whose parents did not use the internet.

Mother hosted me for several days, and fed the chickens, they said they would like to eat lettuce, and fry it for them to eat, I asked where the chicken was, my mother said I should buy it at the market. Mother, I love you, I hope your health is good!

These status updates demonstrate a desire by those who post them to perform acts of filial devotion and piety. The example of being dutiful towards one's elders is often viewed as being emblematic not only of China, but also of countries in Asia more generally. Anthropologists studying China have long understood these feelings as emerging from a system of patrilineal authority in which men are placed above women, and the old are placed above the young.<sup>13</sup> The dominance of this way of understanding Chinese society among Euro-American scholars owes much to a series of influential theories, which argued that patrilineal descent should be understood as the overwhelming organising factor in Chinese kinship and society.<sup>14</sup> These theories became a dominant model in the anthropology of China.<sup>15</sup> However, in the case of Anshan Town, the performance of these acts of gratitude does not always appear to be for the benefit of the parents.

The fact that parents are typically unable to view their child's messages of gratitude and love suggests that these messages are designed to establish one's own cultural and moral value in the eyes of one's peers. A parallel situation can be observed in the ritual activities that occur during the annual tomb sweeping festival (*qingming jie*). This traditional Chinese festival involves families visiting the tombs of their deceased ancestors where they will clean, bow and leave offerings of food. The festival was widely observed in Anshan Town. However, some cynics commented in private that the actions relating to this festival are not really about the deceased ancestors at all; and were actually 'living people performing for other living people' (*huoren zuo, gei huoren kan*), alluding to the fact that these rituals help to display the upstanding morality of participants within the community.

If one were to approach the Qzone posts of filial piety in a similarly cynical fashion, it could be argued that these messages may perform a similar function. They are not seen by parents, but are yet another expression of the idealised version of parental devotion – and family

values – placed on Qzone in order for individuals to appear virtuous to one's friends. However, many of the individuals who posted these messages seemed to have perfectly good relationships with their parents, even if these were conducted entirely offline. It therefore seems unreasonable to doubt the sincerity of the postings. Perhaps the sharing of such messages should be understood in terms of one individual's assertion that their social media profile was a place to 'share happiness, not sadness' (*baoxi, bu baoyou*). It ought to be possible to view this form of social media posting not as an act of self-aggrandisement, but rather as a desire to share the joy of an apparently harmonious parent–child relationship with one's friends. This establishes another link between these postings and those of the baby photos and romantic memes, in that they can all be seen to be about sharing largely positive and idealised views of family relations.

### 'Shared' values

This chapter has examined what is arguably the most 'social' aspect of social media use in Anshan Town: the posting of status updates and memes that are shared with closed circles of people, most of whom are the poster's acquaintances and friends in offline life. As such, these postings identify with, speak to and reinforce many of the accepted moral frameworks already existing in Anshan Town life. Although many people in the town say that they do not feel the need to share very much, when people do post on their Qzone or Moments pages, such postings tend to be extremely normative in nature, and with a strong focus on the family. The posts that appear most often in Qzone reflect these topics of love, devotion, childbirth, marriage and gratitude towards one's parents.

Each of the three topics considered in this chapter are important in their own right but, when considered as a whole, they point to far more significant, over-arching ideals that are priorities for social media users in Anshan Town. All of these postings assert identification with, and adherence to, an imagined 'traditional' lifestyle and set of moral values. Chapter 1 showed the pride that Anshan Town people have in the inherent values of the township and its people, informed by a cultural heritage whose foundations are understood to have their roots in a rich historical milieu of Confucian, Daoist and socialist cultural influences, as well as a contemporary counterpoint to the values and practices of those in nearby urban centres. The popular kinds of mundane status update described above enable those posting them on social media to

assert a direct link with what they see as their own enduring moral framework.

Although these postings appeared to reference tradition, they were in fact selective adaptations of these cultural groupings. Key characteristics – notions of patriliney, clan, descent, obedience – were all notably absent from the posts. These ‘traditional’ postings were not strict reproductions of original Confucian or Daoist values or ethics. Instead, the appearance of social media in Anshan Town had enabled townfolk to reconfigure and reinterpret these ideals, making them both relevant and useful in their own lives. One hundred-day photos shared on social media referenced notions of a child’s debt to its parents, but also allowed parents to express adoration and love for their child. Posts regarding love and marriage emphasised the importance of enduring affinal relationships as the foundation of family, while allowing for the possibility that these relationships could be based in romance and relative equality, all the while playing down patriliney. Posts aimed at portraying their creators as filially pious sons or daughters were cloaked in strong expressions of affection and gratitude towards parents rather than unquestioning obedience.

These findings would not have emerged without careful consideration of what was posted online. This chapter has demonstrated the specific nature of the kinds of mundane posting that occur on the semi-public area of Qzone, which was widely used by the town’s social media users. Sharing such content on these platforms occurs mainly through small groups and one-to-one messages away from public view. In that sense, the content differs from that typically shared on Chinese microblogs and other open networks. It is precisely because access to Qzone content usually requires one to ‘friend’ a page owner that description and analysis of these important yet quotidian postings have been rare until now.

The following chapter will move on to explore even more concealed kinds of communication facilitated by social media. It will examine how social media operates in the most intimate of relations: considering how classmates in schools and universities form their own ‘circles’ with peers on QQ and WeChat, and how social media *actually* operates within romantic relationships and between couples. Considering these kinds of relationships complicates the idealistic representations of family life shared online among circles of friends as detailed in this chapter by bringing into view another pivotal and influential figure – the stranger.

## 4

# Relationships: Circles of friends, encounters with strangers

I won't chat to strangers online. What's more, I will only talk to people who I know, and only chat with the people who I'm willing to talk to.

The above quote came from 24-year-old Fang Qiyao, an unmarried woman from one of Anshan Town's outlying villages who worked as a clerk in the town's Post Office. Many people in Anshan Town (and especially women) would make similar statements when I first started to talk with them about their social media use. However, these statements belied another truth. After spending some time gaining the trust of individuals, they tended to casually let slip that interactions with strangers also formed part of their social media use. This became even more commonplace when individuals were talking about how other people in the town used social media. This chapter examines this contradiction, and tries to understand its implications for the conduct of relationships in Chinese society. While accounts of Chinese sociality have traditionally considered the stranger to be the antithesis of recognised and proper social relations, in Anshan Town we observe a turn towards (often intense and intimate) interactions with strangers. For this reason, they need to be considered as a central element to contemporary rural Chinese social life.

Anthropological accounts of social relations within Chinese society have traditionally viewed kinship, connection and familiarity as the basis of relationships between persons, which has inevitably led to the exclusion of strangers from an understanding of social relations. For example, Fei Xiaotong described kinship (which he defined as any social relationship based on marriage or reproduction)<sup>1</sup> as the most important relationship in Chinese society, likening it to 'the concentric circles



formed when a stone is thrown into the lake'.<sup>2</sup> Although Fei's description of this network of relationships was rooted in kinship, it had an expansive and all-encompassing nature which could potentially include 'countless numbers'<sup>3</sup> of persons, and yet he also appeared to suggest clear limits to its application. With the family at its core, this network of relations both privileges and is bonded by familiarity. Fei describes this familiarity as an intimate feeling, resulting from sustained and recurrent interactions occurring over an extended period of time.<sup>4</sup> While Fei asserts 'the basic methods of human interaction in rural society rest on familiarity',<sup>5</sup> this leads him to maintain that 'these methods cannot be used with a stranger'.<sup>6</sup> Importantly he contrasts familiarity, which he describes as 'a distinctive characteristic of being rural',<sup>7</sup> with modern society, which he views as being composed of strangers.

By contrast Mayfair Yang, in her account of *guanxi*, 'connections', in Chinese social life, argues that familiarity has largely usurped kinship as the organising principle of urban Chinese relations. Yang notes that 'guanxi ties based on the familiarity principle have come to supplant the centrality of agnatic and affinal kinship ties described by so many ethnographers of rural Chinese life'.<sup>8</sup> Yang understands familiarity to be a prerequisite for cultivating *guanxi* with others. Yang's theory points to a clear dichotomy between inside and outside, which she posits is informed by China's 'kinship-based sedentary agricultural society'.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, Yang allows for individuals to attempt to transform others:

A 'familiar person,' one with whom *guanxi* exchange can take place more easily, is also a 'cooked person,' whereas its opposite, the 'stranger,' is an 'uncooked or raw person,' according to the literal meanings of the words *shouren* and *shengren* . . . Bridging the gap between the inside and outside in order to make the *guanxi* exchange possible is accomplished by a transformation of the 'uncooked' into the 'cooked,' in a sense preparing the other to make him/her palatable or ready for *guanxi* overtures.<sup>10</sup>

Although Yang's description of this way to turn strangers into familiar people who can be incorporated into one's *guanxi* network appears convincing, one wonders to what extent these 'strangers' can accurately be classified as such. Yang notes that familiarity and shared qualities and identities are the basis for the transformative process, and that therefore many *guanxi* relations are drawn from among class, hometown or work acquaintances (*tongxue*, *tongxiang* and *tongshi*, respectively) who share a 'principle of commonality' (*tong*). Yang even describes

how in encounters between strangers both parties will initially search for any kind of shared acquaintance, so that 'no matter how tenuous the social connection asserted, identities have been slightly realigned around a common link and the relationship now begins to assume a different light'.<sup>11</sup>

Despite Fei and Yang's accounts displaying different understandings of familiarity and kinship as the basis of social relations, they are alike in that they effectively place 'true' strangers (i.e. those completely unknown, and possessing no direct or indirect connection to the individual) completely outside the realm of prescribed social relations. This chapter will demonstrate that social media use in Anshan Town clearly contradicts this understanding. The townsfolk concurrently experience ongoing exchanges with circles based in traditional relations of familiar ties, as well as serendipitous and highly experimental interactions with arbitrary strangers.

## Defining circles

Villagers restrict the scope of their daily activities; they do not travel far; they seldom make contact with the outside world; they live solitary lives; they maintain their own isolated social circle. All of these characteristics contribute to the parochialism of rural China.<sup>12</sup>

The Chinese countryside has undergone a remarkable transformation since 1948 when Fei Xiaotong put forward the above account of rural localism. As mentioned in Chapter 1, contemporary Anshan Town can no longer be described as an isolated township. New roads have shortened the journey to the provincial capital from the best part of a day to a manageable hour (providing one has a car); the town's manufacturing industry embeds it in the regional and national economy; and migration to outside areas for study or work is also becoming increasingly routine.

In light of these conditions of change, it is perhaps surprising that the majority of social media use by townsfolk still displays a similar parochialism, being largely based on familiar social categories of family, work, school and village. The presence of these categories strongly conforms to Yang's understanding of 'friendship, kinship, classmates' which 'serve as bases or potential sites for *guanxi* practice'.<sup>13</sup> The most significant presence within online circles in Anshan Town is that of classmates.

## A circle of schoolmates

The Chinese New Year's Eve of 2013 presented a difficult balancing act for Little Zhang, a first-year high-school student who had returned home for the winter holidays. On one hand, he had to satisfy his parents and other relatives by participating in the preparations for the festival; on the other hand he was keen to maintain contact with the new friends he had made during his first term at high school in Bai Town. I was able to witness this friction first hand as Little Zhang's family kindly invited me to spend the whole of the festival with them, following their preparations and sharing in their celebrations.

On New Year's Eve, while his parents were busy preparing the 'reunion dinner' (*tuanyuan fan*), they instructed their son to walk over to Baige Village, where his elderly maternal grandparents lived, to help them prepare their house for the festival. Little Zhang marched excitedly through the town, his hands full of firecrackers, door posters to hang and trouser pockets crammed with peanuts and sunflower seeds to snack on.

On arriving at his grandparents' house, he was warmly greeted. While his grandmother prepared tea, Little Zhang got busy sweeping the courtyard, removing the existing paper characters for 'wealth' fixed to the doors and walls of the courtyard, before replacing them with a new set of bright red and gold paper characters. Finally, he set off a string of firecrackers in the yard. Once the 30 seconds of deafening banging had finished, the freshly swept yard was littered with hundreds of pieces of half-burnt red paper.

Sometime later Little Zhang returned to the store where his parents lived, in time for the special reunion meal. Together they sat down in the small room at the back of the shop, which doubled as both a living room and bedroom, to watch the *New Year's Eve Gala* broadcast on China Central Television. Little Zhang's father set to work on a bottle of *baijiu* (a strong Chinese liqueur).

The *New Year's Eve Gala* is an annual live televised variety show which in many ways exemplifies traditional mass media. The gala is the nation's largest media event, and the 2014 edition attracted a record 814 million viewers who watched the show together, many while eating the reunion meal.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, unusually, its audience comprises every generation of Chinese families, both rural and urban. The programme producers have the seemingly impossible task of creating a show whose appeal spans this wide demographic, from elderly people who grew up in the Republic of China, or experienced the Cultural Revolution,

through to young children born in more prosperous times and accustomed to a media diet of cartoons and entertainment. The result is an eclectic, wondrously mix of revolutionary songs, trapeze artists, dancers performing to trance music, child magicians, 'hip' young TV hosts, staid middle-aged light entertainment presenters and saccharine pop stars. Segments praising 'model workers' and musical performances by the People's Liberation Army jostle for attention against teenage rappers and enthusiastic dancers.

That year in Anshan Town, while Little Zhang's mother and father watched and chatted in front of the television, their son's attention waned as the show progressed. Before long he left his parents, moving into the shop area where their computer was located. Turning on the computer, he started alternating between his web browser, which he used to view Qzone, and the QQ Instant Messaging client, while the television broadcast remained in earshot. He used the QQ IM client to send New Year's greetings (*zhufu*) to each of his classmates while browsing their Qzone pages. Many of his friends were sharing posts on Qzone providing an alternative commentary on what was happening on the television show.

Little Zhang and his friends used social media as a space to comment on, and often sharply critique, the content of the state-backed variety show. For instance, at the start of the programme, the presenters introduced a young girl dressed in a flowing white dress, explaining that she would continuously spin round on the spot throughout the four hours of the programme, to symbolise the changing seasons of the year. While this segment was presented earnestly on the television programme, Little Zhang was amused by a satirical meme that was already circulating the internet in response to this feature, and had been shared by one of his classmates. The meme consisted of a photo accompanied by the text 'Spinning girl, have you eaten *Xuanmai* chewing gum?' parodying an advertising campaign for *Xuanmai*, a local chewing gum brand featuring a young singer who, after eating the aforementioned gum, achieved superhuman singing powers, capable of toppling otherwise sturdy objects. The original advert featured the tagline 'Xuanmai chewing gum, unable to stop', a phrase that neatly fitted the constant spinning of the girl on the television programme.

The case of Little Zhang is an excellent example of what has been termed 'produsage',<sup>15</sup> demonstrating how cultural objects and information are increasingly being created and consumed across different media and devices by different actors. This challenges the established one-way flow of content from old media 'producers' to passive 'consumers'.

Ethnographic examples such as this also demonstrate how these changing cycles of media production and consumption prioritise different forms of social relationships and are redefining the practices of even the most established and central cultural events, such as celebration of the Chinese New Year.

In this example, Little Zhang appeared to be eschewing the company of his parents, the state televised broadcast and the reunion meal itself by joining a separate New Year's Eve party via QQ with his classmates from school. This orientation towards school friends supports the theory that classmate relationships create a significant and enduring base for *guanxi* relations.<sup>16</sup> However, Little Zhang found himself caught between obligations to both his friends and family, and social media presented a means of (partly) addressing these conflicting interests. He had to strike a balance between obedience to his parents – assisting his grandparents in preparing their house for the New Year – and making sure he took part in the reunion meal organised by his parents, while also maintaining and strengthening his relationships with classmates from the Bai Town high school (who had all returned to their homes across the county district) by being seen to be active and taking part in the New Year online.

However, while Anshan Town's parents are on the whole absent from the social media platforms frequented by young people such as Little Zhang and his classmates, this absence was the result of local circumstances and attitudes. There is an important point to be made here, which is that the circles of friends on social media platforms, based in familiarity, were not seen as intrinsically opposed to family relations. Instead, it was cultural differences between generations that generally hindered the formation of family relations online.

### Families online: absence of online parent-child relationships

The previous chapter noted how posts expressing gratitude to one's parents are a common feature on Qzone profiles, despite the fact that the parents to whom these messages are directed are not social media users and ultimately do not see the messages. However, close examination of the reasons behind the rarity of parent-child relationships on social media reveals a very different picture inside China to that of regions outside, and helps to explain why the circles of social media in Anshan Town are largely dominated by peers. The presence of parents on social media was largely due to their age. Chapter 1 demonstrated that while social media use was relatively common among teenagers and people in their

**Table 4.1** Middle school students' response to survey question 'Do your parents use the internet?'

	Frequency	Per cent
Only father uses	98	32.0
Only mother uses	10	3.3
Both parents use	71	23.2
Neither parents use	127	41.5
Total	306	100.0

twenties and early thirties, users in their forties were relatively rare and users in their fifties or above were almost non-existent. This meant that parents in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, whose children were aged 10 or under, were generally all on social media. In contrast, parents in their mid-thirties to mid-forties, whose offspring were in middle or high-school, were comparatively less likely to use such platforms.

It should be noted that some of these older parents were internet users, without necessarily being active social media users. Over two-thirds – 68.5 per cent – of middle school students surveyed said that at least one of their parents used the internet (Table 4.1). When only one parent used the internet, this was far more likely to be the father, revealing the highly gendered nature of ICT use in rural China.<sup>17</sup> Examples of internet use by parents which may not have been classified as social media use included playing online games (sometimes using relatives' QQ accounts) and watching streamed television programmes or films.

This narrow age range among social media adopters means that it is relatively uncommon for young people to be friends with their parents on social media. Importantly, this does not mean that Anshan Town's young people are averse to their parents using the same social media as themselves. In fact, most middle school students expressed enthusiasm at the thought of their parents being friends with them on these networks. Instead, young people identify the problem as being that their parents either 'do not know how to use the internet' (*buhui shang wang*) or 'do not have QQ' (*meiyou QQ*). Some even responded to the question with amusement, because they felt it so unlikely that their parents would ever learn or feel the need to use social media. In addition, the fact that Anshan Town's young people were happy to add siblings and cousins as friends on social media further demonstrates that for them social media and family relations are perfectly compatible.

Young people's positive view of online parent–child relations stands in contrast with the nature of parent–child interaction on social media observed in a number of the other field sites in our study. For example, in the UK, Miller has noted how parents' presence on Facebook deterred teenagers from being active on the same platform.<sup>18</sup> Other studies in the United States have highlighted similar concerns over parental presence. By contrast, in rural China the uncontroversial nature of postings shared among friends (as illustrated in the previous chapter) and the restricted affordances of visibility on the platforms themselves, which limit an individual's ability to post on other people's pages, encouraged the more normative postings of the kind seen in Chapter 3, the content of which rarely offended parents' sensibilities.

Although students express less concern (or in some cases even optimism) towards the concept of their parents being present on the same social media platforms as they were, the antipathy of many older parents towards internet use inevitably resulted in furthering their wariness of social media and its effects. Almost all parents of school-age children in the town believed internet, mobile phone<sup>19</sup> and social media use to be detrimental for their offspring's educational advancement, and tried to discourage and control their child's internet use. For instance, 70 per cent of middle school students surveyed<sup>20</sup> felt that their parents' control over their internet use was either 'very strict' or 'quite strict' (Table 4.2).

Despite this, it is not unusual for parents in their forties and above to have their own smartphones, even if they make little use of the internet or social media. One of the reasons these phones are preferred is because the 'large screen' (*pingmu da*) is felt to make it easier to see characters. The phones are used for calling, texting and sometimes playing games. On occasion, to gain access to the internet their offspring seize the opportunity to consume the unused data allowances on their parents' phone plans.<sup>21</sup> Zhang Meixiang used this approach with her father, even claiming that she was 'helping' him to expend the un-utilised bandwidth. Zhang Meixiang's case demonstrates how members of different

**Table 4.2** Middle school students' response to survey question 'Do your parents control your internet use?'

Response	Frequency	Per cent share
'Very strict' ( <i>hen yanzhong</i> )	58	21
'Quite strict' ( <i>bijiao yanzhong</i> )	135	49
'Not too strict' ( <i>bu tai yanzhong</i> )	75	27
'Do not care' ( <i>bu guan</i> )	8	3

generations can approach the same smartphone with completely different expectations of its main purpose. This is another reason why there is a scarcity of inter-generational relationships on social media in Anshan Town when compared to the abundance of non-kin relations, and especially those between classmates.<sup>22</sup>

### Class groups and QQ groups

This general lack of the older generations online meant that young people were left to inhabit social media. In addition, it became obvious that there was further selection in terms of age, and many people's social media networks predominantly consisted of their own peers, very often drawn from their own age group, and more specifically their own class at school. The class group is a particularly important social unit in Chinese society. Students typically remain in the same class for entire academic years, and they stay in the same classroom for the majority of each day while the teachers rotate between classrooms.<sup>23</sup> The formation of 'collective identities' within class groups is further encouraged by inter-class competitions in a range of activities, curricular and otherwise.<sup>24</sup> During high school, college and university students tend to share dormitories. This forms particularly intense friendships, which often persist throughout adult life and are drawn upon for favours and assistance.<sup>25</sup>

Social media has become an important means of conducting these class group relationships for young people in Anshan Town. While QQ dominates social media use in Anshan Town, it is particularly popular among school-age children (Table 4.3). The platform also provides students with the opportunity to reproduce the class group in another space. This is most noticeable in the case of 'QQ groups', which permit

**Table 4.3** Middle school students' social media account ownership by platform

<b>Social media platform</b>	<b>Number of students with one account</b>	<b>Percentage of total number of students surveyed</b>
QQ	264	85
WeChat	86	28
Tencent Weibo	114	37
Sina Weibo	33	11
Renren	27	9
Momo	16	5



users to create on-going instant messaging conversations with defined (and almost always closed) group of users.

School-age children in the town are particularly keen to establish QQ groups, often based around existing class groups and often named after the members' class group number. Students typically instruct their classmates to join the group during classes or via direct instant message. A single class group in the middle school often has several QQ groups, each set up and managed by a different student, who acts as 'group owner' (*qun zhuren*) for the group in question. The group owner also appoints group administrators (*qun guanliyuan*), who are typically his or her best friends. These groups proliferate because being the owner or administrator of a large and active group affords those associated with managing it status in class and a chance to steer the group's conversations. As such, these group owners compete to sign up class members, and are also active in ensuring that after school conversation takes place within their group.

Several students expressed the belief that the constant and competitive messaging within these groups could be especially irritating (*fan*). Equally, they do not wish to leave the group for fear their classmates take offence. For many the best solution is to 'silence' (*pingbi*) the group notification, thereby remaining a member but avoiding distracting alerts when messages are exchanged.

Despite such irritations, students experience these QQ groups as having other practical uses. Several students explained that QQ groups helped to facilitate the completion of homework assignments, some of whom were observed accessing class-group-based QQ groups from their home to obtain homework answers from classmates. While this may raise concerns about whether such use of technology constitutes 'deep learning' or simply encourages plagiarism, it should be understood that many parents of middle schoolchildren in the town had received only limited education and found it difficult to help their children with their schoolwork. In this instance, class-based QQ groups also extended the support provided by classmates outside the classroom.

Perhaps most importantly, though, students used the class-based QQ groups to have fun together and strengthen their relationships and familiarity with one another. For example, the groups were often used to organise playing online multiplayer games together by helping to coordinate everybody being online and playing the correct game at the correct time. Students would post messages within the QQ group, entreating each other to join an online game that was about to start. Playing games seems to be an activity that runs largely along gender

boundaries, with multiplayer battle games such as *League of Legends* or *Counterstrike* predominantly played by males and virtual dancing games being played by females.<sup>26</sup> Simple simulator games such as *QQ Farm* (to be discussed in Chapter 5) seemed to attract players of both genders. The intense pleasure of a shared gaming experience further deepens bonds between classmates, especially in the case of synchronised gaming sessions among young males. This was made particularly clear in the town's only internet café, where activities were dominated by group gaming, with groups of classmates forming particularly strong friendships by gaming together, further intensified by the illicit nature of their internet café use (described in Chapter 2).<sup>27</sup>

These examples all confirm how for many of Anshan Town's schoolchildren, especially those of middle and high school age, classmate groups became a locus of many different kinds of activities. Some did relate to practical schoolwork, but other activities served to cement relationships and gain status among peers, or simply allowed leisure activities to be shared. These groups of classmates were incredibly central to the experience of being online.

Class-based QQ groups, and especially those existing among middle school students, provide an exemplary case for the argument that people in Anshan Town understand the majority of their contacts on social media in terms of closed and defined groups of circles. Furthermore, they show how the groups were populated with individuals, many of them non-kin, who would form the basis of future networks of connections. As such, the shared activities of joking, sharing homework answers and playing games establish an essential familiarity on which to base future social relations.

### Changing circles: high-school, university and work

While classmates were central to the experience of being online for many middle school students in the town, it is by no means an exclusive grouping. As people leave middle school and progress through different stages of life, the friends they have on their social media accounts begin to reflect this expanding network of social relations. These extra groups of friends can be understood as forming a series of concentric circles that the individual has accumulated through various phases of life.<sup>28</sup> When Anshan Town's students graduate from middle school and start to attend high school or college in Bai Town, this is typically accompanied by a significant growth of online contacts. For example, during Little Zhang's (see above) first term at high school, his QQ contacts increased by one third.

Different circles cannot always be discerned by examining an individual's social media profile because (as previously mentioned) few use their real name or photo online, and friends' lists are not visible to users. However, the different groups were important to users and techniques did exist for distinguishing them. QQ IM forced users to assign contacts to specific lists. In addition, different circles of friends were sometimes distinguished by using different platforms. For example, when students from Anshan Town begin to attend university in urban cities WeChat becomes the preferred platform for communicating with their new classmates. Therefore these students saw WeChat as predominantly being for communicating with university friends, while QQ IM remained the easiest way to communicate with middle or high school friends.

There were QQ groups other than class-based groups in Anshan Town, especially among adults who use the network for work or leisure. For example, the town's informal football team uses QQ groups to organise their practice sessions; a number of fishing enthusiasts who cast their lines into the town's reservoir have a group for communicating with each other. Similarly, QQ groups frequently act as the preferred way to maintain communications within a workplace or between businesses. Pharmacist Zhang Lin uses QQ groups to receive stock updates and offers from medical wholesalers in Bai Town and Jinan. Teachers from the town's middle school have established a QQ group, which they use to distribute important internal messages. For many businesses in Anshan Town QQ IM has become the main internal communication method, its popularity far exceeding that of email.

Despite the variety of these QQ groups, the ones based on classmate relations remain especially important in that their use often continues after students graduate from school and the class group ceases to meet regularly. Some older individuals even used social media as a way to reinvigorate these relationships. A particularly notable example comes from Tang Xiaoguang, a teacher in his forties who organised a reunion of his former classmates during the summer of 2013. A few weeks prior to the reunion Tang Xiaoguang explained to me:

Too be honest, I don't really chat with other people that much... If you instruct me to go to a classmate reunion, then I might go. I'm always passive, I almost never take the lead and go out to socialise with old classmates.

Despite claiming this passivity, Tang Xiaoguang found himself in the throes of organising a reunion for some of his former classmates with

whom he had attended the town's middle school almost three decades earlier. Every couple of years one of them takes responsibility for organising a reunion and this year the task had fallen to him.

Initially Tang Xiaoguang examined the possibility of going to a tourist area in the countryside surrounding Jinan for an entire weekend, or meeting up for a large meal in a restaurant in the city. However, both options were prohibitively expensive. He instead negotiated a discounted rate for himself and his classmates at the town's hotel. The group would meet on Saturday lunchtime, spend the day together in the Daoist temple, have a meal together in the hotel that evening, sleep at the hotel (sharing rooms to further reduce the cost) and then return to their respective homes the following day. The entire outing was to cost less than 100 RMB (\$16) for each person.

In addition to organising the bookings, the teacher used his computer to produce a precise timetable of activities and events, organised to the hour, which he pre-circulated to the classmate group via QQ. Although the group spoke regularly on QQ, Tang Xiaoguang explained that these occasional reunions were especially important given how busy and dispersed everyone had now become, and that they represented a welcome change from the more sporadic occasional conversation between members of the QQ group. While many people of Tang Xiaoguang's age in the town did not use social media, as a teacher his employment gave him easy access to a computer, and also reason to use it. Indeed, many of the other members of his QQ classmate group had moved to urban cities, so their use differed from those who had remained in the town.

Furthermore, for groups such as this, the reunion was an important opportunity to renew close bonds of friendship and to recollect a shared past together. Despite Tang Xiaoguang's reservations about participating in such events, he recognised that maintaining relationships with these classmates could be useful in the future, especially if one needed a favour. This example therefore further confirms the classmate group as a basis for enduring familiar relations. It also demonstrates how these groups become mapped on to social media, even in cases where the individuals did not have QQ when they were classmates.

Highlighting the importance of circles of known acquaintances for social media use in Anshan Town has identified the social relationships and contexts that explain the highly normative postings shared online: the intended audience is a closed network of known friends. Cultivating circles of known acquaintances online has been shown to have practical uses. The range of online activities may serve to establish

one's status among these friends, and later to maintain and renew social relationships. Hence the circles stress shared values, familiarity and obligation, being largely based in traditional and mostly non-kin bases of *guanxi* such as school and workplace. It is against this backdrop that we now turn to examine the recurring presence of the figure of the stranger on social media, and attempt to make sense of why Chinese social media platforms juxtapose familiarity with alterity in this specific way.

## Seeking out strangers

In contrast to participants' strong claims that they only spoke online to people they knew personally, respondents were altogether coy with regards to their interactions online with strangers. While it gradually became clear that when people wanted to interact with strangers online, townfolk do not choose to make use of platforms that offer drastically wider visibility to engage in such practices (Sina Weibo, for example, allows postings to be shared with the entire internet), townfolk instead prefer to use the social media platforms they use to communicate with their friends, in order to seek out and interact with strangers, predominantly on a one-to-one basis.

### Aliases, avatars and anonymity: bridging friends and strangers

Interactions with strangers on social media can take place under conditions of *mutual anonymity*. This anonymity is achieved because it is the custom for the majority of social media users in China to employ unidentifiable net aliases and user avatars.<sup>29</sup> This appears to be a nationwide trend on most major social media platforms. For example, I conducted a brief survey of research participants' accounts and found that, approximately, only one in five QQ accounts and one in four WeChat accounts featured photos of the actual user as their profile image. Most avatars were cartoon characters or photos taken from the internet. However, using an image of one's own child was also a notable theme, with about 10 per cent of all users employing this method of anonymising.

Other researchers have noted the use of social media in China for communication with strangers, for example highlighting the importance of QQ among migrant populations not only for keeping in touch with relatives, but also for chatting online with strangers and extending one's social network.<sup>30</sup> It has been argued that there are important cultural differences in Chinese concepts of anonymity compared to

Euro-American notions, which are based on concealing identities in order to avoid the repercussions of one's behaviour.<sup>31</sup> In a context where most people do not wish to use their real identity online, the Chinese government have been particularly concerned with being able to trace the connections between online and offline individuals.<sup>32</sup> However, while anonymity may provide cover for both protest and illicit activities, it is also argued that in China it provides a venue for exploration of the self and creative endeavours.<sup>33</sup>

Other commentators have suggested that online anonymity has allowed for experimentation with the self and the formation of new identities, particularly among teenage users. The notion of an 'elastic self' has been proposed to describe this 'trying on' of different identities, arguing that the elastic self gives young people the ability to navigate through society and conduct a new form of civil society.<sup>34</sup>

However, the use of anonymity in Anshan Town differs from that proposed above in that these interactions occur alongside strong and clearly defined circles of known friends. While avatars and net aliases provide anonymity when interacting with people one does not know, Anshan Town users believed that if someone knew them well, they should be able to discern the person's real identity from the net alias or avatar alone.<sup>35</sup> The anonymity feature therefore acted as a form of testing of personal relationships. Avatars and net names were seen not only as anonymising, but also as individualising and expressing personality.

Aided by this, people in Anshan Town seek out interactions with strangers for a wide variety of reasons: to ease boredom, to appear more popular to others, to pursue romantic relations, for sex and to meet people who share the same interests. Common among all of these themes, however, is that seeking out interactions with strangers appears to transform the nature of these experiences themselves, allowing the individual to explore the freedom of relationships that fall outside the familiar social areas of family, classmates, workplace and village.

### Messily adding: encountering disorder

One of the earliest forms of adding strangers is in the practice of 'messily adding' (*luanjia*), which refers to indiscriminately adding strangers on social media, often in large numbers. This practice is particularly popular among middle school students, although it is also commonplace among high school and university students. Messily adding was done for a number of reasons. For middle school students, the practice was often intended to increase the number of contacts they had on the platform;

however, others referred to the practice simply as a means of addressing some of the boredom related to social media use.

This form of adding strangers is considered to contravene accepted forms of social relationships. The character for ‘messily’ (*luan*) used to describe this method of adding friends can also mean ‘disorderly’, ‘in confusion’ and ‘chaotic’. As such, ‘messily adding’ indicates the potentially transgressive nature of interactions with strangers that occur on social media. The practice of messily adding strangers contrasts powerfully with more ‘orderly’ social relations of class, work, family and village that Anshan Town people claim typifies their social media use.

### Romance among students

Arguably the most dominant theme that emerged when speaking to young people about interactions with strangers centred on issues of romance and sex. Interacting with strangers holds a particular appeal for the town’s young people who often seek to engage in romantic relationships, but face barriers to doing so in their everyday lives. An obvious advantage of social media for young people is that it allows them to engage in one-to-one communication with somebody while reducing the risk of people, such as their parents, teachers and classmates, becoming aware of what they are doing.

Schools tend to forbid romantic relationships between classmates on the assumption that they will adversely affect students’ study, making interaction on social media particularly appealing. For example, Little Zhang, the student mentioned at the start of the chapter, recalled an occasion when two of his classmates, one male and one female, were caught holding each other’s hands by their teacher. The teacher ordered them to stop and severely reprimanded the students. The school subsequently contacted the students’ parents to alert them to the romantic relationship. The students were subsequently paraded in front of the entire school during an outdoor assembly; their unsatisfactory behaviour was highlighted and they were admonished for engaging in ‘abnormal relations’ (*bu zhengchang jiaowang*).

Li Biao, another high school student in Anshan Town, uses several different QQ accounts, keeping the password for some from his parents, in order to preserve a ‘private space’ where he can chat with girls online without his parents’ knowledge. While there is no evidence that having romantic relationships really does have a detrimental impact upon young people’s academic success, it is clear that for students such as Li Biao social media offers a useful way to circumvent such restrictions.

**Table 4.4** Middle school students' response to survey question 'Which media is the most suitable to discuss "matters of the heart" or to declare one's love?'

Communication method	Frequency	Per cent share
Phone call	21	7.9
QQ instant message	133	49.4
Face to face	82	30.5
SMS	7	2.6
Write letter	17	6.3
Other	9	3.3

By shielding interactions from public view, social media was felt to allow the town's young people to alleviate some of the shyness and awkwardness around discussing romantic matters. As one woman explained: 'Sometimes some more romantic things, they are hard to say [in person], but on QQ they are easier to speak about.' For example, when presented with a range of possible communication methods for 'discussing "matters of the heart" or declaring ones love?'<sup>36</sup> (the Chinese equivalent of declaring a crush), almost half of all middle school students surveyed chose QQ IM as the most suitable means (Table 4.4).<sup>37</sup>

When young people reach the age of 19 or 20 and start vocational college or university, parents generally become more relaxed with regards to their offspring engaging in romantic relationships, or, as it is affectionately referred to, 'talking about falling in love' (*tan lian'ai*). Universities and colleges, for their part, do not exercise severe bans on romantic relationships between students as is the case in middle and high schools.

Despite this greater level of permissiveness, university students also maintained that social media helps to overcome anxiety around talking to the opposite sex. Many university students<sup>38</sup> from Anshan Town who returned home during the summer and winter holidays were keen to discuss with me how they and their classmates use social media in dating. Almost every returning student I spoke to either had themselves, or knew someone at university who had, found partners on campus using these platforms. Male students in particular eagerly shared stories of how easy it was to find a girlfriend while at university thanks to the help of social media. For example, Wang Gaoshan, a final year university student from Anshan Town, explained the ease with which university students took to online dating.



Dating online is very fashionable in China, you know? Falling in love online, it's just chatting with strangers online. Chat, chat, chat. Then just say, 'Let's meet up', you meet, and . . . success!

Online dating at the universities is helped by a fortuitous combination between the affordances of location-based stranger-finding functions on social media smartphone apps and the geographic location of university campuses. Many of these have relocated from city centres to large, self-contained campus clusters on the peripheries of urban areas (Fig. 4.1).

One such university cluster, called 'University City', lies between Anshan Town and Bai Town. University City is an enormous development, featuring 10 newly built universities and colleges and over 200,000 students (in comparison, the population of Anshan Town is only 31,000). Despite being only several kilometres distant from Anshan Town, the University City has relatively little impact upon the daily life of the town. Few students from University City visit the town unless they already have connections there.

These university encounters with strangers on social media partially retain the traditional notion of classmates, while also often allowing students to push beyond the confines of their college. Because of the concentration of students in University City, using WeChat's People Nearby function or Momo from within the town was almost guaranteed to return results predominantly comprised of students. Wu Haoran, a



**Fig. 4.1** University City near Bai Town

male university student from Anshan Town who attends a college in the University City, claimed he could ascertain whether prospective partners were members of his own school or the neighbouring colleges simply by looking at the distance of the individual from himself. The overall impression given by Anshan Town's returning university students is one of an abundance of romantic opportunity at university – further enhanced through the presence of social media – in contrast to the restrictions they had experienced during middle and high school. Social media made it easier to break out of traditional classmate relations, and to speak to students in the neighbouring dormitory, or even college.

That being said, encounters with strangers online also raised number of concerns regarding issues of authenticity. Wang Gaoshan, a final year university student, explained.

With falling in love online, it is really easy to be cheated. Female students can get cheated really easily . . . in fact, male students can get cheated really easily too. When you are taken to a particular place, then you're blackmailed! For example, let's say you've both had good conversation, she invites you to come to Anshan Town. After you arrive, the two of you hold hands lightly, suddenly out of nowhere comes a bunch of people, and one asks 'What are you doing with my girlfriend?!' They take out a knife to scare you. How are you going to solve this problem? You give 5000 RMB (\$806), or 10,000 RMB (\$1612), and the problem will go away. Otherwise nobody is leaving . . . So, on QQ female students are cheated out of sex, and male students are cheated out of money.

Dong Jian, a 19-year-old hairdresser from the town, was similarly cynical about the authenticity of online romantic relationships among people of his generation, commenting:

Post-90's generation<sup>39</sup> love . . . it's unbelievable. It is full of cheaters and the cheated. They are either using sex to make love, or they are using love to make sex.

Forming romantic relationships online with strangers outside of familiar networks meant there was no way to get people to vouch for others. So while pursuing such relationships carried inherent worries regarding authenticity, this was also part of what made them exciting and out of the ordinary.

It should also be noted that young unmarried women from Anshan Town respond to the opportunity to interact with strangers in different ways to their male counterparts. While some indicated their willingness to pursue interactions with strangers, they were generally more cautious about them, or had to form strategies for dealing with the demands of such online interactions. For example, Long Qing, an unmarried woman in her early twenties who worked in one of the town's hotels, felt that instant messaging on social media did make it easier to communicate intimate matters with romantic partners rather than in face-to-face communication. However, she exercised caution when interacting with male strangers through the platform.

I only started using them ['shake shake' and 'people nearby' functions] recently. . . . I have [added some men I don't know]. But, if they are people I don't know, and . . . if it displays online that they are quite old, then I will refuse their friend request.

Other young women in Anshan Town were less enthusiastic when it came to using social media to find romantic relationships. For instance, Gao Li, a nurse who worked in Anshan Town's small hospital, tried to avoid receiving online messages from many other people in the town. Gao Li was in her mid-twenties, and was originally from Anshan Town. She lived on the town's Commercial Street with her parents and her brother. Although Gao Li had studied dentistry in Jinan, on graduation she had been unable to find a job in Jinan, and so had returned to Anshan Town to a modestly paid nurse's position while studying for further qualifications.

Gao Li finds her current job boring. On most days patients arrive at 8 am to have their bloods taken, although by 10 am all the patients have been dealt with, leaving the remainder of the day largely vacant. Gao Li keeps herself occupied by studying from medical textbooks in the hope of gaining extra qualifications that could lead to a job in the city, or idling the time away using her Samsung smartphone to message her friends on social media.

Since starting college, Gao Li predominantly uses WeChat rather than QQ as most of her college classmates from the city also preferred the platform. However, she retains her QQ account, explaining that all of her friends on QQ are people that she knew in person, many of them former schoolmates from middle school in Anshan Town. Gao Li claims that whenever she is visible 'online' in QQ IM she always receives greater numbers of 'annoying' (*fan*) messages. Because she

knew these people personally, she often felt an obligation to reply. For this reason, she always sets her own QQ IM status to invisible, as she does not want men she knows from the town to pursue her. Gao Li is equally dismissive about finding partners online, and told me that she would never use social media to talk to strangers. Not only does the thought of finding a date on QQ seem completely unattractive, the prospect of just chatting to a stranger online in a non-romantic context does not appeal to her.

Similarly Wang Miao, a 30-year-old married female pharmacist who dispenses Chinese medicine in the same hospital, spoke of her worries regarding the dangers of befriending strangers.

I always refuse strangers' [friend requests] . . . Let's say I am online every day, then in one month I will receive between 50 and 60 friend requests. Most of them are all cheats, or people who are idle and have nothing to do. I am also quite worried, like if in the future my son wants to go to the internet café, I will be unable to look after him, he could turn into anything, I don't know.

These accounts portray the concerns surrounding dating for women in Anshan Town, whether offline or online. While offline advances can be experienced as disconcerting, blunt and invasive, chatting to people online brings with it an acute sense of concern and anxiety regarding authenticity and safety. Nonetheless, despite the difficulty of ensuring authenticity, increasing numbers were choosing social media as a way to engage in romance, because in many cases it was still far better than their offline experiences. In an environment where persistent societal expectations mean that women are unfairly and disproportionately expected 'to uphold the monogamous marriage, through sexual fidelity and marital service',<sup>40</sup> social media offers scope for romantic relationships to develop in secrecy, without the need to publicly acknowledge their existence, and to circumvent the pressure and expectation that they will result in marriage.<sup>41</sup>

This section has illustrated the important and complicated role social media is occupying in mediating relationships between unmarried people of opposite gender. These cases are all powerful in that the anonymity and distance afforded by social media has allowed many young people in Anshan Town to bypass the often acute embarrassment and awkwardness involved in interactions with the opposite gender. But while interactions with strangers become increasingly popular, concerns are also widespread: both males and females are cautious of

being cheated through encounters with strangers, with some women flatly refusing to communicate with strangers on social media. Concerns become even more important when social media's presence is felt within conjugal relations.

Social media in marriage: the stranger as the 'third one'

*For you I'll work like an ox, work like a horse, I'll not cheat on you.  
All the new girls I meet, all the new telephone numbers I store, I will  
prepare them for you to inspect everyday*

These lyrics feature in the song *The Wife is the Biggest*, which was a national hit during the period of field work.<sup>42</sup> Such was its popularity that Anshan Town's square dance troupe, mostly consisting of middle-aged women, often danced to this song in public on the town square in the evening.<sup>43</sup> The ideal of devotion to conjugal relations and complete truthfulness towards one's partner described in this song (and many of the social media postings related to love and devotion discussed in Chapter 3) emphasises the ultimate importance of monogamous marriage in society. This aligns with state discourses that portray monogamy as a socialist principle of marriage vital to the social order and fabric of society.<sup>44</sup> Even though social media has become a common place for young people to engage in romantic relations that may ultimately lead to marriage, its continued use following marriage is often perceived as problematic, as university student Wang Gaoshan explained:

Before you get married you can chat [online] with many women. But after you get married, it has to be only you and her. If you don't delete them all, then your woman will delete them for you. Including your QQ password, she has to know this. You have to put everything you own in her hands.

While other young married men expressed similar sentiments to Wang Gaoshan, not all ultimately deleted strangers from their friends lists upon marriage, with some, as previously mentioned, continuing to add more strangers over time. Indeed, as time went on, some men opened up to me with regards to their pursuit of romantic relations outside of marriage through social media. One example comes from Li Jian, who works in one of the local companies manufacturing large-scale pressurised heating systems. His job takes him all around China, and he has

frequent long business trips (sometimes for several weeks or months to other provinces in China. His wife and young daughter stay at home in Anshan Town while he goes off on these trips.

One day Li Jian revealed to me that he actually owned a second phone, from which he could organise to meet his mistress. Li Jian also said that he had recently deleted WeChat from his phone, because his wife almost found out about the existence of this 'third one' (*disanzhe*). He compared his situation to that of one of his male friends, commenting that, 'I am lucky, because [my friend's] wife has already found out, she wants to divorce him. But of course, he will not allow the divorce [to happen], he has a wife and a son.'

A similar instance comes from Pan Bohua, a man in his thirties who manages a small construction company. He often travels around the district supervising the projects that he works on, and he also has to entertain clients by taking them to restaurants and karaoke parlours. Pan Bohua explained that he only uses WeChat during the day when he is away from home, because 'if my wife knows I use WeChat she will smash my phone'.

It would be easy to try to make sense of such male promiscuity as simply a means to assert their masculinity, or the remnants of feudal marriage practices.<sup>45</sup> It is instead more convincing to understand this behaviour within the context of an insistence on marital monogamy that forms part of the moral framework of life in Anshan Town and state concepts of 'socialist morality'.<sup>46</sup> Zheng Tiantian attempts to understand male infidelity as a repudiation of artificial limitations imposed by a moralist Confucian-socialist system, arguing that men analogically compare turning their semen (*jing*) into their wives to the act of a peasant handing in their grain to the state, which took place under the socialist system.<sup>47</sup> She argues that men assert autonomy over their own bodies by 'misappropriating' their semen from their wives, just as peasants misappropriated grain from the state during the socialist era.<sup>48</sup>

Whatever the explanation, only a few married men actually spoke of arranging trysts through social media and it remains incredibly difficult to gauge how widespread cases such as these really are. Because these forms of relationships challenge the sacrosanct status of monogamous marriage, many do not want to talk openly about it. Arguably rumour and gossip surrounding such behaviour had a greater social impact than the actual occurrence of such events. Hearsay among townsfolk is usually sufficient to encourage a widely held feeling that social media constitutes a threat to the stability of marriage and, by implication, society.

In response, significant numbers of married persons spoke of drastically reducing or stopping social media use altogether following marriage, while others sought to hide such use from their partner.

Cutting back social media use for this reason tends to fall unfairly on women, reflecting the continuing importance attributed to 'women's responsibility as the protagonist of monogamy'<sup>49</sup> in conjugal relations. There were no draconian rules restricting women's use of social media, but there were subtle, unwritten norms of acceptable and appropriate use, many of which were expressed by women themselves. For example, several women said that following marriage they would remove many strangers from their contact list from previous 'messy adding' sprees during their teenage years. Others withdrew from particular platforms or stopped using social media altogether. Pregnant women also tended to reduce their use of social media, although this was partly because of beliefs that mobile telephones and computers emit harmful radiation. Many women 'locked' their Qzone albums, typically with questions such as 'What is my name?' so that only people who knew them offline could view the personal photos that would identify them.

Zhang Lili, the 30-year-old married mother who ran Anshan Town's only beauty parlour, is especially cautious about using social media to interact with strangers following a bad encounter she had on the platform. Zhang Lili spent a lot of time online chatting with strangers, to ease the boredom during long periods when she had no customers.

On one occasion one of these strangers, a male whom she had been amicably chatting with on QQ IM for some time, suddenly sent her a message, which read 'I have changed a QQ number, add my new QQ number.' Zhang Lili asked why he had a new QQ account number, and received the unexpected response 'because *his* wife knows'. Reading this reply made Zhang Lili very angry; she felt she had not done anything wrong and never even met the man. Zhang Lili replied: 'I have no special connections with you, what does it matter if your wife knows?' Eventually she decided to add his account to her 'blacklist' (*hei ming-dan*), which prevented him from subsequently adding her account. However, Zhang Lili had not realised that this stranger was someone from Anshan Town, and she recalled that the matter almost became a 'big thing', hinting that this secret online relationship between strangers very nearly spilled over into the public life of the town.

As a result of this incident, Zhang Lili is now more careful when speaking to strangers online. She has removed all the pictures of herself from QQ and WeChat, and all the albums on her Qzone are now locked with personal questions, so that only people she knows offline can access

them. She has also set her username to a pseudonym, and changed her WeChat avatar from a picture of herself to an image of an unnamed woman holding a gun, which she found on the internet. In addition, she set the gender of both her QQ and WeChat profiles to male to reduce the number of male strangers attempting to add her.

Zhang Lili's case illustrates the pressure felt by women to embody the monogamous ideal. Even after they are married, people are expected to display publicly the normative morality of the town. Being too visible on social media, or visible in the wrong ways, can carry a risk of others misinterpreting one's intention and questions being raised about one's morality.

While Anshan Town women tended to be more selective and cautious about the friends they kept online following marriage, for men marriage seemed to have little effect on their social media use. Part of this may be due to a traditional expectation that men are supposed to earn money for the family, and therefore be outside. Townsfolk often explain this pattern through the saying 'women live on the inside and men live on the outside' (*nü zhu nei, nan zhu wai*). This encapsulates the widespread feeling that men should be active in establishing *guanxi*, and therefore need to visit people in order to cultivate social connections.

The plight of rural Chinese women has undoubtedly improved when compared to previous decades, when incredibly oppressive enactment of patrilineal ideals severely limited their mobility and status.<sup>50</sup> The right to work, own land and increased freedom of marriage has – albeit partially and often not uniformly – improved conditions. In Anshan Town itself, a changing material culture including mobile telephones and social media make it easier for women to maintain social networks between family and close friends, while electric bikes make travelling between the villages within the township easy. Nonetheless, these forms of mobility are still impoverished and stigmatised in comparison to the hyper-connectivity and mobility that the town's adult male population enjoys.

## Conclusion: Making moral relations

This chapter has presented two specific strands of social media use that are fundamental to social relationships within China. The first strand focused on how use was dominated by non-kin relationships based in school, work and place, while noting that parent-child relationships were conspicuously absent. The second strand looked at how people use social media to connect with total strangers.



The lack of parent–child relationships on social media was partly explained by the relatively short time the platforms have been in use within the town: offspring use was rare among young parents, while conversely parental use was rare among middle and high school students. One of the most important activities for offspring who used social media was sustaining the classmate group outside the school classroom, with young people using platforms to build strong circles of online friends which continued to be significant in everyday life.

The incredibly strong horizontal integration of QQ, plus the functions allowing discreet one-to-one conversations with nearby strangers, made it a particularly ideal venue for conducting romantic relationships. Many middle and high school students found social media helped them to circumvent parental and school prohibitions over such relationships. Students attending university in nearby urban areas turned to WeChat's 'People Nearby', or Momo to speak to strangers outside of established normative relationships drawn from classmate groups, by potentially seeking partners from other colleges. While a small number of young married men in the town have made use of social media to find extra partners and to conduct affairs, this has had a considerable impact on the way that people view the platform. Upon marriage, individuals (and particularly women) feel they need to delete strangers from their social media profiles, driven by concerns to preserve reputation by upholding monogamous conjugal ties.

In very broad terms this chapter has shown how marked differences in attitudes towards and adoption of social media has both sustained divisions between generations within families and facilitated interaction between young people within their peer group circles. Although social media has enabled romantic relationships through online interactions with strangers, almost as soon as these are legitimised through marriage the use of social media is discouraged as it is seen to be a threat to the very partnership that it created in the first place. As such young married couples often prefer to communicate with each other by either telephone call or text message.

The model presented above is a generalisation, and there were couples and individuals who deviated from it. Nonetheless the model is sound enough to shed light on what the transformations in relationships represent, how specific attitudes to social media are formed through them, and also how ideologies about what constitutes moral behaviour within Anshan Town are expressed.

The very nature of social media as something that creates distance between parents and children, allows romantic relationships and then *almost immediately* prohibits its further use is revealing of

the changing kind of sociality people desire. The fact that people's attitudes towards the platforms change rapidly as they go through certain life stages indicates that social media should not be considered as a whole, but that it is the specific functions and services of the platforms that should be analysed. It is these functions that people make sense of with reference to their own complex and shifting network of social relationships.

However, social media is doing more than just playing a role in changing particular social relationships and how they are formed and maintained in Anshan Town. This chapter has also demonstrated that people in Anshan Town view social media as emblematic of wider changes in social relationships and society. The sudden ubiquity of social media means that it is easy for townfolk to attribute it as being the cause of particular social transformations and phenomena, regardless of whether or not that is the case. So, while the prevalence of romantic relationships at universities arguably owes much to the siting of self-contained university campuses away from towns, people nonetheless come to view these relationships as a function of social media. Likewise, while the divorce rate in China has been rising for a number of decades, townfolk find it easy to attribute domestic strife and infidelity to social media, despite the fact that easier transportation for men, and the popularity of new semi-private spaces of consumption, may equally be to blame.

The irony here is that social media is often understood as the place where things become visible to others, demonstrated in the previous chapter's examination of the kinds of posting people most regularly shared with their friends on social media. This chapter has emphasised another aspect of social media communication, one which is far more concealed in nature. In addition to facilitating different social engagements and relationships, this limited visibility now seems to represent the less tangible shifts in social relationships. So whereas, as described in Chapter 3, social media provided a platform for overt morality, this chapter has shown how people use social media to explore and rationalise various transformations in society. At this point in time urbanity is encroaching on Anshan Town and its people are having to find new ways to incorporate their traditional moral values into everyday life. On one hand, they can attribute changes in society as being caused by these platforms, and blame them for what they see as good or bad. On the other hand, within this perceived transformation of society and the family social media becomes an enabling tool, allowing individuals to reposition themselves within dramatic change.

## 5

# Moral accumulation: Collecting credits on social media

To be honest, I don't know much about social media. I only go on Qzone to check whether my friends have posted anything... and to steal vegetables.

—Chen Hao, 19 years old male, kitchen assistant.

Given that increasing numbers of people in Anshan Town are leaving farming to work in factories or elsewhere, I found it both ironic and perplexing that many played *QQ Farm*, a web browser-based game in Qzone (similar to *FarmVille*) where users grow virtual crops to exchange for fictional currency and points.<sup>1</sup> The game allows players to view online farms kept by friends and 'steal vegetables' (*toucai*) from them should they happen to be harvestable at that moment. This earns the player extra currency and points, and speeds progression through the game's levels (Fig. 5.1).

The desire to earn more points in *QQ Farm* – and on many other parts of Chinese social media – drives townsfolk to adopt what are sometimes quite unusual patterns of behaviour. For example, shopkeeper Zhang Li recollected the fascination with *QQ Farm* he experienced during its peak popularity, around the year 2000. Despite being in his mid-thirties at that time, and busy each day running his store and caring for his family, he would nonetheless set his alarm to sound at 3 am. He would then go directly to his computer and browse his friend's *QQ Farms* searching for ripe vegetables to steal, after which he would return to bed. Zhang Li explained that the very early hours of the morning were the most opportune time for stealing vegetables because many plants would come to harvest overnight, and few people would have risen in time to harvest their own plants.



**Fig. 5.1** A QQ Farm with the user's level displayed on the green toolbar

He explained that his friends often expressed a mixture of surprise and admiration when they logged in to their own QQ Farm to find that the crops they had expected to be ready for harvest had already been pilfered. Zhang Li was proud of the high level he had achieved on the *QQ Farm* game, largely due to the diligent care he afforded to his own virtual produce, but also helped by his illicit nocturnal raids. Zhang Li's example is perhaps amusing, but it also pinpoints how an intensely experienced desire to accumulate levels can result in people engaging in quite extreme patterns of behaviour.

This enthusiasm around using social media as a way of moving up through levels forms the focus of the current chapter. I will argue that, far from being frivolous games, these activities are anthropologically important because they actually demonstrate how desirable personal characteristics – most notably diligence and ingenuity – become constituted among townfolk through social media. This provides another example of how social media use is a force in both informing and constituting the moral framework of Anshan Town. This chapter shows that in addition to level accumulation forming a readily understood symbolic signifier that is shared with one's circle of friends, these practices also carry an inwardly directed aspect of self-cultivation. Individuals derive feelings of accomplishment through the persistence, hard work and resourcefulness necessary to achieve progress in these level schemes. Users also associate these systems of accumulation with broader economic and social transformations occurring in China's rapidly developing market society.

As well as this self-directed element, its social function should not be overlooked: circles of friends, and particularly the classmate group, remain a constant and significant presence in these activities. It will be shown how levels create differentiation within classmate groups, but also encourage students to co-operate to assist each other in mutual progression. The desire to climb levels online will also be discussed in relation to other systems of levels and accumulation existing in social life. These findings are significant for the discussion in Chapter 6, which will turn to consider sets of broader relations that link Anshan Town and its constituent villages to the 'higher levels' of the county, city, province and the Chinese nation in political and economic terms.

The rest of this chapter is split into four sections. First, the growing literature on gamification and level systems will be examined; however, it will be argued that applying these theories to Anshan Town obscures local motivation for and understanding of the significance of these activities. The second section of the chapter describes the complex rules that govern level accumulation systems on Chinese social media platforms. The third section considers how people in Anshan Town respond to such systems with various tactics and strategies to speed their own rate of accumulation. The fourth section of the chapter accounts for the moral dimension of level collecting practices, observing a parallel with existing literature on the entrepreneurial nature of gambling in China, and arguing that the practices draw on valued personal characteristics of dedication and manipulation.

## **Gamification is not an explanation**

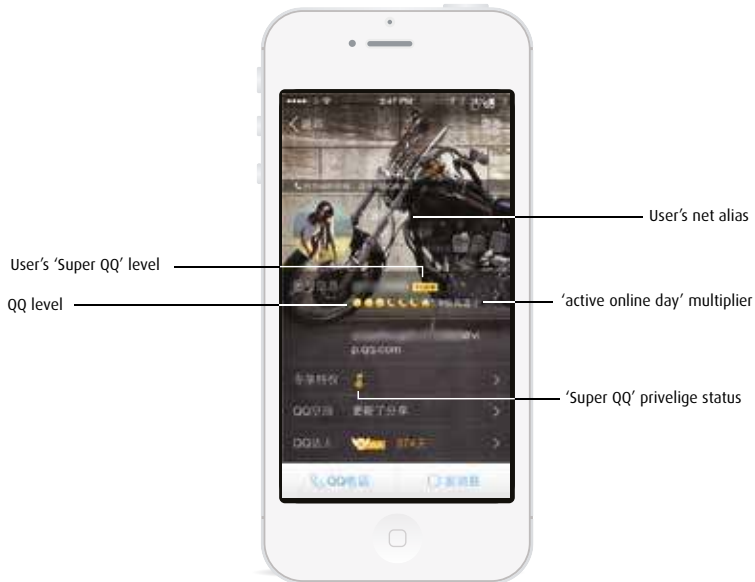
The presence of conspicuous point-collecting and level-accumulation schemes on users' social media profiles is a particularly distinctive feature of Chinese social media, elements which generally do not exist on non-Chinese social media platforms. It is tempting to ascribe this phenomenon to the recent trend of gamification, one feature of which is the permeation of gaming elements into non-gaming contexts.<sup>2</sup> However, Anshan Town people's attitude towards social media level schemes, and the way they appear in the context of their everyday lives, differs from many of the existing explanations for the popularity and effectiveness of gamification. I propose that the popularity of these games can be better understood by acknowledging how townfolk re-appropriate level accumulation as a form of moral activity.

The concept of gamification has gained prominence in recent years due to its promotion by consultancy and marketing industries as a novel concept and source of revenue. A range of publications have promoted the use of gamification, evangelising its role as an income stream for business<sup>3</sup> and even as a tool with the potential to transform the world.<sup>4</sup> Critiques of gamification have followed, seizing on the commercial origin of the movement and arguing that the practice is not really about game design but is motivated by consumer exploitation.<sup>5</sup> Those advocating the serious study of computer games as a cultural form express frustration at the attention given to gamification, saying it ‘reduces playing to a stimulus–response experience’.<sup>6</sup> It has been proposed that gamification turns users into passive individuals, removing their choice and effectively objectifying their own agency.<sup>7</sup>

However, much of the literature, whether advocating for or critical of gamification, often excludes the users’ points of view, and the way in which users engage with gamified content is rarely contextualised in relation to their lives and social situations. There seems to be an idea that gamification owes its effectiveness to designers somehow achieving a specific awareness of the mechanics of human behaviour, but for those trying to make sense of gamification this excludes the possibility that cultural differences could have an impact on these practices. My chief point is that both the techno-utopian and techno-dystopian views on gamification are largely grounded in culturally specific Western concerns around the appropriate location of game play activities in online life. Anshan Town’s social media users, by contrast, generally hold few qualms around the suitability of these gamified elements appearing on many social media platforms. This chapter will argue that the perceived virtue attributed to level-accumulation activities in fact reveals the delicate and shifting moral ‘boundaries’<sup>8</sup> governing social media in the town. Acknowledging such boundaries can pave the way for a broader discussion surrounding whether or not some of the principles and ideals that are commonly attributed to social media – and the internet more broadly, such as equality and freedom – apply to the same degree in Anshan Town.

## **Bureaucratic measures: The rules governing level accumulation (or how to get 2.89 days out of 9.5 hours)**

There are a large number of graded level systems that exist on Chinese social media platforms; however, this section will mainly concentrate on one system: the QQ ‘levels’ (*QQ dengji*),<sup>9</sup> as QQ is the dominant social



**Fig. 5.2** User's QQ level and 'Super QQ' privilege status displayed on their profile page

media platform in Anshan Town (see Chapter 2). Describing the administration of this system will lead to an understanding of users' own practices in response, which will be discussed later.

A user's QQ level is prominently displayed using a combination of symbols including moons, stars and crowns, brightly coloured penguins with the word 'VIP' and numbers (Fig. 5.2).

QQ has a complex system for calculating how levels are conferred on users, the full explanation of which is tucked away on a series of pages within the QQ website.<sup>10</sup> In brief, gaining QQ levels relies on users first accumulating a unit called 'active online days'.

#### 'Online time': putting in the hours

The most basic method of accumulating active online days is through 'online time', which involves remaining logged in to QQ IM, either via a desktop computer or the mobile app (or for the maximum possible accrual rate, both). To incentivise use of the network, Tencent awards 'active online days' based on a user's time spent on the network. Prior to 2004, the proportion of the day that a user spent online directly corresponded to the proportion of an 'active online day' that the user

**Table 5.1** ‘Active online days’ through online time accrual rate

Online method	Time spent online	Increase in ‘active online days’
QQ Desktop Computer version	Over 2 hours	0.5 days
QQ Mobile version	Continuously logged in for 6 hours	1 day

was awarded. At that time, staying logged into QQ on one’s computer for 24 hours would result in the award of one active online day; while staying logged in only 6 hours would result in 0.25 active online days being awarded.

This like-for-like award system led to a large number of QQ users nationwide choosing not to switch off their PC or internet connection, thereby remaining logged in to QQ 24 hours per day – referred to as ‘hanging up one’s QQ’ (*gua QQ*). This maximised the accumulation of active online days and users would climb the levels at the fastest possible rate.

The practice became so common that China’s State Grid Corporation,<sup>11</sup> which governs the country’s electricity supply, warned Tencent of their responsibility for the electricity being wasted by consumers. Tencent changed its method for awarding active online days as a result. Users were instead awarded a set amount of active online days when they achieved a specific threshold of online time in one day (Table 5.1). In theory this removed the incentive for people to remain continuously logged in, although some users still chose to do so (to be discussed later in this chapter).

### Trading levels for invisibility

Ensuring that one’s online status is set to ‘visible’ constitutes another method of increasing active online days. QQ IM has a number of different online status settings including ‘online’, ‘offline’, ‘away’, ‘busy’ and ‘invisible’. A user spending two hours in one calendar day with a visible online status earned an additional 0.2 active online days. Setting one’s QQ status to invisible meant that users appeared as if they were offline to their QQ friends. Invisible users nonetheless remained able to send and receive messages to and from other users. Recall from Chapter 2 that Anshan Town people generally desired a form of online visibility that made them visible only to their friends. However, at times even this



was considered too onerous. The use of the invisible setting seemed to be allied to concerns regarding privacy and intentionally creating barriers to communication at certain times, effectively making it the QQ equivalent of ‘call screening’.

One example of why concealing one’s presence on a social media platform could be useful comes from the case of Gao Li, the female nurse (mentioned in the previous chapter) who works in Anshan Town’s small hospital and sought to avoid receiving online messages from many other people in the town. Receiving ‘annoying’ (*fan*) messages from men led her to set her own QQ IM status to invisible. Disguising the fact that she was online allowed her greater control over whom she spoke to. We can now see that Gao Li’s ‘selective sociality’<sup>12</sup> would come at a cost, however, as setting her status to invisible slowed the rate at which her QQ levels accumulated. In Gao Li’s case she was happy to make this sacrifice, as QQ levels were no longer as important to her as they had been when she was a teenager.

### Paying for privilege

A third way to increase one’s QQ level was through purchasing premium ‘VIP’ membership services, such as ‘QQ membership’ (*QQ huiyuan*) or ‘Super QQ’ (*chaoji QQ huiyuan*). These services allow users some extra instant features,<sup>13</sup> and also act as multipliers of the active online days accumulated through online time and visible status (see Tables 5.2 and 5.3). The standard QQ membership service costs 10 RMB (\$1.61) a month, while Super QQ membership is priced at 20 RMB (\$3.22) a

**Table 5.2** QQ membership yearly accrual status

Membership level (i.e. years of paid membership)	‘Active online day’ multiplier	
	QQ member	Annual paying QQ member
VIP1	× 1.2	× 1.5
VIP2	× 1.4	× 1.7
VIP3	× 1.5	× 1.8
VIP4	× 1.6	× 1.9
VIP5	× 1.6	× 1.9
VIP6	× 1.7	× 2.0
VIP7	× 1.9	× 2.2

**Table 5.3** Super QQ membership yearly accrual status

Membership level (i.e. years of paid membership)	'Active online day' multiplier	
	Super-QQ member	Annual paying Super-QQ member
SVIP1	× 1.4	× 1.7
SVIP2	× 1.6	× 1.9
SVIP3	× 1.7	× 2.0
SVIP4	× 1.8	× 2.1
SVIP5	× 1.8	× 2.2
SVIP6	× 1.9	× 2.4
SVIP7	× 2.1	× 2.7

month. Users who chose to pay annually (rather than monthly) enjoy higher rates of level accumulation.

In addition to speeding up the accumulation of active online days (and therefore QQ levels), these paid-for membership schemes have their own internal level systems. For instance, in the first year of paid Super QQ membership the user's level will be SVIP1; for every year membership dues continue to be paid, the level will increase – to SVIP2, SVIP3 and so on, up to SVIP7 (Table 5.3). The attained level rankings are prominently displayed on users' profiles (Fig. 5.2).

The final way in which 'active online days' can be earned is through the use of a range of 'Tencent Services', for example installing Tencent's free 'Computer Butler' (*tengxun diannao guanjia*) anti-virus/firewall application, or playing QQ's mobile games (*QQ shouji ban youxi zhongxin*).

For each user the four criteria detailed above (online time, visible time, level speed increase and Tencent services) were monitored by the QQ system on a daily basis. They were then used to discern the total amount of active online days rewarded to that user each day, according to the following formula:

$$\text{Active online days} = \text{online time} + \text{visible time} \times \text{level speed increase} + \text{Tencent services}$$

This formula meant that it was possible for a user to, for example, spend only 9.5 hours logged in to QQ using a combination of the above services and accumulate 2.89 active online days in the process!<sup>14</sup>

**Table 5.4** QQ IM's graphical representation of levels

等级	等级图标	需要活跃天数
Level	Level symbol	Active online days required
1		5
4		32
8		96
12		192
16		320
32		1152
48		2496
64		4352

At the end of each calendar day, the amount of ‘active online days’ earned during that 24-hour period is added to the user’s cumulative total of active online days accrued since first joining QQ. This is then converted to a corresponding QQ IM level, and shown on each user’s profile graphically through a combination of symbols (Table 5.4).

The symbols representative of the levels – such as the moon, the sun and, at the very highest level, the ‘imperial golden crown’ – carry strong cosmological inferences. The corresponding amount of active online days also builds on the long-standing Chinese cultural passion for numbers.<sup>15</sup> For example, the highest level, 64, is especially auspicious in China, the product of eight squared: an especially lucky number whose Chinese word (*ba*) rhymes with the word for ‘becoming rich’ (*fa*). The average QQ level obtained among the middle school students surveyed in the town was 18.8 (with a maximum of 64, and minimum of 2), a further indication of the widespread participation in these level-accumulation systems.

In addition to the ‘cultural capital’ of the overt symbols of level accumulation, this complex bureaucratic system also leads to a range of awards being conferred upon users. Some of the rewards are also highly visual signifiers of one’s QQ IM level: the VIP badges mentioned earlier, speech bubble decorations and emojis for use in instant messaging. Certain administrative privileges, such as the right to build more QQ groups and have higher numbers of friends, are also bestowed upon users on reaching particular levels.

The desire to accumulate QQ IM levels was demonstrated in all kinds of ways; for example, I witnessed one elementary school child peering over a peer's shoulder as he used the service, remarking, 'Wow, your QQ level is so high!' Other individuals took note of and were able to recall which of their friends had higher status. Equally some also asked me what my own level was when we spoke about QQ.

### Levels on other social media platforms























The significance of this complex system of level accumulation is evident when two further considerations are taken into account. The first is that such levels rarely appear on non-Chinese social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. However, QQ IM's level-accumulation system is typical, rather than exceptional, in China. For example, Qzone features its own system of level accumulation (with yet another optional paid-for element) entirely separate from QQ IM. Instead of moons and stars, levels are calculated via flowers, leaves, tomatoes and 'golden apples' (Table 5.5). Among the rewards available to members is the ability to decorate their Qzone with customised backgrounds, or to set up animated introduction pages in order to welcome visitors to a user's Qzone.

Sina Weibo also has a complex level system calculated through a combination of online time, messages posted and paid membership.<sup>16</sup> Momo has a star-based ranking system giving users extra functionality such as contacting more strangers and building groups on the platform.<sup>17</sup> Online shopping platform Taobao features level systems in which sellers and buyers accumulate points through successful transactions and by writing reviews for service and products. Systems of level accumulation are, however, notably absent from WeChat, and the significance of this will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

## User agency: the manipulation of accumulation

Despite the elaborate and rigid regulations set out by Tencent governing the accumulation of levels on Chinese social media platforms, Anshan Town's users adopted their own strategies to speed up the accumulation of levels. They took considerable delight in methods they employed to 'beat the system'. However, conversations about QQ IM's level system quickly turned to general discussions about accumulating levels on a number of social media platforms or online games. While the previous

**Table 5.5** Graphical representation of Qzone level system

等级	积分	正常版本
Level	Points	Level symbol
1	5	
2	10	
3	15	
4	20	
5	30	
6	40	
7	50	
8	60	
9	75	
10	90	
11	160	
12	250	
13	360	
14	490	
15	640	
16	810	
32	6250	
48	16810	
64	32490	
128	146410	
192	342250	
255	615040	

section concentrated on a description of the level-accumulation system on QQ IM, the following subsections look at how Anshan Town users increase their levels on multiple platforms.

### Staying logged in

In spite of the reforms to QQ IM's system for rewarding 'active online days', leaving one's QQ permanently logged in remains a common tactic for moving up through QQ IM levels. Although leaving QQ logged in 24 hours a day is no longer necessary, a significant number of people set up their computer so that QQ IM logs in automatically on start-up and remains running in the background. Many users also take advantage of a feature in QQ IM that allows multiple accounts to be logged in simultaneously. It was common to see a single computer in households, shops or offices that had several QQ accounts logged in at the same time (Fig. 5.3).

This feature is particularly useful for the town's young people, especially those from poorer families who have limited internet access (as outlined in Chapter 2). To ensure their levels kept increasing, some young people described leaving their QQ logged in at the house of a trusted school friend or relative where there was a terminal and



**Fig. 5.3** The toolbar of a Windows PC in a business in Anshan Town. The four penguins denote four separate social media accounts that are logged in at the same time

broadband connection. In addition to problems of access, simply having the time to spend online was another major constraining factor, especially for games (such as QQ Farm) which required constant monitoring in order to progress through the levels. Many middle school students commented that they would like to spend more time on the internet so that they could accumulate levels more quickly, but their middle school timetables occupied most of their weekdays (Table 5.6), and a proportion of the weekends; many felt they simply lacked the necessary time to move up through the levels at a satisfactory rate.

**Table 5.6** Typical daily schedule of a second-grade middle school student

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>
06:00	Get up. Brush teeth, wash face. Depart for school
06:30	Teacher supervised 'self-study' lesson
07:20	Eat breakfast, clean classroom
08:00	Class group sings song together
08:10	Lesson 1
08:55	Short break
09:05	Lesson 2
09:50	Long break
10:20	Lesson 3
11:05	Short break
11:15	Lesson 4
12:00	Return home. Lunch*
12:50	Return to school. Prepare for lesson
13:20	Clean classroom
13:30	Class group sings song together
13:40	Lesson 5
14:25	Short break
14:35	Lesson 6
15:20	Long break
15:50	Lesson 7
16:35	Short break
16:45	Lesson 8
17:30	Return home. Dinner*

(Continued)

**Table 5.6** (Contd.)

Time	Activity
18:00	Return to school. Prepare for self-study
18:30	Short break
18:40	Teacher supervised 'self-study' lesson
19:35	Short break
19:45	Teacher supervised 'self-study' lesson
20:40	School ends. Return home*
22:00	Sleep

Students from remote outlying villages (about half of the total) live in school dormitories during weekdays and have their meals in the school canteen. An asterisk denotes times when a non-boarding student is at home and is typically permitted to use a mobile phone, computer, etc. (if available).

This lack of time to invest in social media is clear in the case of Zhang Jie, an earnest, bespectacled middle school student living in Huangtian village with his parents who run a small car repair business from the courtyard of their tiny, two-room brick home. Despite having a computer and internet connection at home, Zhang Jie had little time to make use of it. His parents were keen for him to improve his grades; during the holidays they paid for extra one-on-one tuition with a teacher from the town's middle school. They have even purchased an electric bike for Zhang Jie to ride to school in order to reduce time spent commuting. Zhang Jie only has time for gaming at the weekend, when he mainly indulges in online games such as Seer (*sai'er hao*), Counter Strike and QQ Farm. Significantly, his choice of preferred games is largely driven by which games afford the maximum level progression with the minimum investment of time. Zhang Jie describes these as 'normal' (*putong*) games, contrasting them with more 'complex' (*fuza*) games played by his older peers attending high school or university such as League of Legends, which require a greater investment of time in order to succeed.

They [high school/university students] play more different kinds of games than I do. They have the newest version of QQ, or games where you move up through the levels faster... I can't play them, because I don't have any time to look after them. I can't log on to them that much.

This frustration at being unable to achieve timely level progression is more pronounced among students whose families lacked internet access



altogether. For instance, Wang Na, a first-grade middle school student, lives in one of the remote outlying villages with her older sister, their parents and grandparents. In contrast to Zhang Jie, her home has no internet access and her parents own only simple 2G feature phones. Wang Na's main opportunity to access the internet is during the bi-weekly computer class at school (as discussed in Chapter 4). In conversation, Wang Na was clear as to how she makes use of her scarce online time:

**Wang:** I only go on [Qzone] in order to try and get promoted a level.

**Tom:** Where do you do that?

**Wang:** School. In the computer class. Just once a week, and I don't get promoted quickly. I'm not even sure what level I am on now.

### Getting the help of friends

Many school students (especially those attending middle school) are not able adequately to 'invest time' (*touru shijian*) and 'invest money' (*touru qian*) in order to 'care for' (*zhaogu*) their social media profiles and QQ games and advance through levels. They will therefore often ask their friends to 'look after' (*zhaogou* or *guan*) their social media and game accounts on their behalf.

The people charged with such care often have greater amounts of free time or their circumstances mean it is easier for them to access the internet. The pharmacist Zhang Lin, mentioned in this chapter's opening sequence, eventually tired of stealing vegetables from his friends' QQ Farms in the dead of night. He now enlists his wife's help in planting, growing and harvesting the virtual crops (although she remains unwilling to get up in the middle of the night to steal other users' virtual carrots).

Devolving the care of a QQ account constituted a significant test of trust for users, especially in the case of schoolchildren. Of the middle school students surveyed, 73 per cent shared their social media passwords with others. Passwords were most often shared with friends (50 per cent of survey group) and siblings (32 per cent). A considerable number of students spoke of sharing their passwords with their 'male senior apprentice' (*shixiong*), an antiquated term which today is used to describe an older male classmate; female middle school students often shared their social media password with an [almost always female] 'bosom buddy' (*guimi*). For students sharing QQ passwords with peers typically occurred within the same gender. For married

couples who still kept social media accounts the opposite was the case, with passwords often being shared with spouses in order to mitigate the suspicions that could form around social media use, as detailed in Chapter 4. The sharing of passwords and co-operating to help each other accumulate levels thus represents an important way in which bonds of friendship within the familiar ‘circles’ of Qzone can be strengthened.

One consequence of these common practices of leaving QQ logged in on shared computers and sharing passwords is the relatively frequent occurrence of accounts being hacked or misused. National figures show that 25.9 per cent of Chinese internet users have had their account hacked or password stolen.<sup>18</sup> The field work demonstrated that townsfolk hold a very specific attitude towards privacy and the safety of their data, making their laid-back attitude towards devolving passwords to other individuals. Ultimately users seek to overcome this contradiction by distinguishing among the persons they deem to be trustworthy, a judgement that can also be interpreted as a means to build trust.

### Multiple accounts

A further way to accumulate was through the creation of second accounts. This was a relatively common practice, with 55 per cent<sup>19</sup> of middle school students surveyed claiming to have more than one QQ account.<sup>20</sup> People generally refer to their oldest, most established and frequently used account as their ‘main account’ (*zhuhao*), while other accounts are often referred to as ‘second accounts’ (*erhao*). Having multiple accounts is helpful in gaining higher levels in many of QQ’s online games. These games were designed to be played with one’s QQ friends; however, users often intentionally arranged competitions between their main and second accounts to increase the rate at which they earned points and accumulated levels. One high school student explained the logic behind such matches:

My biggest love is playing basketball. I’ve got some games on my Qzone, some are about basketball, ... it’s called ‘NBA Dream Team’ ... The game has everything in it ... On the computer, in Dream Team, there are lots of stars and you can buy all of these players for yourself and make them your own players. Once you’ve done that you feel very cool! When you are playing the game you need a certain amount of luck, but I’ve also opened a second Qzone account and I use that account to buy players, which I then sell to

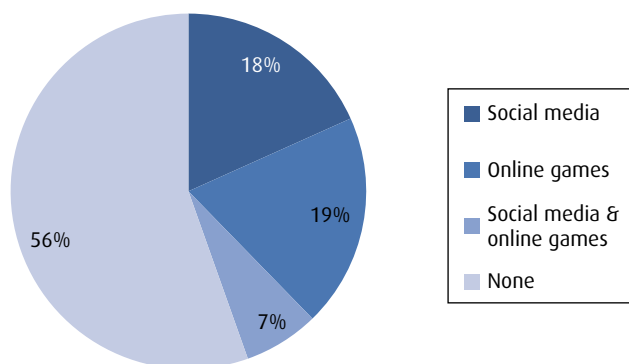
my main account. This helps my main account to move up to the next level and then I can set up matches between my main account and my second account. Of course my second account won't be able to beat my main account, and in this way my main account will get more experience and move up through the levels.

This explanation demonstrates how such tactics help individuals beat the bureaucratic systems imposed by social media companies to restrict the speed at which people are able to accumulate levels. Far from being exploited by a system imposed from the 'top down', Anshan Town users' creation of multiple accounts speaks to the degree of agency they were able to exert over their engagement with these platforms.

### Paid membership

Surprisingly, rather than being considered an unnecessary extravagance, paid-for QQ VIP memberships were actually relatively popular among the town's social media users who considered these schemes to be largely benign. In a survey carried out solely among social media users in the town, 44 per cent of respondents claimed to have spent money on social media subscriptions, online games or both (Fig. 5.4).<sup>21</sup>

Given the limited wealth of most Anshan Town families, it seemed surprising that almost half of the people surveyed were willing to spend their scarce resources on virtual goods and memberships. Few young people in the town have the means to subscribe to annual VIP memberships, so spending tends to be limited to a single month's membership or a particular item required for progression in a game. Some users



**Fig. 5.4** Areas of online spending by social media users

interpreted these paid-for virtual goods and services as a sign of distinction. For example, high school student Li Biao explained how a classmate's use of QQ membership revealed the wealth of the classmate's family, commenting 'My classmate has QQ membership...his family are rich'.

Many students exercised considerable creativity in extracting money from their parents to purchase premium memberships. Far from seeing themselves as being manipulated by Tencent into parting with 'real' cash for 'virtual' things such as obtaining QQ levels, many saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate their financial ability among their circle of friends. This willingness to take part in systems of overt stratification based largely on spending power makes sense in the context of a wider turn towards conspicuous consumption as a regular way to express financial wellbeing. Such behaviour has been commonplace since government policies created the category of the small private trader in the early 1980s and individuals in Chinese cities began to become wealthy.<sup>22</sup>

This description of the strategies for level accumulation has shown the ingenuity of users in the face of bureaucratic measures that impose multiple systems of level accumulation upon them, and despite their limited resources. It has demonstrated that a significant group of users seem enthralled with the levels offered by various social media platforms and the opportunity to move up through these levels, and are quite happy to devote considerable resources to doing so. However, this fixation with level accumulation ought to be viewed in relation to a user's own agency, exerted by employing techniques such as remaining logged in, obtaining the help of friends, using a second QQ account and spending money on memberships and virtual levels, which enables users to feel that they have some control over these level systems. Therefore, while gaining levels holds major appeal, a large amount of this springs from the considerable craft, skill and technique required to speed one's climb through the level system.

## **Accounting for accumulation: level accumulation and morality**

The final section of this chapter will explain how practices of level accumulation on social media and the dedication, ingenuity and skill they necessitate become understood by users as a morally worthwhile activity. This reveals an important entrepreneurial ethic that underlies all of

the activities, despite the fact that different generations of users often prefer to carry out the activities in different ways.

### 'Growing up' and level accumulation

While these level accumulation systems were widespread on many social media platforms and games, different systems appealed to different users. Preference for a particular system seemed to be shared among circles of friends – often the same peer group or gender. For primary and middle school students, and especially male middle school students, there seemed to be a particularly strong interest in systems of level accumulation on platforms such as QQ IM and Qzone. By contrast, young adults in their twenties who had previously purchased memberships would express scepticism towards such membership schemes. For example, 23-year-old Gao Li explained how her attitude toward paid-for membership had changed:

I used 'yellow diamond' [paid-for membership] in my Qzone. You can make the Qzone beautiful with it. . . . Now I don't use it, I feel it's a complete waste. Previously in high school, I felt I wanted to let other people see my Qzone looked beautiful. Music and decoration made it look good.

In a separate example Tang Lei, a college graduate in his twenties – who had accumulated the highest QQ level (68) of any research participant – explained how paying for membership several years ago had helped him to achieve a high QQ status.

Previously when I used to buy stock market shares I built a 'super QQ group'; in order to do this, I purchased three years' membership. That is all the money that I've [ever] spent on it. . . . In the last few years, smartphones and wireless internet have now become so convenient and common. Previously people used to turn off their QQ when they left the computer, now I don't care if I am at the computer or not, my QQ is never offline.

Young middle school students' attitudes towards these levels contrasted to the limited interest felt among those in their twenties and above. These students, who faced severe restrictions on their access to smartphones, internet and social media, attributed great value to the time they were able to spend online. The value placed on access explains why,

to these students, the levels on Chinese social media and games seem to be of such great importance: they become an easy means to compare one's connectedness and access to an otherwise scarce resource with one's peers.

Contrast this with the case of those in their twenties or thirties. Several years earlier these people had responded to many of the levels found on QQ and Qzone in a similar way to that currently observed among primary and middle schoolchildren in the town. However, for the twenty to thirty age group, access to the internet was much easier. Those who were at university and had access in their dormitories often played more 'complex' games (of the kind described by Zhang Jie, above) demanding more time and dedication. As internet access became an everyday commodity for them, the value attributed to QQ IM levels was accordingly reduced. They now dismissed level systems on QQ as being childish (*youzhi*) and banal. This was a further reason for the growing popularity of WeChat among this group, a platform where level accumulation systems were noticeably absent.

Older individuals, aged in their forties and above, typically use social media far less frequently than younger people (see Chapter 2), so accumulating levels on QQ IM and Qzone held less appeal for them. However, even among this older group it is still possible to find users taking part in such activities, often through online versions of familiar card games and mah-jong, which when played offline normally involves gambling. The popularity of this type of level accumulation is particularly important. Many existing explanations for the social significance of Chinese gambling practices emphasise the importance of players' own ingenuity and tactics. Therefore these accounts can help to explain not only the popularity of online card games and mah-jong played by older users, but also of all the systems of level accumulation on social media outlined above.

### Understanding accumulation: the hard work of gambling

In all of the systems of level accumulation seen in this chapter, achieving a high ranking largely relies on one unavoidable factor: sustained dedication. It does not matter whether this involves remaining logged in on QQ IM over many years, faithfully checking in to Qzone every day to gain points, earning credits through regular postings on Sina Weibo, or conscientiously tending to one's crops in QQ Farm. Although the preferred platforms and media for carrying out these activities changed between age groups, possessing traits of commitment and perseverance remained key factors in accumulation.

When attempting to account for the popularity of level accumulation practices on social media, it is important to acknowledge that hierarchal social arrangements – and progression through them – have been a constant and major theme in anthropological representations of Chinese culture, informed by a long historical tradition of dividing all manner of relations, people and objects into clearly delineated levels.

For instance, the cosmological underpinnings of Imperial China rested in a hierarchy of different Chinese gods arranged into levels<sup>23</sup> used as a ‘conceptual tool’ by the Imperial government in order to justify the various layers of bureaucracy that comprised the Imperial governing structure.<sup>24</sup>

Chinese patriliney constitutes a further hierarchy fuelled by the ideal of males being superior to females, and the old superior to the young.<sup>25</sup> These two principles combine to create effective levels between generations within families, and also within the same generation based on age and gender. These rules informed the distribution and inheritance of property,<sup>26</sup> and had a profound influence on Chinese kinship studies.<sup>27</sup> Recent studies emphasise the interaction of patriliney with other different cultural forms and understandings of relatedness.<sup>28</sup>

Hierarchies are further established by clearly delineated levels appearing in other aspects of Chinese society, including socio-spatial structures connecting places,<sup>29</sup> business relations and official connections between individuals,<sup>30</sup> moral hierarchies around the possession of specific character traits<sup>31</sup> and within funeral rituals and mourning.<sup>32</sup>

While these historical hierarchies in Chinese society may provide beguiling explanations for the appeal of systems of level accumulation, they have undergone significant transformation in the past one hundred years, and it is unreasonable to simply assume that such historical factors are still of major influence today. The more influential factors are to be found by examining the platforms themselves and the practices of use outlined earlier in the chapter. These practices reveal users’ attempts to resituate their online activities within a moral framework by stressing the traits of persistence and manipulation required to be successful in the face of the platforms’ rigid administration.

The dedication required to successfully accumulate levels demands entrepreneurship and hard work, characteristics which are highly valued in Chinese culture. This ‘Chinese entrepreneurial ethic’ has been described as a cultural ideal that mandates investment of one’s resources ‘in a long-term quest to improve the material well-being and security of some group to which one belongs and with which one identifies closely’.<sup>33</sup> The fact that all of the level accumulation

systems require a considerable input of time draws on this entrepreneurial ethic, turning QQ users' activities into an industrious – even virtuous – activity. This broadly defined Chinese entrepreneurial ethic resonates strongly with the townsfolk's attitudes towards business. Chapter 1 discussed the strong work ethic of townsfolk, which left them with little spare time for leisure activities in comparison with other regions of China.<sup>34</sup>

The fact that scarce resources are being dedicated to level accumulation suggests that in addition to these practices being outward facing and performative, they also have an important self-directed aspect. Therefore, while level accumulation may partially be about cultivating one's Qzone profile, the activities they involve also give users the sense that they are cultivating themselves through their continued engagement in such practices.

How can these themes of hard work and persistence in accumulating levels be reconciled against the strategies employed by users to circumvent the established system of level accumulation (for example, through spending money, having multiple accounts, staying logged in)? How can the accumulation of levels be moral, when those employing such tactics are placed at an unfair advantage over those who do not? The literature on the relationship between gambling and entrepreneurship in China helps to explain this apparent contradiction. Gambling appears to attract comparable levels of interest to online level accumulation, with many similarities and crossovers between the two. However, there are also important distinctions.

The popularity of gambling within Chinese culture, despite the fact that it appears to undermine the much-valued entrepreneurial ethic, has garnered significant attention.<sup>35</sup> Accounts of gambling in China date back to the Xia dynasty (c. 2070 BC–c. 1600 BC).<sup>36</sup> During the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), writer Wang Fu criticised gambling as a vice of the idle wealthy of central China.<sup>37</sup> Concern that gambling could bring financial destitution to entire households was a common theme during the Ming and Qing dynasties.<sup>38</sup> These historical records all point not only to the enduring popularity, but also the often morally problematic nature of gambling practices.

A separate anthropological account of mah-jong games that took place in a small market town in the Yunnan province in the 1940s highlights that gambling was as much a rural pastime as it was an urban one.<sup>39</sup> In this account the apparent contradiction between entrepreneurship and gambling was also speculated upon, although it was argued that Chinese gambling was largely a social event carried out between friends



and under set situations with clear rules and equipment, such as mah-jong or similar games.<sup>40</sup>

Research carried out in the early 1980s on gambling in a Chinese community of entrepreneurs in Calcutta proposed that although social prestige was an important aspect,<sup>41</sup> other rationalities also informed these gambling practices.<sup>42</sup> It was argued that gambling's appeal lay in its ability to recreate the perils and dangers of everyday business relationships.<sup>43</sup> A concept of fate was incorporated into gambling practices that allowed for player's to retrospectively view the outcome of each gambling act as beyond one's ultimate control. In this way, success in both life and gambling is seen to be a combination of hard work and good fortune.<sup>44</sup> Gambling had added appeal because it allows players to see immediately the results of their investments.<sup>45</sup>

It has also been noted that the often morally problematic nature of gambling, which both challenges and supports the entrepreneurial ethic, is made possible because gambling 'usually occurs in contexts that are ordered and bounded'.<sup>46</sup> It has been argued that the boundaries which confine gambling practices in China are themselves constantly shifting, and that the exuberance and 'social heat' of gambling situations can spiral out of control, which is when gambling is felt to become a problem.<sup>47</sup> Gambling remains illegal on the Chinese mainland, but is generally tacitly permitted (providing the wagers remain small).

In this sense, level accumulation systems largely lie outside these problematic boundaries. Although illegal online gambling does exist in China,<sup>48</sup> the systems that appear on social media platforms were not thought to be forms of gambling. While using money to increase one's speed of accumulation was possible, this money would not gain value itself, nor could it be withdrawn at a later time. Participants understood that money paid in would generally never be returned.

### From money to morals: the appeal of cash-less gambling on QQ

Some of the most popular systems of level accumulation within social media platforms were computerised versions of games that, when played in offline environments, frequently involve gambling. These include card games such as *doudizhu*, *gouji* and mah-jong. For some users, such as 23-year-old engineer Peng Lei, these online versions were attractive because they allowed him to avoid the unappealing betting element that often accompanied the games. However, Peng Lei remarked that in the

transition to online platforms, the games had lost some of the intense conviviality associated with face-to-face modes of play.

I like playing Chinese chess, *doudizhu*. I don't like gambling. On QQ games there is 'spicy *doudizu*' (*mala doudizhu*); it's roughly the same [as playing offline]. Of course, if people come [and play in person] it is better; the atmosphere will possibly be better.

Others, such as Li Ming, a local restaurant owner in his forties, highlight the relationship between his business work and playing card games online. Rather than seeing any obvious analogy between the two spheres, Li Ming viewed one as being largely mutually exclusive of the other.

My main use of QQ is to play *doudizhu* . . . [but] now I am too busy, in the summer I have no time to play. When I am relaxing, when the business isn't busy then I'll play. When I am busy I have no time to play.

Li Ming's quote suggests that play typically makes way for business, and that if possible, people would always prefer to be playing card games. He also touched on the added excitement and intensity that gambling money in such games would contribute, echoing the remarks of Peng Lei.

When you get a few friends together, and gamble a little bit of cash, then there's a bit of stimulation (*ciji*), the play is exciting. But when you play online you can't gamble money.

This kind of sentiment, where online card games devoid of gambling were felt to be bland and insipid in comparison to playing card games in person (with the added excitement of modest stakes) was commonplace among the town's social media users. By contrast, others espoused the virtues of the online games precisely because they had been stripped of the potentially damaging influence of gambling. For instance, Tang Daiyu, a 38-year-old doctor who ran a small clinic in Huangtian village, maintained that playing the card game *doudizhu* on QQ was more fun than playing it offline precisely because it had not been sullied by the addition of money.

I don't like gambling money. I only play cards. The main attraction is entertainment. If you add money to entertainment, then the 'pure fun' is gone.

However, Tang Daiyu's account suggests that the excitement that had been lost through removing the gambling element was more than compensated for by the potential thrill of being able to accumulate levels.

When I go up a level I feel incredibly happy. As my points increase more and more, and I gradually move to the top of this level, I will be very happy...but there are no [direct] benefits, only your skill has improved, it doesn't really mean anything, it's just an entertainment.

For Tang Daiyu accumulating levels through playing QQ online was seen to be far less morally problematic than accumulating money through gambling on similar games offline. Concerns were directed not just at the individual, but also the impact of such activities on her offspring.

I don't like to learn mah-jong. When other people teach me I don't like it, because it is too easy to get addicted. As the female household head, raising two children, if you want to play, your children will also follow you in playing. If you want to manage your children well, first you must manage yourself. Although playing cards is just fun, there is not that much addiction. The motivation is for the children, managing the children well is the main objective.

Tang Daiyu's claim suggests that level-accumulation practices lie on the 'correct side' of the boundaries of acceptability. A comparable situation is found in Steinmüller's study of gambling practices in rural Central China, where he notes the distinction between social gambling (*wan*) and problem gambling (*dubo*).<sup>49</sup> So, while gambling is an activity that is enjoyable precisely because it is analogous to the risk taking and uncertainty seen in business practices, the opposite seems to be the case for level accumulation on social media, where its entrepreneurial ethic is precisely the thing that makes it attractive.

In this context, the strategies to speed accumulation are often not felt to be cheating at all. In fact, the town's social media users recounted the various techniques they used to speed accumulation with measured pride. They viewed their own activities not as deceiving either the system or other users, but merely using one's own cleverness. In a separate study into the popularity of underground lotteries in rural China, it was noted that many played these lotteries despite the belief that they were rigged, largely because a combination of

skill and fate still meant lottery players felt that they had some control over the system.<sup>50</sup> A similar such logic appears to be in place in Anshan Town.

## **Conclusion: entrepreneurship, social media and social transformation**

By examining the popularity of level accumulation practices as they appear on Chinese social media, it is possible to reject common discourses around gamification that tend to see such platforms as exploitative of docile users. Instead, the interpretation of systems of level accumulation by Anshan Town people within their local moral framework has revealed how these users transform the practices into ethical activities by asserting their entrepreneurial nature.

While many of the methods for climbing levels involved either dedication or ingenious ways to circumvent the bureaucracy, the fastest way to raise one's level remained spending money. Whether buying the VIP membership schemes introduced above, or directly purchasing accounts or items that already have a high status, financial power offers a route to bypass the established moral values and creative approaches described in this chapter. The presence of such financial shortcuts in social media can be seen as reflecting a wider transformation in society, where the material signs and signifiers that come to represent one's achievement end up being based less on hard work but increasingly reflect one's ability to buy advancement. Although the introduction of money into level-accumulation systems is largely aligned with rather than opposed to entrepreneurial activity, it does not mean that using money to directly purchase such status is destined to continue to be viewed positively. Indeed, in the long term shortcuts may increasingly act to erode the importance of the levels themselves, as users see them less as a sign of self-cultivation, and more as a symbol of economic ability.

The ability simply to purchase status indicates that Chinese users possess a radically different set of ideals in comparison to users outside China around the principles that should underlie social media use. Some users outside China have advocated for concepts such as 'net neutrality', reflecting attitudes that all internet data (and users) should receive equal treatment. Rather than ranking and grading systems being incongruous with supposedly egalitarian peer sociality, on Chinese social media these two aspects appear together with little concern from users. This also speaks to a broader social change: the transition in the

reform and opening era from a controlled socialist structure – albeit still informed by strong ideals of meritocracy – to an appreciation of spending power within the vastly expanding domain of consumer culture. This may partially account for why people start to lose interest in level systems in their twenties and above; they increasingly realise that exchanging money for purely online goods has less appeal than exchanging it for material goods.

Users' accounts of changing opinions of social media levels over the years also intersect with significant change in terms of the 'circles' of known friends that form the key social group dominating their social media interactions. On the one hand, users are happy to call on the help of members of their circles to move up through the levels, and, on the other hand, the systems of levels add new forms of distinction into what were otherwise fairly egalitarian circles of friends. The move towards material consumption partially reflects a desire to use material goods to effectively break out from these circles, and to become involved in larger global transitions and levels of wealth and power that exist elsewhere in Chinese society, all of which will come into play in the next chapter.

## 6

# Broader relations: The family, the state and social media

From the loving example of one family a whole state may become loving, and from its courtesies, courteous; while from the ambition and perverseness of the one man the whole state may be thrown into rebellious disorder.

—Confucius<sup>1</sup>

This persistent notion of the family being central to the Chinese state<sup>2</sup> appears not only in Confucius' *Analects*, but is also present in contemporary discourses. The previous chapters of this book have focused on exploring the moral implications of social media use for different relationships such as family, familiar-non-kin or, increasingly, strangers. By concentrating on relationships between individuals, the role of the state has largely been omitted from the discussion so far. However, this chapter will show how, in response to moral concerns over social media transforming families and society, the state is seeking to influence social media in a number of ways. Equally, individuals and families may also expect the state to intervene in response to their own moral concerns over social media.

The chapter draws together a number of the themes raised in previous chapters (for example, 'traditional' family values, why and how people communicate with strangers, the moral accumulation of wealth) and attempts to illustrate how townsfolk make sense of them with reference to the political environment around them. In examining connections between the family and the state, this chapter broadens the focus by connecting events in Anshan Town to larger political and economic structures that operate at national and regional levels, and the specific cultural conditions in the town where social media is found and operates. A key argument of this chapter is that while the state has

responded to families' moral concerns over social media with increased regulation and control, there remain untapped possibilities for individuals to engage in profit-making activities via social media. These opportunities may prove effective in assuaging many of the concerns around social media technology because such entrepreneurship is well regarded in Chinese culture.

Social structures in China had, of course, already undergone monumental change prior to the advent of social media, perhaps most notably the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent large-scale abandonment of socialist ideals in favour of the market-based economy of the reform era.<sup>3</sup> These structural changes were often accompanied by significantly different sets of values and ideologies that guided each system. This chapter will examine some of these broader relations, while attempting to remain rooted in the everyday lives of townsfolk by illustrating the key links between Anshan Town families and the nation state as they are enacted through social media use.

The chapter has three distinct sections. First, it will examine the control that various institutions place on Chinese social media platforms, along with the townsfolk's interpretation of these measures. Notions of state responsibility towards families allow parts of the state (and also industry) to assert the need for a 'moral internet',<sup>4</sup> supposedly legitimising measures enacted over social media. The second part of the chapter documents how, rather than controlling access to social media, an equally important aspect is state efforts to create an environment where these platforms are populated with forms of propaganda and other 'appropriate' content. Appropriate content includes domestic news coverage and also patriotic postings by users. This section argues for an acknowledgement of users' role as active creators, rather than passive receivers of nationalistic content. The third section of this chapter considers the increasing interest among townsfolk to undertake business and commerce via social media. It is suggested that the potential economic benefits of social media for individual users may align with cultural attitudes toward the accumulation of profit through hard work and co-operation (as outlined in the previous chapter) thereby potentially satisfying both state and family concerns regarding new technologies.

This chapter will also provide further context and illustration of how relationships with strangers seem to be becoming more acceptable and possible. The discussion will suggest that through controls, propaganda, nationalistic postings and increasing economic activity on Chinese social media platforms, an online space is being shaped that

promotes and sustains the imagined community of the nation state. This grants a certain licence for interactions with strangers to take place within the online domain of this imagined community, the inhabitants of which are tacitly assumed to be fellow citizens.<sup>5</sup>

## Cause for control: Protecting nation and family

Restrictions that have been imposed on social media platforms have ranged from controls enacted by the state to the entirety of the internet in China to controls enacted on a far more local basis within Anshan Town itself. Some of the latter may even have originated with individuals or families who were concerned about the potential danger of the internet.

### State-level controls: The Golden Shield

The Golden Shield Project (*jindun gongcheng*), colloquially referred to as the 'Great Firewall of China' (*fanghuo changcheng*), is arguably the best-known mechanism of Chinese state control over the internet. The Golden Shield Project is a large, central government project administered by the Ministry of Public Security and enacted by the country's ISPs. It is predominantly aimed at preventing local users from visiting particular websites and searching for a range of key terms. Many studies, particularly by scholars based outside China, have revealed various aspects of the Golden Shield Project, such as how controls and blocks are applied in reaction to sensitive political events,<sup>6</sup> the role of industry in developing the necessary technology,<sup>7</sup> the increasing sophistication and reach of the network over time<sup>8</sup> and countermeasures enacted by users in response to the restrictions.<sup>9</sup> An altogether less frequently discussed (but equally pertinent) reason for the existence of controls limiting access to foreign social media platforms is to protect the high revenues of indigenous social media firms.<sup>10</sup> Western social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were included among the inaccessible platforms (at the time of writing).

The opaque nature of the system and its management by the Ministry of Public Security makes it difficult to fully discern the process that ultimately results in a decision to ban a particular overseas social media network. It has been suggested that a key motivation behind the Golden Shield is to limit the contact that domestic social media users have with foreign users and the information posted on



social media networks. It is significant that blocks on social media platforms have often been enacted at specific moments related to political crises in China. For example, during the 2014 Hong Kong Protests the Golden Shield was extended to prevent users in mainland China accessing the photo-sharing platform Instagram. Hong Kong's Central district was filled with protestors, and large numbers of photographs of altercations between police and protestors were circulating on Instagram.<sup>11</sup>

When events such as this happen, how does the Golden Shield actually affect the lives of ordinary people in a place like Anshan Town? The answer may be not very much – at least not in a way directly discernible to townsfolk themselves. Although tech-savvy, cosmopolitan and globally aware residents in China's urban cities may have experienced the sudden blocking of Instagram (and, prior to that, other social networks), the case was different in Anshan Town where use – and even awareness of – non-Chinese social media platforms is extremely limited. The questionnaire conducted in Anshan Town showed only one individual who possessed a Facebook account (a 25-year-old male Post Office clerk, who was from Bai Town), and no users of Twitter or Instagram. I was often asked what social media platforms were used outside China, and whether people outside China used QQ.

Despite the barriers to using non-Chinese social media platforms, most university students and people in their twenties had at least heard of Facebook. Many knew of Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder, either through the film *The Social Network* (a dramatisation of the events surrounding the conception of the platform) or via the national news reports of his visits to China during which, some townsfolk noted, Zuckerberg had spoken in broken Chinese. During the entire period of field work only one participant – a hairdresser in the town – took the time to install a Virtual Private Network (VPN) program that allowed him to circumvent the Golden Shield. He subsequently joined Facebook and added me as a friend. A few days later he commented that Facebook was not as good as QQ and WeChat, because it 'didn't really have anything on it' (understandable given the fact that I was his only friend on the network).

In general, the high level of interest the Golden Shield Project receives in non-Chinese reports and academic coverage of the Chinese internet<sup>12</sup> is not reflected locally, where most people are unaware of its existence and those who are aware are largely unconcerned about it. This reflects the fact that the Chinese government occupies a 'default position' of authority over the internet, in contrast to Euro-American

governments which have to legislate in order to give themselves the right to exercise control over the internet.<sup>13</sup>

We should not assume that all users of social media in Anshan Town would be Facebook/Twitter users by default if the constraints described above did not exist. This is clear when viewed from the other direction. There is absolutely nothing to stop European or American social media users from setting up a QQ or WeChat account (both platforms have English-language versions), yet in practice very few people have such accounts. Other factors are clearly at play, such as whether the platform is judged to be useful to the people who use it or whether their friends, family or other associates that they communicate with also happen to be members of the same social network.

### Deleted posts and frozen accounts

The next level of control occurs within Chinese social media platforms themselves, where certain types of postings are actively monitored and deleted. As with the Golden Shield Project, the process of moderating posts lacks transparency. It has been suggested that social media companies work to monitor potentially objectionable content in response to demands by the Ministry of Public Security.<sup>14</sup> Postings that are subject to moderation are not limited to those that are critical of the government, but include other content deemed inappropriate: pornography, fraud schemes and instances of account abuse, etc. Only two people I spoke to recalled having their account frozen. Jiao Yongqi, a 20-year-old shop worker, reported having his accounts frozen for a short period of time; however he was unwilling to go into details of what he had posted that brought this about. Jiao Yongqi regarded this block as an inconvenience, rather than seeing it as especially oppressive. In a separate instance Liu Wei, a 28-year-old travelling salesman, had his account frozen for cheating while playing card games on QQ:

I have been reported [by another user]. What thing ended up with me being reported? My friend and I were playing *doudizhu* [the card game]. The two of us were working together to cheat that [third] person out of their 'Happiness beans' . . . The two of us knew each other's cards. That person reported us, we were unable to play for a month. They shut down our accounts.

Although these threats of deletion or bans do deter users from certain behaviour, by far the most effective deterrent is self-censorship; most

users understand that there are expectations about the kind of content that is appropriate for posting on these platforms. Chapter 3 showed that the vast majority of users' postings on QQ were related to either offspring or romance and marriage, rather than political postings. For example Zhang Lin, a shopkeeper in the town, spoke about the need for caution when making such posts.

I do [post about news], but I still have a few scruples. I have a classmate who doesn't have a single bit of common sense. He used to be a teacher, and then he became a businessman. He is more radical than me. He will be filled with righteous indignation at some unfair things in society. He will share these things [online], I'll also comment. But eight out of ten times it's not possible to publish. Sometimes you can't even publish a curse.

However, there was no evidence that Anshan Town people shy away from making overtly political postings because they are afraid of punitive measures by the government or social media companies. Instead, users seem to regard QQ and WeChat as outlets that are appropriate only for more positive kinds of posts. When it comes to posting messages online, people are far more concerned with whether the posts will provoke the disapproval of friends and family, rather than the state, law enforcement bodies or the social media companies. As such, social media was generally felt to be an inappropriate locale for posts regarding news, politics and current affairs.

The above examples of Jiao Yongqi, Liu Wei and Zhang Lin are interesting in that they reveal the way in which controls over acceptable content often become codified into cultural norms. This may explain why users' responses frequently shift between expressing feelings of constraint over what it is possible to post to claims that they do not want to make political postings on social media anyway. I believe that such reactions can be understood as ways that townsfolk form a strategy for coping with inflexible controls that they are otherwise unable to influence. It should be noted that this aversion towards political postings does not mean that townsfolk are entirely opposed to intense political discussions. I witnessed numerous animated debates over tea drinking sessions, at dinner tables or in homes, regarding all manner of issues from China's foreign policy to local land allocation and issues of corruption. The key point is that both families and the state were active in conspiring to keep such postings outside of social media.

## Limiting youth access

The social media use of young people in Anshan Town was an area of particular concern for townfolk, who were often worried about the potential corrupting influence of such technologies. This is a particularly significant area, as efforts by both the state and local families often overlap in seeking to limit young people's access to social media. For example, social media companies imposed limits on the amount of time that users were permitted continuously to play games. Users were required to confirm their age by registering with a valid national identity card number. For users under the age of 18 years, playing in excess of three hours per day would halve their 'profit' in the game (i.e. virtual points, experience or currency); playing in excess of five hours would reduce it to zero.<sup>15</sup> Young people in Anshan Town found a way to circumvent this by entering someone else's identity card number (their parents' ID card numbers – either with or without their knowledge – were usually felt to be a good choice). Some users registered a second QQ account that they could continue to use once their first account had reached the time limit. Once again, these controls were targeted at young people, in part due to criticism of social media companies concerning young people's 'addiction' to gaming. The state needed to be seen to respond seriously to such widely held family concerns.

In addition to nationwide controls implemented by the government or social media companies, there were a number of measures that were, to varying degrees, enacted locally. For example, there is nationwide prohibition on under-18s using internet cafés, which is half-heartedly implemented in the town's only such café. Throughout China a national identity card is required to use any internet café. The front desk of every internet café is fitted with a card reader and users must swipe their cards on arriving and when leaving. In addition to logging time spent online, and ensuring the customer is billed correctly, this measure is designed to make café owners ensure the users are of the legal age. Regular, unannounced inspections by the county-level Cultural Bureau and other government departments are supposed to check that café owners are fulfilling this requirement to prevent underage use.<sup>16</sup>

However, in Anshan Town's internet café the manager kept a supply of spare ID cards (borrowed from friends and extended family) in a locked drawer at the front desk. When under-18s without ID cards came to the café, the manager would swipe one of these temporary cards in lieu of the youngster's. The underage users were usually accommodated in two 'secret' rooms at the back of the café, away from

the street and out of view of family members and inspectors. Despite only 2 per cent of the surveyed middle schoolchildren identifying the internet café as their main place of internet use,<sup>17</sup> these schoolchildren seemed to be the most common customers in the café. By providing access to schoolchildren, the internet café owner was aware of the resulting low social standing he had in the town.<sup>18</sup> In comparison urban areas, where internet cafés were open 24 hours a day,<sup>19</sup> in Anshan Town the café limited its opening hours to between 07.00 am and 10.00 pm daily.

Rural internet cafés are more community-based than their urban counterparts, which further raises their status as a ‘commons’ for their users. In this respect, they fulfil a wider function than urban internet cafés which can be seen more as entertainment centres and therefore more likely to be subject to government clampdowns.<sup>20</sup>

Restrictions on mobile phone use for young people in the town were a further example of the kinds of controls that affected social media use. Parents believed that mobile phones had an adverse affect on their child’s educational achievement, so many would refuse their offspring’s requests for phones until they went to university or college. Schools were also complicit in enforcing a ban on mobile phones within classrooms.<sup>21</sup>

The cases discussed in this chapter show that the regimes creating and enforcing these control systems are organised at the state and local levels and by internet service providers, social media companies and even local businesses and schools. The controls which receive the greatest attention outside China – the Great Firewall and deletion of social media posts – are the ones that typically concern local people the least. However, other systems of control – such as checking users’ ages and restricting access for young people – that act at a local level are immediately visible and very important to townsfolk. Some of these measures come from people’s own convictions about the appropriate use of social media, rather than just from state-imposed restrictions.

By looking at the various measures of control enacted over social media use at different levels, this section has emphasised the degree of collaboration that exists between the Chinese state and families in shaping appropriate use of social media. Many of the interventions discussed, whether implemented by the state or by individuals, are guided by moral concerns regarding the potential dangers of social media use for families or the state, or sometimes both.

## Appropriate content: propaganda and patriotism

Limiting users' access to social media platforms, and certain types of content appearing within them, was only one aspect of state efforts to promote a social media aligned to both state and family interests. Another method was by populating these platforms with content – 'propaganda' and 'patriotism' – felt to be commensurate with these aims. On occasions this too became a joint activity by both the state and social media users, which had the effect of creating a uniquely Chinese social media environment in which a series of national values and priorities were discussed, shared and instilled.

### Tencent news: national news delivery via social media

Examining the way news appears on social media provides a particularly good way of understanding propaganda. It should be noted that in China, while propaganda frequently ends up forming the basis of news, not all news comes from, or is, propaganda. In Chinese, the term 'propaganda' (*xuanchuan*) carries less negative connotations than in English, where it is commonly associated with intentional misinformation. In contemporary China the term 'propaganda' is increasingly being used in practices that are normally associated with 'public relations'.<sup>22</sup> The Anshan Town government has its own 'Propaganda Office' (*xuanchuan bu*), as do all government departments of a similar level and above. It is also very common to see propaganda departments within state-owned enterprises and commercial businesses of a similar size. Even placing commercial advertising or organising a promotional campaign is often referred to as 'doing propaganda' (*zuo xuanchuan*).

QQ and WeChat differ from the most popular non-Chinese social media platforms as they are set up, by default, to deliver national news items to their users' mobile devices. These items appear between the other conversations in the application (Fig. 6.1). The desktop PC version of QQ IM also delivers news headlines to users' computers in the form of an onscreen pop-up that opens when users log in.<sup>23</sup>

The news headlines and stories that appear in each of these in-app news services is not created by external news agencies, but by Tencent themselves, through an in-house 'Tencent news' centre. Both platforms deliver three news reports daily, with each report normally containing four news stories. Occasionally news stories of major national importance were afforded their own individual posts.



**Fig. 6.1** News appearing among recent conversations in WeChat

That these applications are configured to deliver news stories by default and interspersed with everyday conversations does not seem to pose any major concerns for Anshan Town’s social media users. Nobody ever spoke about choosing to deactivate the news reports or associated notifications (in contrast to notifications from QQ groups, mentioned in Chapter 4). This ambivalence seems to originate in part from a longer history of the delivery of news to citizens through trusted state-approved networks.

Unlike larger Chinese towns and cities, Anshan Town does not have any newsstands. Instead, the only way to get a newspaper is through a subscription from the town’s Post Office. Large bundles of newly printed newspapers are trucked into the town on a daily basis and the town’s postmen deliver them to subscribers’ homes by motorcycle. Overall, newspaper subscriptions were dwindling for a township with a population of 31,000 persons (Table 6.1). The town’s postmen vigorously promoted the subscriptions (as they received commission on newspapers delivered), and some townsfolk explained that they felt obliged to purchase subscriptions in order to stay on good terms with the postal workers. Many companies bought several copies to keep in their offices. A public noticeboard had also been placed outside the government’s Industrial and Commercial Management building on the busy

**Table 6.1** Newspaper circulation estimates for Anshan Town

Newspaper	Daily circulation (copies)
Jinan Daily ( <i>Jinan Ribao</i> )	400
Shandong Evening Paper ( <i>Qilu Wanbao</i> )	340
Jinan Times ( <i>Jinan Shibao</i> )	200
Dazhong Daily ( <i>Dazhong Ribao</i> )	160

commercial street, inside which pages from the day's newspapers would be pinned for people to read, although few did so.<sup>24</sup>

Anshan Town citizens are therefore used to news being delivered directly to them, and so the appearance of news stories interspersed with conversations within a social media app was not viewed as a distraction. In fact, many users maintained it was highly 'convenient' (*fangbian*). Li Yan, a 21-year-old university student from Anshan Town, explained:

I won't go and look at the news on my own accord. WeChat sends me news. Everyday it sends me Tencent news. I will just open it and look for a while, that's all.

One feature which distinguished Tencent news on social media from newspaper news was the speed with which it was delivered, although the content that appeared on these different platforms was by-and-large similar. Shop assistant Jiao Yongqi explained:

[Tencent news] is very convenient, if you want to read the newspaper, you have to find the paper, to watch the TV [news] you need to turn on the TV. You just take your phone, turn it on and you can see it. The content is all about the same. It's just the content is faster [via social media]. You have to wait until the afternoon for today's paper to be delivered, whereas with news on the phone you can search it anytime.

However, the actual content of news that appeared on Tencent news showed that it does occupy a unique position within China's news ecosystem. Tencent news on QQ mobile and WeChat is noticeably free of formal news regarding new government laws and diplomatic meetings and official government announcements. Repeated verbatim, this content tends to dominate the main government-controlled national news sources such as China Central Television's (the state television broadcaster) *National Network TV news (Xinwen Lianbo)* and the *People's*



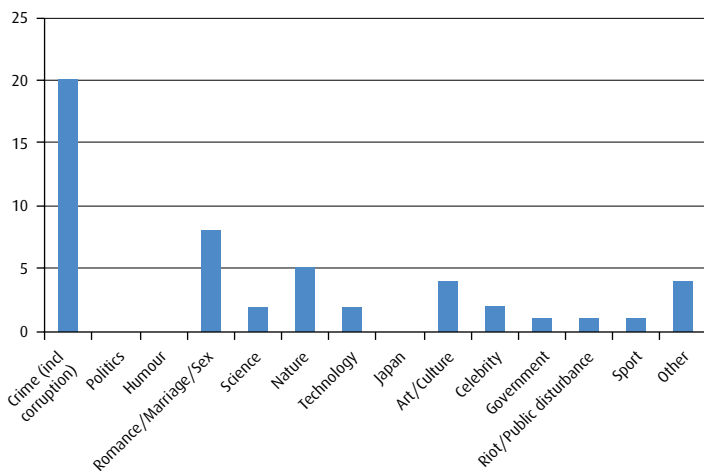
Daily newspaper (*Renmin Ribao*). Likewise Tencent's coverage differs markedly from the newspapers, the majority of which are either local papers – which beyond the front pages mainly focus on issues relating to the city or province – or the local state party newspaper, *Jinan Daily* (*Jinan Ribao*), delivered to all government units and state owned enterprises in the region, which dryly announces the party line on a number of issues.

News that appears in the stories featuring on Tencent News has a distinctly mainstream, tabloid flavour. I performed a simple analysis on the themes of 50 articles that appeared on WeChat in September 2013, which revealed that the majority of the articles featured themes relating to criminal and government corruption court cases, sex and scientific/natural discoveries (Fig. 6.2).

Most of the news articles are about crime, and many of them appear to emphasise the effectiveness of the justice system, frequently showing accused or convicted criminals in court hearings (Fig. 6.3).

Anshan Town people had their own interpretations of the types of news that they encountered on social media. Liu Wei, a travelling salesman, explained.

I read Tencent news by going on to QQ...but in reality it is not that good. A lot of Chinese news is all controlled by the government. Real things, the inside story definitely won't be reported; only superficial details will be reported. For example, if there is an earthquake there is no number of dead, no clear number of



**Fig. 6.2** Analysis of themes appearing in Tencent news articles



Fig. 6.3 Tencent news articles concerning court proceedings

injured, or more people have died. The numbers on Chinese news, you can just listen a little to. But if they say one person died, then it is possible [that actually] over ten people died.

Wang Gaoshan was also similarly sceptical with regards to these national news services, and said that he preferred to use a different online news service to obtain news.

China's news, do you know what it's called? 'Political factors' (*zhengzhi yinsu*). 80 to 90 per cent of it is fake news. *National Network TV News* only says praise (*ketao de hua*, literally 'bowing down language'), you don't know anything. I like to look at 'Little mushroom' [an alternative online news service]. . . *National Network TV News* just tells you [the news], swaps between scenes, then it's over. I don't like that kind of news; I just like to look at interesting [news]. I know that it's important national news, but in reality it has got nothing to do with me.

Other townsfolk suggested that the internet provided a broader range of news providers, and some of these were seen to offer different viewpoints. People who were particularly interested in politics or who were intellectuals often cited the Hong Kong news platform Phoenix news (which had a special site for mainland China), as an alternative. As 43-year-old male shopkeeper Zhang Lin explained:

There are two main ways I get my news. One is Tencent news, and one is Phoenix news. Most is from Phoenix news . . . what's on it is

more subjective. I have never used Xinhua news and People's news [both state-run news agencies] websites, including China Central Television [China's state run broadcaster]; they are all the same style. All the news Phoenix news publishes in Mainland China has been filtered or examined.

Tang Xiaoguang, a 44-year-old male teacher from the local middle school, had similar comments.

Speaking from the heart, Phoenix news is a little 'freer'. It has some comments that really are [interesting]... Phoenix news' website also has a richer design, it has everything on it.

With cases such as Little mushroom and Phoenix news, social media was felt to offer a greater variety of perspectives in comparison to those found on traditional media. Individuals like Zhang Lin and Tang Xiaoguang, who chose to seek out such news sources tended to be 'intellectuals' with relatively humble incomes. However, most people who obtained news from social media relied on Tencent News as their primary source, which was often viewed as being closer to the conservative position seen from state news agencies, albeit written in a more interesting and digestible style, and interspersed with celebrity and other news. Even though people may have had reservations regarding its authenticity, the fact that every social media user in Anshan Town received this news, and the majority read it, meant that it was extremely effective in instilling a sense of belonging to the broader Chinese nation.

#### Local news: The cherry-picking festival

While Tencent news consists of a top-down approach to news delivery that often acts in support of central government, by contrast local government has a very different approach to social media and how to manage interactions with individuals and families in Anshan Town. As noted in Chapter 2, the Anshan Town government are not very active on social media at all. Governmental bodies in the town do not have their own official social media accounts, and did not tend to promote their activities online via social media. This actually reflects the other ways in which the town's government employees were concerned with limiting their contact with townsfolk – such as their reluctance to live in Anshan Town itself. While many government workers in the town had their own personal social media accounts, here too they seemed cautious about

sharing anything work-related on their profile pages. However, despite the Anshan Town government making little use of social media, there are certain events in which higher bodies – such as county, city or provincial level government departments – used social media to promote and report on events that took place within Anshan Town. One such example was the town's cherry-picking festival. May is cherry-picking season in Anshan Town. It is a short harvest, lasting only a month. The end of the cherry season is followed by similarly brief but plentiful harvests of apricots, peaches and plums (in that order). Most of the cherries are picked locally and sold in the fruit markets within Jinan. However, some city-dwellers drive to Anshan Town to visit the orchards and experience picking the ripened cherries themselves. During this period, several locals also set up makeshift stalls on the side of the main road into town to sell fruit to passing drivers.

Anshan Town's cherries are one of the area's 'local specialities' (*difang techang*), the others being free-range eggs and sesame oil. It is common practice when travelling in China to buy gifts of local specialities from one's origin or destination to give to one's relatives and friends. The practice is such that passengers weighed down with numerous large presentation boxes of specialities are a common sight at train and bus stations. Anshan Town's cherries have managed to become a moderately renowned 'local speciality' for the area.

Cherries were not grown in Anshan Town until recently. Around 2002 the Jinan city level government spent around 500,000 RMB (\$80,600) in an effort to bring cherry cultivation from Zhaodong (another county in Shandong where they had been grown for decades) to Anshan Town, as testing had shown that the soil conditions in parts of the town were suitable for the cultivation of cherry trees.

A few households in the outlying villages had enjoyed particular success in their cherry growing ventures. Some farmers, with around a hundred cherry trees, could be expected to generate a turnover in excess of 100,000 RMB (\$16,120) per year from cherry growing. The local government want to encourage more farmers to follow suit, and they continue the practice of distributing free cherry seeds to local farmers. However, many are unwilling to grow cherries as larger profits can be made from cultivating other fruits. In 2014, the Anshan Town government, keen to capitalise on the minor fame of the town's cherries and to encourage visitors to the township, inaugurated the town's first cherry-picking festival.

The event was particularly notable because, in contrast to the usual absence of Anshan Town government activities on social media,



**Fig. 6.4** Sina Weibo posting shared by Jinan Weibo information. Caption reads: ‘The season for eating cherries has once again arrived, do you know where to pick them?’

in this case a significant number of postings promoting the government-backed cherry-picking festival had been made on the public social platform channel Sina Weibo. A large number of cherry-picking festival posts, featuring splendid images of abundant ripe cherries (Figs 6.4 and 6.5), originated from, or were shared, by the district level or city level tourist departments. For example:

**Sina Weibo** share by *@Poly Jinan*: Found out from Bai Town county [government] the Bai Town seventh cherry picking festival will be opened in ten days. The main cherry production areas of Long’an Town, Shuangde Town and Anshan Town will all hold cherry-picking activities. It is understood that the fourth tomato festival will be opened at the same time, the two will go to the end of May 19. via *@Jinan Municipal Bureau of Tourism*.

Looking at public Weibo posts, one can see the combination of posts made by county town and city level government departments (although not Anshan Town government itself), and comments and re-posts from interested individuals.



**Fig. 6.5** Sina Weibo posting promoting Anshan Town cherry-picking festival

However, it should be remembered that few people within Anshan Town actually used the Sina Weibo micro-blogging platforms in comparison to QQ and WeChat (see Chapter 2). Despite the unusual level of promotion this local event received, it is unlikely that Anshan Town people actually saw the postings on these channels. The promotion of the event to people via Weibo would by and large have reached audiences in urban areas such as Bai Town and Jinan, rather than in Anshan Town itself.

The targeting of urban users via social media did not correspond with those who attended the grand opening of the cherry-picking festival, which consisted of a ceremony that took place in one of the township's outlying mountainous villages a few kilometres from Anshan Town itself. The event was held on a flat agricultural plain dotted with a few trees and surrounded by gentle hills. In the middle of the field the organisers erected a large, red carpeted stage towered over by a red, inflatable, semi-circular gate bearing the message 'Warmly congratulating Jinan City's "Bai Town – Clear Water" inaugural Anshan Town Great Leisure Tourism Cherry Picking Festival Grand Opening'. Similar words were repeated on the backdrop behind the stage, including billing the event as a 'Cherry Tourism Road Opening Ceremony' (Fig. 6.6).



**Fig. 6.6** Anshan Town cherry-picking festival opening ceremony

There had been a temple festival the previous day, and the most notable thing about the first cherry-picking festival was that – despite the extensive coverage on Weibo – it was obvious there were no tourists from outside Anshan Town in attendance. Instead there was a smattering of local businessmen, village leaders, government leaders (including those from higher levels of government, such as Bai Town and Jinan) and journalists from local TV and radio stations. The audience predominantly consisted of bemused local farmers from nearby villages, who had come to witness the unusual spectacle unfolding on their fields.

Xu Meiqin, an employee of the Anshan Town government who was working on the event, tried to explain the reason behind promoting the event on Weibo. She explained that in cases such as this, the district and city level government departments would ‘give us guidance’ (*gei women yixie zhidao*) on how to publicise. She claimed that the ‘level(s) above’ (*shangji*) could provide support and help them to spread the message further. Her comments imply that in addition to expertise, higher levels of government often had greater capabilities and resources that the lower levels could make use of.

The example of promotion for the cherry-picking festival suggests that the Anshan Town government’s lack of enthusiasm for adopting social media emerges in response to a combination of factors. Firstly,

the low proportion of social media uptake among townfolk (especially of social media platforms that allow announcements such as Weibo and WeChat's 'Subscriptions' function); secondly, the availability of more established media channels (both traditional and new) operated by higher levels of government; and thirdly a reluctance to be overtly public-facing and engaging.

Although few tourists attended the cherry-picking event despite the significant social media activity, there are grounds for suggesting these efforts were not a complete failure. The role of the event had been for the benefit of higher levels of government, as much as it was for the tourists. The festival and associated social media coverage confirmed that the local government not only possessed, but were also enacting, an ambitious plan for the future that would transform Anshan Town into a prosperous, modern, developed and ecological industrial town with a booming tourist industry. The event acted as proof that this plan was not a far-flung dream, but was coming into being. Social media such as Weibo, in addition to traditional media channels, allowed the government to share news of this event, which both confirmed these aspirations and the progress towards them, to a perceived 'wider public'.

Even though the Anshan Town government was averse to setting up and using its own official government social media accounts as a way to communicate to the public, they were nonetheless happy to involve themselves in the higher levels of the state on occasions when their activities were felt to align particularly well with the national goals of modernisation and development. In this way both the cherry-picking festival itself and the use of social media for its promotion can be understood as actions that transgress individual administrative levels of authority, and in so doing cultivate the imagined community of the nation state.

## Patriotic postings

Another way in which social media posts expressed a sense of belonging to a larger national community was through nationalistic and patriotic postings. While there were few posts critiquing the party or government bodies, most critical posts tend to be focused on the activities of corrupt government officials or over-zealous police or city administration (*chengshi guanli*) officers. There were very few posts that directly criticised the central government, or policies and attitudes of the state. There is an argument that even these critical posts should be understood as strengthening the sense of belonging in the imagined community of



the Chinese nation, in that they target those whose activities are deemed to be against the interests of the state overall.

In fact, of the 1,214 posts analysed as described in Chapter 3, only six posts were identified as having themes directly centred on political figures. All of these were shared memes, rather than original postings, and generally spoke of China's incumbent and former leaders in approving terms (unless they were suspected of corruption). These postings included a post featuring archive photos of Chairman Mao at different stages of his life, a post with imagery from Chairman Mao's state funeral, a post in support of the prosecution of Bo Xilai for corruption, a post comparing Xi Jinping (in positive terms) with Bo Xilai (in negative terms), and a speculative post regarding the possibility of Xi Jinping announcing the end of the legal category 'small private traders' (*getihu*).

A good example of such a posting can be seen in Fig. 6.7, which was shared by Zhang Meixiang, a 15-year-old middle-school student.



**Fig. 6.7** Meme showing former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao eating in a communal canteen

It shows a meme containing a photograph of Wen Jiabao, the former Chinese Premier. Wen Jiabao attracted public praise within China following the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, when he immediately flew out to the area to meet victims and oversee relief work. The text accompanying the meme reads:

If you are a Chinese person. It doesn't matter how busy you are right now. Please stop and take a minute to read this. He [Wen Jiabao] possesses a high position and much power, subordinate to a single person [implying Hu Jintao, China's then Chairman and leader of the CCP] and superior to many thousands of people. But he eats the same dishes as the canteen employees. He is genial and diligent with government affairs, loving the people. At the scene of every accident in China you can see this old man's shadow. I do not know how many people this photo will move? But at the very least, it moved me. This old grandfather will soon retire; he has contributed to China day after day, night after night. It doesn't need me to say, I believe that everyone has the same view? In a few days it is Grandfather Wen's birthday. Everybody, forward this post of this white-haired grandfather and add a message of blessing (*zhufu*). Share a message of health, share! (after you share, your net name will change to the rarely seen purple-red colour).<sup>25</sup>

The plea for the message to be forwarded takes the form of a 'blessing' or 'well wishes' (*zhufu*, literally 'wish wealth'). The word also has a range of religious connotations, being the kind of statement one might hear uttered during the burning of incense at a temple festival, or text messages shared with friends and family during Chinese New Year celebrations. A significant use of such blessings occurs during times of national emergency or disasters. Posting blessings and messages of support on social media is another way to reinforce the notion of belonging in the nation.<sup>26</sup> As another person comments, people forward posts for the victims of disasters (the conversation centred on the Ya'an earthquake in this case) because:

It's probably because it represents a kind of support. The support of 'kindly intentions' is a kind of support. But I'm afraid [this form of support] is very small.

Xu Meiqin recounted that she created her own blessing in response to the Ya'an earthquake, with the hope of it resonating and being shared.

I didn't share [other posts]. On that day I watched the television, when I knew the news, I was really sad, I took a phone, and took a picture of the television [programme], and said [in the post] 'Ya'an has had an earthquake, lets bless Ya'an'. After some friends forwarded it. If, let's say, you want me to forward it, it's definitely that the news, in my opinion, has a different meaning. Or it's just this news is barbaric, horrific. Or if I feel deep hatred and resentment, that kind of news. Simply it has to physically resonate with me.

And a further statement from Li Biao, the high school student mentioned previously, confirmed this.

The things I share are all interesting occurrences. When it was the Ya'an earthquake, one of the classmates in our class set a [Qzone] status of 'Wish blessings to Ya'an'. We all shared it. Afterwards classmates from other classes also shared it.

Not everybody agreed on the efficacy of sharing these blessings. For example, shop attendant Jiao Yongqi was far more sceptical in this regard, commenting that.

I didn't post anything; it won't help anything. . . . I'll just look. I do not express any judgements [online]. Also, expressing has no use, after you express no-one else will look.

Despite sceptics such as Jiao Yongqi, widespread sharing of this type of blessing in response to natural disasters constitutes highly nationalistic acts. These posts allow townfolk to express solidarity with their fellow citizens and (many) feel they were able to do something – no matter how small – to influence events.

Sometimes nationalistic feeling took the form of antagonism towards foreigners. This was particularly so in the case of postings featuring anti-Japanese sentiment that appeared on some Qzone and WeChat profiles. Anti-Japanese sentiment was common in the town and often emerged from a combination of historical distrust towards the Japanese government and more recently perceived antagonism regarding the Diaoyu/Senkaku island conflict. These feelings were further fuelled by local accounts of Japanese conduct during the anti-Japanese war of resistance (1937–1945) and tales of abuses witnessed first-hand by some of the elderly townfolk. Stories of the town under Japanese control told how guards were stationed on the corner of each street, and

about horrific executions for acts of resistance. Zhang Baoqi, a travelling salesman from the town, once warned, 'If you are in China and you mention Japan, you will arouse public indignation'.

However emotional, this disdain for Japan was also tempered by a grudging respect for various aspects of Japanese culture. These conflicting attitudes are encapsulated well by Fig. 6.8, which shows a recipe meme shared by a 20-year-old female on her Qzone page. The post provides instructions on how to cook Gyudon Beef Bowl, a Japanese dish.



Fig. 6.8 Anti-Japanese meme shared on Qzone

Make your own Gyudon Beef Bowl!!!! Force the little Japanese to go to hell!!!! There is no need to keep spending so much money going to Yoshinoya [the Japanese chain restaurant]!!!! Do it yourself at home. 5–6 RMB (\$0.81–\$0.97) per serving (and twice as much meat as Yoshinoya)!!!

While displaying admiration for Japanese cuisine, the post attempts to instruct individuals on how to make their own, so that they can avoid eating at Yoshinoya, a popular Japanese chain restaurant, and in so doing contribute to resisting Japan.

The fact that this type of highly political posting is permitted while others are not reflects how nationalism is tacitly allowed, even encouraged, within China's digital spaces. Separate research has shown that the Chinese authorities apply a mass-media model to popular websites with content concerning national history and identity, which effectively 'reproduces the very logic of "imagined communities" that makes reconciliation of historical disputes in East Asia so protracted'.<sup>27</sup> Other research has noted that online nationalism in China has grown beyond its origins as bulletin board services operated by universities and that while government and commercial bodies play a role in steering these nationalistic discourses, loosely-organised 'ground up' nationalistic websites are also emerging.<sup>28</sup> The case of Anshan Town demonstrates how such postings appear on mainstream social media, albeit in a less orchestrated fashion that reflects the personal sentiment of individuals. People's desire to re-interpret and reproduce these posts speaks to the effectiveness of nationalistic postings on social media and elsewhere online (in addition to other offline media) in normalising such expressive behaviour on the internet.

In summary, patriotic and nationalistic posts made or shared by users in Anshan Town are seen to operate on three different levels: firstly, as in the example regarding Premier Wen (Fig. 6.7), expressing admiration for central party leaders (past and present); secondly, expressing national pride and solidarity, particularly towards fellow citizens at times of natural disaster; thirdly, against common enemies, especially the Japanese. Social media has become an appropriate place for townspeople to express their membership of this 'imagined community'<sup>29</sup> of a wider Chinese nation. Far from being passive receivers of propaganda and nationalist discourse, many social media users in the town used the platforms to play an active part and contribute to it. In this case the intense social feelings that are attached to history are not only read, but also 'resonated' by individual users back into social media, amplifying

them and making their individual acts of sharing also a social act, ones that speak to the higher social collective of the nation.<sup>30</sup>

This sense of collectivity shapes interactions with strangers through social media, ensuring a degree of commonality between those who meet online. Because Chinese social media platforms are almost entirely dominated by Chinese users, most of these interactions are likely to be with people who share a familiar cultural background and at least some common values. The strangers that one meets online will never be too strange.

The opposition in this chapter to an emphasis of understanding social media through overtly political postings may be complemented by a return to what the evidence suggests social media is doing. At all levels – from the state to the individual – we see a consistent concern to express the importance of morality, and the creation of a ‘moral internet’ related to moral persons, moral citizens and moral families. We also see social media being used by individuals to identify with a broader notion of the familial nation state, not so surprising in a region influenced by Confucius where there has been continuity in the idiom of patriarchy from the family through to the state.

Under these circumstances, that the Chinese government may be seeking to use the internet to exert its influence upon individuals and families may be seen as largely unsurprising. The state has sought to exert control over families in multiple ways, including through limiting mobility,<sup>31</sup> family planning,<sup>32</sup> education,<sup>33</sup> propaganda, labour and architecture.<sup>34</sup> This means that when social media suddenly appears in a place like Anshan Town, it is easy for individuals to seize on specific aspects (such as the platform’s effect on educational achievement, or on marriage) and use these to castigate the platform as a whole. This effect is exacerbated by the fact that younger people are enthusiastic adopters, while the older generations are likely to feel some concern and keep their distance from social media.

In these circumstances, the government (at various different levels) is faced with the difficult task of managing the introduction of social computer networks into society – a move which is understood to be vital for the country’s continued development. From the perspective of young people in China, improved networks and greater access cannot come soon enough, while parents, conversely, hope to see the networks contained, controlled and managed. However, such is the popularity (and utility) of social media platforms in China that attempting to limit their growth is akin to trying to pushing water up a hill.

The real problem therefore becomes how to make social media platforms palatable to conservative parents and grandparents. Controls on access and the deliberate production of appropriate content are partly aimed at satisfying the older generations' desire for the government to intervene to make the internet a more 'civilised' and moral place. It hardly matters that many of the controls are ineffectual and young social media users often find ways to circumvent them.

Efforts to restrict the internet are thus only ever piecemeal, which may explain why on occasion a decision to implement controls only partially (for instance by lending identity cards to underage users in the town's internet café) is a deliberate one, aimed at ameliorating the sometimes diverging expectations between government and individual users. At the moment, the state has mainly chosen a reactionary approach, focusing on control and constraint of social media. This could be seen as the most cautious path that the state could take in incorporating this new form of communication technology into the nation. However, in considering the remit, scope and target of restrictions placed on Chinese social media, the majority of such controls detailed in this section are aimed at preventing or limiting access to certain kinds of content. I suggest these restrictions should be considered alongside the limits that are placed on economic aspects of social media use, which carry a different set of moral concerns, but could be central to transforming the perceived influence of social media on the family and state.

## **Monetised media: business and friendship on social media**

In China it may be said that what is generally regarded as the political domain is actually often subservient to a much larger concern – the economic domain. In the vast transformations of the past century, whether first to communism or later toward modernity and reform, the effective mode has been via economic transformation. China's economic reforms, implemented by Deng Xiaoping following the death of Chairman Mao, have brought unprecedented change to the country. While these reforms represent the adoption of a number of the elements of capitalist market economy, they were always billed as being 'socialism with special Chinese characteristics' (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*). The phrasing allowed the implementation of sweeping economic and social reform without having to directly acknowledge the large-scale abandonment of many of the socialist ideals of the past.

This remarkable economic transition extends right down to Anshan Town itself, where being industrious, doing business and earning money are major parts of people's lives and are seen as being extremely desirable personal qualities. This attitude was reflected in the previous chapter in the discussion of how the entrepreneurial ethic came to be expressed online on social media. A large number of farmers are actively engaged in the market economy. Many sell high-priced fruit and surplus crops that they have grown. Many farmers (mostly male) preferred to work as manual labour in the town's factories in order to earn more than they might do working in agriculture, leaving their wives responsible for tending vegetables for most of the year (in addition to the considerable burdens of housework). Through this employment, the factories made a significant contribution to the local economy. The town itself was full of retail outlets, selling everything from groceries to clothes to motorcycles. Anshan Town residents were, in many ways, acutely aware of their participation in the regional, national and global economies. A proportion of internet users also sought to extend their entrepreneurial ethic to their use of social media. The previous chapter looked at users for whom this took the form of level accumulation; for others it involved trying to extend their business activities into online spaces.

### Social media for promotion

There were already instances of small businesses in Anshan Town, such as restaurants and shops, using social media within their everyday operations, although using social media as a channel to promote their activities was altogether less common. Neither Qzone nor WeChat have the ability to easily create business pages<sup>35</sup> in the same way that Facebook offers. One user, Li Ming, who runs a restaurant in the town, set his personal profile name to that of his restaurant. For a period, his WeChat profile picture was a photograph of his restaurant storefront. Li Ming hoped that by doing this, people who were visiting the town might see his WeChat profile online via the 'People Nearby' function, and if they happened to be looking for somewhere to eat, they might contact him and then come for a meal. He explained that since he had set up the profile, one or two people had, indeed, become aware of his restaurant this way and had come to eat at his restaurant. However, he expressed disappointment that his online presence had not elicited more custom. Li Ming eventually gave up on this approach, instead using an image of himself as his profile picture.



Another example was Gao Jianguo, who ran a photocopy/printing shop within the town. Like Li Ming, Gao Jianguo also set his QQ alias as his company's name and used an image of his shop front as his profile image.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Gao, social media was more immediately relevant to his business. Although most people came directly to the store in order to print things off, usually armed with a USB key containing the relevant files customers also sometimes sent him the files for printing via QQ. QQ was thus used as a business page in order to aide communication and to increase visibility to potential customers.

There were also instances of people using social media platforms themselves to sell specific products. One example is a woman whose father was a retired carpenter. Her home featured a beautiful bed that her father had made by hand. She placed an advert on her Qzone containing a photo of the bed, saying 'if anyone is interested in buying one call me on this number . . .'. One small company in the town that specialised in selling steel to the town's factories for use in the manufacturing process attempted to promote their business through WeChat group messages. The company used the group message function to regularly send the wholesale prices of metal (i.e. per tonne) to buyers in each of the factories to keep them updated on changing prices.

All three of these examples show the willingness of townsfolk to utilise social media platforms for their own business purposes. For these small local businesses, social media was the preferred way to both promote one's business and to communicate with customers. However, personal accounts and business accounts were often indistinguishable from one another, again reflecting the fact that personal relations were seen to form an integral part of business relations.

## Taobao

As already noted, there are very strong links between the development of social media sites more generally and that of Taobao, a popular online shopping website that operates in a similar way to Amazon Marketplace. For a 1,000 RMB (\$161) returnable deposit, it allows people to set up their own store where they are able to sell products. In some ways the overlap with more conventional social media is more apparent than it is with Amazon Marketplace because Taobao has a strong social element to it. It features a chat client called 'Prosperous Ali' (*a'li wangwang*), which allows potential customers to chat directly with store owners. Rather than customer – storeowner dialogue on Prosperous Ali being confined to issues of post-sale customer support, a significant amount of dialogue

is conducted prior to the sale. Many sellers receive messages from customers prior to purchase checking whether they have a particular item in stock, and customers will often attempt to negotiate a discount on the listed price.

During the field work I only met one woman in Anshan Town, Wang Miao, who operated her own Taobao store. Wang Miao was a Chinese medicine doctor in the town's hospital; however, she also ran a small clothes shop in Anshan Town, selling children's clothes in partnership with her sister. Her online Taobao store also sold clothes, however in contrast with the actual store she operated in Anshan Town, none of the clothes on her online store were actually owned by her. Instead, she acted as an agent, selling on clothing for another person who was located in another city in China. Each time Wang Miao made a sale on her online store, she messaged the person, who fulfilled the order and electronically transferred a small portion of the profits to Wang Miao's account. The person who fulfilled the order had their own online store on Taobao; however by having multiple stores offering their products, the main seller increased the potential range of people who could receive such offers. Nonetheless, Wang Miao reported that sales through this channel were minimal, and towards the end of my field work she closed her online store, as she felt it required too much time to maintain.

In contrast to selling online, buying from Taobao is common among Anshan Town people. Over the period of field work shopping via Taobao became an increasingly popular activity. One of the major transitions was the opening of a 'Taobao assisted buying shop' on the town's Commercial Street during the field work. The shop, run by a local family, served to reduce two barriers that discouraged townsfolk from buying online: the expense of getting items delivered, and the lack of trust involved in conducting online transactions with strangers.

The opening of the 'Taobao assisted buying shop' broke the monopoly on delivery services held by the town's Post Office. Prior to the store opening, the Post Office (operated by China Post, the state Post Office) was the only officially recognised parcel delivery service. In contrast, large cities offered greater choice, with several private couriers offering delivery that is both cheaper and faster than China Post. These courier companies are able to offer superior service by limiting their coverage to cities and large urban towns, such as Bai Town. By not offering delivery to smaller, poorer places such as Anshan Town (where there are fewer customers posting items, and fuel and delivery costs are high), the couriers keep their overheads to a minimum. The

'Taobao assisted buying shop' services the final stage of the delivery process – between Bai Town and Anshan Town – which the couriers had deemed to be unprofitable. Each day the shop owners drive to Bai Town, visiting the delivery offices of each courier company and pick up all packages destined for Anshan Town. On return to Anshan Town, recipients are called and told to pick up their goods from the shop on the town's Commercial Street. The courier companies pay the shop 1 RMB (\$0.16) for each item they deliver. For the residents of Anshan Town, being able to pick up their items from the store in Anshan Town is far preferable to travelling to Bai Town to pick up the package in person.

The 'Taobao assisted buying shop' offers a further convenience for users, helping them to make the purchases in the first place by providing a way for users to overcome issues of trust. Customers can use one of two computers located in the store to browse through the Taobao site themselves, and to select goods for purchase. The store owner helps to introduce users to the site and provides guidance on how to talk to the seller using *a'li wangwang* to negotiate a discount. Furthermore, instead of paying using their own credit cards or online bank accounts, customers were able to pay the Taobao store in cash (for a percentage fee of the total cost of the product). The store owner then used their own bank account to pay for the items. Many of the people who made use of the store's assisted purchasing service tended to be young people, mostly middle school students and young mothers. Visitor numbers swell during the school's break and lunchtimes, when students from the school opposite visit to make purchases. These people often do not have bank accounts, or do not trust online purchasing, so have not yet activated this feature of their bank account.

The storeowner keeps a record whenever they buy items on behalf of customers, so that when the package arrives they know who to pass it on to. Examining this record revealed the low value of many items purchased. Of a random selection of 44 different items purchased by 15 different customers, the average item cost was 33 RMB (\$5), with the most and least expensive individual items costing 6 RMB (\$0.96) and 178 RMB (\$29) respectively. The majority of items purchased through the store were clothes, shoes and accessories.

In this case, it was the familiarity of the local owner of the Taobao store that helped to allay users' fears around conducting online transactions with strangers. The store owner was as a member of a known family from the town, and therefore users were happy to conduct transactions through this individual, even if the end user was not known.

In this economic arena the particular character of Chinese social media seems to find its niche. In China there is always a duality between the social and the economic and a preference for a more socialised form of exchange, which may explain why people seem to be increasingly willing to spend their money on these platforms. There is also increasing willingness to try to make money out of online platforms, as evidenced by Wang Miao's online clothes store and both Li Ming and Gao Jianguo's use of social media profiles to promote their businesses within the town itself. It is worth noting how this is the opposite of the impact of the internet on commerce in the West, where sites such as Amazon represent a further de-socialising of commerce when compared to offline shopping.<sup>37</sup>

## **Conclusion: Making social media moral – from content to commerce**

This chapter has examined the relationship between the family and the state in the context of various controls that are placed on social media in an attempt to produce a morally acceptable online space, which is perceived to be in the best interests of both of parties. The chapter has examined how Anshan Town people themselves experience attempts to control both access to and content on social media, through measures such as the Golden Shield project, deletion of posts deemed inappropriate and self-censorship. The production of content – both propaganda in the form of news and patriotic postings made by users – were also found to be an activity directed towards creating an 'imagined community' of online users of social media. This in turn provided the conditions for interactions among strangers online. In all of these cases specific forms of content and usage are being encouraged with the aim of promoting shared national values and ideals. However, rather than this being a 'top down' activity, users also play an active role in the production of appropriate content. In this way, the state and the family collaborate to produce a social media containing information that is understood to support and strengthen the values and ideals of both parties.

Considering social media's role in the economic sphere provides an important counterpoint to these concerns around content. Chinese social media platforms have been incredibly successful at monetising their services. Chapter 5 noted the presence of paid-for membership schemes and add-ons on social media, and the high proportion of young

people who had subscribed to these premium services at one time or another. The fact that the platforms are capable of generating such revenue can be seen as a further motivation for the Golden Shield: it ensures that Chinese internet users' money remains in the domestic economy – largely spent on gaming and services offered by local internet companies – rather than going to foreign firms.

Chinese social media users are accustomed to the fact that they may have to pay for part of their social media use. However, this chapter has also revealed an interest in and willingness among significant numbers of social media users in Anshan Town to explore the possibilities of these platforms for business purposes. The desire to exploit social media to make money is not necessarily individualistic; it actually reflects the fact that entrepreneurship and the earning of money is perceived to be aligned with the ideal of the corporate family.<sup>38</sup> However, to date, the flow of money for social media users in Anshan Town has largely been an outward one, with money from the users being spent on internet access, virtual goods and subscriptions. Currently these highly monetised social media platforms are seen to encourage the flow of money away from users towards the social media companies themselves. Young people's spending on such items – in terms of money and time – has also caused a certain amount of conflict within families: it is seen as wasteful and undesirable. Investment in an education is widely held to produce moral persons capable of contributing to the nation and of returning financial gains to the family and parents in their old age. If there were more opportunities for young people to use social media to earn 'real' money, rather than to spend it on what parents view as being idle 'entertainment', then the potential utility of social media may become apparent to those parents.

It seems that the challenge at the present time is to design platforms that allow people to engage in commerce and conduct transactions. WeChat has gone some way to doing this with the development of the WeChat wallet, which allows users to move money between people. Taobao also has a similar escrow service named Alipay (*zhifubao*) that is also popular. What users in Anshan Town seem to desire is an adjustment to the platforms so that users have greater opportunities to earn money through these channels. If those who command power over China's internet and social media infrastructures were to consider this as a potential alternative to more tried-and-tested controls over access to information, they may find the internet to be an altogether less problematic beast.

## Conclusion: Circles and strangers, media moralities and ‘the Chinese internet’

This book has examined the impact of social media in contemporary rural China by giving an ethnographic account of its use and consequences in Anshan Town, exploring its wide-reaching influence on friendship, marriage, family life, education, consumption, politics and economics. The volume began with the case of Li Kang, a young man who had deleted his WeChat account in order to prevent his wife discovering he chatted with other women via the platform – behaviour that contrasted sharply with the family-oriented and moralistic postings he shared with his friends via his QQ feed. Returning to this example in light of the material presented here, we can now better understand these apparently contradictory behaviours. The appeal of these platforms to people such as Li Kang can be seen to lie in the opportunity they offer individuals to explore such inconsistencies within their own lives.

The book has described the characteristics of China’s social media platforms and their users, and illustrated this with valuable contextualised accounts gathered during an extended period of ethnographic engagement. These accounts detail how and why participants’ social media contacts are predominantly drawn from classmates and people from established offline social networks, and why, with these people in mind, postings are of a highly moralistic nature. There is a ready availability of stranger-finding features on popular social media platforms, and yet the book has been able to show how all of these features relate to a strong moral framework in Anshan Town, where the ‘traditional’ values of family and integrity are felt by townsfolk to distinguish them from other Chinese people.

In this chapter I will draw together three key themes of inquiry that were introduced in Chapter 1 – circles and strangers, morality and ‘the Chinese internet’ – and discuss the main implications of these findings. I will first summarise the importance of the circles of contacts and strangers and discuss its consequences for the understanding of social relationships in China, by arguing that Anshan Town people’s desire for these relationships reflects a growing individualism. Secondly, I will consider the interaction between social media and the strong and pervasive moral frameworks that exist in the town. Finally, I will examine how the case of Anshan Town can help to create a more accurate picture of ‘the Chinese internet’ and particularly its social media, highlighting the key challenges to current understandings that are raised by the ethnographic data.

## **Circles and strangers: individualistic relations**

Relationships based on circles of friends or of strangers, mediated by social media, have featured prominently throughout this volume. Up to now, they have largely been treated as being in opposition to each other. Indeed this is how they have been viewed in important anthropological accounts to date (as discussed in Chapter 4), and also sometimes how people in the town speak about strangers in comparison to ‘normal’ relationships with their friends and families. However, taking these two sets of relations and considering what they mean as a whole, I argue, reveals that social relations in contemporary rural China are becoming more individualistic in nature as people seek to construct their own personal and selective spheres of relationships. In the following section I will show how relations with both circles of friends and strangers are forms of these more individualistic relations.

This finding partially corresponds with the work of Yan Yunxiang, who has argued that increasing individualisation in China combines with cultural democracy and the lack of a welfare state to create a diminished notion of individualism that is far more utilitarian and selfish in nature than that seen in other modernising societies.<sup>1</sup> This, he argues, accounts for the absence of trust and the competitive nature of Chinese society. While I think specific online relationships in Anshan Town are indicative of the increasing importance of individualism as people are able to personally structure their online relationships, I am less convinced that this can be attributed to individualism understood as extreme selfishness, resulting in ‘egotistic’ and ‘uncivil’ individuals.

The evidence suggests not only a willingness to trust both friends and strangers, but also strong ideals surrounding the morality of social media use.<sup>2</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1, it is not that individuals have necessarily 'lost' their morals, it is simply that these morals have undergone a change.<sup>3</sup> In part this was shown by the way individuals attempted to balance the relationships between circles of friends and strangers within the same online space. I argue that although both sets of relationships are insular to varying degrees, it is through juxtaposing them that Anshan Town's social media users can explore and navigate the meaning of moral change.

In the case of relations within circles of friends, many of the connections already possessed an inward-facing quality, as these non-kin friendships are based on familiarity. Chapter 2 outlined the importance of specific regimes of visibility afforded by social media platforms, which provide favourable conditions for sociality among circles of friends, rather than the wider internet. Chapter 3 examined the highly family-oriented and moralistic postings that indicate moral worth to one's peers, confirming the significance of social media as a platform for interaction with a known circle of acquaintances. The clearest example came from Chapter 4, which demonstrated that friendship relations sustained on social media are based on the principle of commonality (*tong*) which has traditionally formed the basis for non-kin *guanxi* relations drawn from common class, home-town or work acquaintances.<sup>4</sup> Taken as a whole, social media has allowed for a continuity of these relationships, which already represented somewhat closed and intimate groups.

However, in many ways social media has strengthened these groups and relations and led them to become more insular than before. Examples can be seen in the classmate groups on QQ, which enabled groups to continue beyond the school walls, facilitating reunions after graduation (Chapter 4). Although the frequent use of avatars and aliases appeared to add a layer of invisibility, it actually increased intimacy by presuming familiarity among people already known to each other. Chapter 5 showed how the practice of level accumulation on social media introduced elements of competition and hierarchy into these circles of friends. The evidence presented suggests that relationships are in fact becoming intensified, but are also more individualistic as a result of social media.

On initial inspection, relations with strangers through social media seem to be the opposite of these familiar relationships, allowing people to connect with individuals located completely outside the bounds of traditional familiar relations. Chapter 4 showed how elementary and



middle schoolchildren found it relatively easy to connect to and interact with strangers through the process of ‘messily adding’. Older university students from the town took this a stage further, using location-aware features on social media for the purposes of dating. On the one hand, these behaviours seem to be the antithesis of ‘traditional’ relations, for example by threatening the supposedly inviolable nature of monogamous marriage. Stranger relations thus represented a challenge to popular discourse about the types of relationships felt to be permissible in social life, but also to foundational theories of social relations in China that have understood strangers as being the antithesis to relations based on kinship or familiarity.<sup>5</sup>

However, although relations with strangers may seem to be a radical alternative form of sociality, which sees individuals break through the boundaries of traditional familiar relationships, they can be viewed as a move towards a more individualistic-oriented network, as individuals seek to exert greater control over their own social worlds. Many of the interactions that individuals pursue with strangers appeal precisely because they are free of mutual connections, providing relief from the constraints of familiar relationships that are governed by moral obligation and concern for reputation. Chapter 4 also described how individuals may use encounters with strangers for anything from seeking romantic relations to talking about one’s problems, or sometimes simply relieving boredom. Therefore, although the numerous encounters with strangers that individuals undertake online are a form of exploration and a source of novelty, they are voluntary, reflecting an individual’s choice of who to befriend. In comparison, networks of obligation are determined by circumstance – epitomised by kinship or familiar non-kin relations.

As people turn inwards in their relationships, family relations in particular have been shown to sit uneasily within the environment of social media. Family connections are not completely absent from social media, but they certainly do not occupy a central position in the sociality on these platforms in the same way as familiar non-kin relations, such as classmates or work colleagues. Indeed, there are far fewer interactions between generations, and within marriage such use is discouraged. Instead, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, idealistic notions of family are strongly expressed in the form of baby photos, romantic memes focused on marriage and messages of adoration towards one’s parents – all of which are unlikely to actually be viewed by family members. Concern around social media use and its effect on the family is not entirely without basis. The turn towards sets of relationships dictated

by individuals' personal desires can represent a departure from, or even a threat to, relationships within the family, which assume each person occupies a fixed and indisputable position in a social hierarchy by virtue of their birth and gender.

Anshan Town users can juxtapose relations with friends against relations with strangers and this may be where the appeal of social media lies. I have demonstrated how both sets of relationships point towards an inward turn among Chinese social users, in which individuals are seeking to focus upon that set of social relations which increasingly derive from personal choice. However, this inward turn does not necessarily mean that individuals are becoming 'less social' or are losing the ability to communicate, as espoused by some scholars critical of the influence of social media.<sup>6</sup> Instead it must be acknowledged that social media users are intentionally crafting an online environment where they seek intense forms of sociality, which also involves being able to contrast and move between the different experiences found in different forms of relations. Anshan Town's social media users are intentionally using the shielded world of social media as a space where they can creatively bring these oppositions together, explore their contradictions and create their own intimate sphere of relations. In relation to individualism, this supports the idea of a more individual focus as they are choosing their own relationships and not just accepting the dictates of kinship, but, on the other hand, it is not making people more individualistic in the sense that they are becoming less social.

This inward turn in relations has important implications for how we understand the experience of everyday life in rural China. People are willing to think of themselves as part of an 'imagined community', as shown by the patriotic posts, and they use this as a basis of familiarity upon which they build relations with strangers. One of the key questions of this inward turn in relations is how it affects the way in which individuals understand and come to moral decisions about the world they live in.

## Media moralities

The old Taoist temple, perched high in the mountain on the town's eastern boundary, was one of my favourite spots in Anshan Town, offering a spectacular vantage point from which to view the town below. On visiting the temple I would often call in on Priest Wang, who occupied one of the temple buildings. Priest Wang always dresses in white Daoist robes

and speaks in a calm, balanced and reflective manner, having clearly benefited from spending the best part of his life ensconced on the hillside, reflecting on the nature of existence.

Despite his traditional appearance, Priest Wang does not shy away from new technologies. Whenever he sits down at a table he pulls out a large, glistening Samsung smartphone from the deep pocket of his priestly gown and gently places it in front of his person. Although the distinct sounds of QQ and WeChat message notifications sporadically emerge from his phone, he nevertheless resists the temptation to impulsively read such messages, instead concentrating intently on whoever he is conversing with at the time. On asking Priest Wang what he thought of social media, he gave a typically measured answer, doubtless informed by his Daoist worldview: 'All things have their good side, and they have their bad side. . . . What is important is how you use them.' Priest Wang's advice is worth bearing in mind when it comes to making conclusions regarding the impact of social media on the lives of Anshan Town inhabitants, and the broader consequences of this technology for China and humankind more generally.

Chapter 1 noted that scholarly discussion on the impact of social media (and the internet more generally) tends to be dominated by approaches which assume a technology is inherently 'good' or 'bad'. This volume has sought to shy away from such simple judgements, instead calling upon ethnographic engagement to illustrate the varied use and multiple and contradictory effects of social media on the lives of the townsfolk. In other words, I have tried to understand the morality of media by looking beyond the media itself, and to consider the wider ethical underpinnings of the context in which it is found.

The presence of Priest Wang overlooking the town also helps us recognise the special context for this study. Most people in China are Chinese by default, but they do not necessarily bear a great personal responsibility for embodying or representing China, or Chinese values. The people of Anshan Town are different from many others, because they acutely recognise this responsibility: not to represent China or the Chinese as a whole, but rather a version of it that is embodied by their own understandings of what constitutes Confucianism, Daoism and socialism.

So the dilemma considered in this book is how does a population that is defined by its embodiment of classical values and moralities respond to a technology most closely associated with radical change? In addition, social media is often seen as destructive of tradition. In this book we do not find a single or simple answer. Instead we see a

number of different ways in which the population creatively develop an appropriation of social media that suits their situation. These varied responses reflect the fact that rather than the Confucian, Daoist and socialist pasts being experienced as fixed and stable, or even as hegemonic conservative norms, they appear as points of reference within the moral frameworks which townsfolk construct in response to their social situations and the modernity of everyday life. In so doing, the character of these traditions themselves is also open to reinterpretation and change.

The first, and perhaps most straightforward, response is simply to find ways in which social media can come to express and facilitate traditional values and moralities: the threat is turned into a supportive tool. In Chapter 3's analysis of visual postings demonstrated how the two main genres – baby photos and idealised romantic relationships – are inherently about conservative values, which could be linked to parent-child reciprocity<sup>7</sup> and the perceived inviolability of marriage.<sup>8</sup> In the same chapter, postings in which children express devotion to their parents, despite the parents being unable to see these messages, is further evidence of using social media postings as a means to establish one's own moral value among one's peers.

Chapter 4 showed how the different types of social relationships fostered by social media use in China are also felt to reflect the morality of the user that engages in them. Circles of friends mainly consisting of familiar non-kin relations – classmates, work colleagues and people from one's hometown – are felt to be relatively unproblematic. However, far more ambiguous online relations with strangers has led to social media often being stigmatised within married couples as inherently immoral and damaging to the stability of families.

Chapter 5 looked at level accumulation, describing how social media users turned the practice of collecting virtual currency and levels online into a moral activity by emphasising its entrepreneurial nature, even if this involved using money to purchase levels or manipulating the system in other ways. The emphasis on moving up levels seems to fall between an obsession with progress through meritocracy – that was foundational to education and bureaucratic governance – and the new status aspirations of consumer materialism. The intense interest of (often young) people in these activities was felt by older generations to be especially problematic, adding to their general distrust of social media as a whole.

Chapter 6 described how the broader moral stigmatisation of social media raised in Chapters 4 and 5 brings together the state and

the local population, allowing both to form moral judgements about modern social media and assert the need to control it. Social media is part of a long-term project in which the current Chinese government has sought to draw upon and reinforce an idiom of patriarchy. This extends from the proper moral family through to the proper moral state, so that the concept of duty can be consistently applied at all levels, with social media forming part of a moral internet. In Anshan Town there was evidence that this drive was coming from below as well as from above. Attempts to control social media content were contrasted in Chapter 6 with a less confrontational mode of activity: the growing interest among some media users to appropriate these platforms for their own economic purposes, recollecting the theme of entrepreneurship as a moral activity highlighted in Chapter 5.

In this volume the evidence that social media can be turned into an instrument of moral tradition and conservatism is tempered by an equally important role for social media as the instrument of transformation and change. Social media itself represents change but it has arrived in China at a time of radical change, when many areas of life and societal values are being reconfigured. Social media has been shown to have a dual role in social transformation, allowing individuals both to imagine alternative moral and social possibilities, and also to experiment in engaging with such potential.

This research largely agrees with Priest Wang that social media is neither inherently good nor bad. Morality is implicated in social media in far more complex ways than the innate qualities of the technologies themselves. For example it can be seen in such as usage behaviour, the types of relationships formed, the consequences for education and work, and the messages and ideals that are disseminated through the platform. Anshan Town's distinctive cultural heritage also informs these moral discourses, but these actions simply cannot be separated from the tremendous social and cultural changes occurring in the town at the present time: improving urban linkages, migration, engagement in industrial labour, increasing prevalence of consumer goods. The fact that townsfolk use social media as a means to understand and think through morality is thus significant in that it supports a range of recent ethnographic studies emphasising the importance of the ethical in ordinary Chinese life.<sup>9</sup> Examining social media arguably acts as an ideal perspective on social change because the multi-faceted functionality and widespread and differentiated use of information and communication technologies evoke a range of moral issues that define contemporary social experience in China today.

## Understanding 'the Chinese internet' and its social media

Both the specific social relations (with circles of friends and with strangers) and the moral dilemmas raised by social media, which have been the major themes of this study, are relevant when it comes to drawing broader conclusions about the nature of 'the Chinese internet' and its social media platforms. Examining media use in relation to these aspects of social life allows for a more intimate perspective on the concerns and motivations of the users, which can in turn help to challenge conventional understandings of such media.

One of the key findings of this volume has been the high degree of difference and autonomy that Chinese social media has compared to the other countries in the larger research project of which this study is a part.<sup>10</sup> This distinctiveness may be expected given the Chinese government's authoritarian control over the internet; it has sought to mould what it considers an appropriate online space, in which non-Chinese social media platforms have gradually been ostracised while domestic platforms have been allowed to flourish. However, the idiosyncratic nature of Chinese social media cannot be solely attributed to the platforms themselves. The reasons for these differences are in fact more complex. This study has shown that any understanding of the consequences of a new communication technology for a particular society must include a consideration of how individuals from that society creatively put these technologies to use in their everyday lives.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 2 included a description of some of the key features of the social media platforms used by people in Anshan Town which started to build a detailed understanding of the social behaviours, relationships and moral issues emerging from their use.<sup>12</sup> The limited visibility afforded by the most popular platforms helped to make clear the primary audience of known friends for sharing posts online, while also enabling relations with strangers to be concealed from one's other acquaintances. Location-aware stranger finding services built into the same platform indicated users' willingness to juxtapose these two sets of relations. The overt nature of level-accumulation systems on QQ, Qzone and other platforms (Chapter 4) raised questions about the ethics of social differentiation and monetisation within social relationships. However, it was only through observing and discussing with participants how they made use of these features that it became possible to draw firm conclusions as to their relevance.

Thinking through both the platforms themselves and their use – and thereby including both the material and the social – provides a more detailed picture of the impact of social media on society. Such an approach allows us not only to realise how social media is appropriated differently in different places, but also to use this difference to challenge the process by which themes of internet use come to be deemed worthy of study. Here again we return to the distinction between technoutopian and techno-deterministic approaches, which have largely informed discussions regarding the social impact of new technologies. These two opposing viewpoints have ended up guiding many of the chief areas of concern around the impact of social media such as privacy, democracy, inequality and education.<sup>13</sup> However, this study has shown that rural Chinese users define social media as important in ways that do not always correspond to these ethnocentric ideals about what ought to give it meaning.

For example, Chapter 1 noted that in relation to the topic of personal freedom in online spaces in China, some commentaries emphasise the potential for social media to be a tool of liberation, while others stress the impact of state controls on the same social media.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Chapter 2 showed how people of Anshan Town feel little need to ‘have a voice’ on the internet; in fact they largely avoid using social media platforms which allow them to share their thoughts with the entire internet. Chapter 6 described how few people in the town were even aware of the existence of the national ‘Golden Shield Project’ (often known as the ‘Great Firewall of China’) which blocks certain websites, including non-Chinese social media platforms. Those who are aware of it seem largely unconcerned about it. Similarly, very few people reported having any social media posts censored or deleted, which in part reflects the fact that, for most people, social media is not seen as an appropriate place to share overt political opinions or postings.

This does not mean that Anshan Town people were acquiescent in their own suppression or lacked critical perspectives on the wider structures of power around them. Chapter 6 also showed how many spoke disparagingly about the content of news reports on social media (and traditional media), believing it usually to reproduce the Party view. It is rather that social media is constructed by what such populations desire to make of it, and in this instance it is issues such as pleasure, romance, family and personal aspiration that come first.

The topic of privacy provides a further example of the need to understand local interpretations of themes of inquiry before using them to assess the impact of social media. Anshan Town’s social media users

were not overly concerned about the state or social media companies monitoring their use; it was personal privacy that was a prime concern. The use of avatars and user aliases was commonplace, and helped to facilitate interactions with strangers by allowing users to conceal their own identity. Equally, sharing social media passwords was common behaviour, especially among young peers for whom it signified the existence of a high level of trust. Some users operated multiple or secret accounts to hide their online activities from their partners. These activities all point to a far greater concern about how one's peers and family, rather than the administrative powers, may react to one's online behaviour.

A final example that perhaps most forcefully illustrates the importance of taking the local into account when attempting to understand social media's impact comes from the topic of inequality, where opinions are divided between whether social media will reduce or exacerbate social inequality. Debates on this theme have to consider a range of social variables such as socio-economic status, literacy, age, gender, location and race. This project has demonstrated that ethnographic engagement can make clear how technology and the distribution of wealth and opportunities in society operate in a complex and reciprocal relation, rather than a linear and causative one.

The first contrast to draw on the subject of inequality is between the rural and the urban, especially in light of the unique setting of this study. Surprising findings have been obtained simply by giving due attention to rural use. For example, Chapter 1 noted how many urban Chinese believed internet and social media use in the countryside to be rare or non-existent. The range of platforms and internet access methods described in Chapter 2 showed Anshan Town to have a thriving (albeit unevenly dispersed) communications ecology.

Age and migration were shown to be two key and interrelated factors governing the use of social media. Users who had migrated to urban areas such as Bai Town or Jinan for extended periods of study or work often used a broader variety of platforms. By contrast, people who had not left the town – especially elementary and middle schoolchildren – tended predominantly to use QQ. However, even here there were notable exceptions; for example, a minority of individuals in their late thirties and above working in shops or administrative offices were also frequent users of QQ, a phenomenon that is often attributable to their working conditions – they are required to be in their workplace where they have both long periods of idleness and readily available internet access. As such, we see that determining someone's level of social media



use may be as much about their immediate context as it is about any single social variable.

Gender has also been a key theme in this book. It is not simply that men and women use social media differently by virtue of their gender. It was demonstrated that the differing levels of mobility afforded to men and women (by virtue of their access to different modes of transport) combine with social media to afford both genders with markedly different opportunities for social interaction. So with gender, as with age and migration before it, we see a complex and at times contradictory picture. Instead of simple causal relations, patterns of social media use emerge in response to normative ideals informed by moral frameworks that dictate access to and appropriate use of a vast array of material technology in the town. Equally, these ideals are open to interpretation and challenge, including through social media use itself, and as such exceptions are also commonplace. This means that while structures of inequality exist in Anshan Town, as with any society, it is important to avoid seeing them as rigid and absolute.

While themes such as control, privacy and inequality are common areas of inquiry when studying the internet and social media in both China and beyond, this very specific case of a rural Chinese town has shown that each of these themes can mean greatly different things for local individuals. So the critique of their prevalence lies not in the importance of these themes for understanding the impact of social media and the internet in China – topics which rightly require thorough research and documenting. The issue is the imbalance of the existing articles, which can easily lead readers to believe that such topics are the defining features of the Chinese internet for those that use them. This study has brought to the fore the specific kinds of social relations people create and maintain through their social media use, and how these become implicated in important and pressing moral frameworks, revealing another aspect of the internet and social media. As such, social media's impact cannot be satisfactorily explained by either utopian or deterministic principles, but rather we must see society and technology in a reciprocal relationship with each other in order to reveal what appear to be the townsfolks' ambivalent positions in a society undergoing constant transformation. In this complex and shifting context, it is only by trying to understand the significance that users of social media themselves attribute to such technologies (which requires us to first put our own assumptions on hold) that we might expand our own comprehension of social media from being a tool of communication to one of understanding.

# Appendix – Methodology

## Questionnaires

This volume has made reference to statistical data throughout. The majority of this data was obtained through three questionnaire surveys, which were conducted during different stages of the field work. Completion of these questionnaires posed a considerable challenge, and was sometimes hampered by participants' suspicion regarding the purpose of the questionnaires, misunderstandings over the meaning of certain questions, illiteracy and boredom. Certain questions included in the original questionnaire proved so problematic, ill-defined and irrelevant to the local situation that they ended up being disregarded altogether.

The above factors also contributed to difficulty in finding individuals willing to respond to the questionnaires. The sample sizes are therefore relatively small. This means that the figures given in this book should be taken as being representative only of those who responded, rather than of Anshan Town as a whole. Nonetheless, certain findings drawn from the surveys have been presented in this volume as their inclusion complements the breadth of data gathered over 15 months of ethnography in Anshan Town, for example by corroborating the author's own intuitions regarding the existence of specific patterns of attitudes toward, or use of social media in the town, based on behaviours that were observed many times or points of view that were frequently expressed. On plenty of occasions, however, statistics gave unclear answers.

Some will argue such use of statistics to be selective and problematic. However the other alternative, large-scale, macro-level surveys and 'big data' analysis tend to miss out the kind of fine detail and analysis that participant-observation research can deliver.<sup>1</sup> One of the benefits of long-term interaction with participants was that it allowed the design of later questionnaires to take into account and address observations raised in the field. All questionnaires were anonymised and coded.

## Questionnaire A

Questionnaire A was performed between June and August 2013 (the third to fifth months of field work). It consisted of a six-page questionnaire covering aspects such as socio-economic background information, use of different social media platforms, range of activities on social media, types of people communicated with on different platforms. The questionnaire also considered the presence of a range of different ICTs in the home, and their use by different family members. Ownership of transport and other household items was also measured. This questionnaire was designed with the intention of facilitating comparison between the nine field sites in the study, and therefore roughly the same version of the questionnaire was conducted in each of the field sites in this study.

The complexity of Questionnaire A meant that respondents generally had to be helped to complete the questionnaire by the author or a research assistant, who was able to guide participants through the questions, often recording responses on their behalf. In total 111 people completed the questionnaire (52 females, 59 males), with the youngest respondent being 16 years of age, and the oldest 65 years (the mean age was 32 years). This questionnaire included both users and non-users<sup>2</sup> of social media. The participants who formed the focus of the remainder of the field work were almost entirely recruited by means of this questionnaire.

## Questionnaire B

Questionnaire B was conducted in the final three months of field work, between June and August 2014. It consisted of a two-page questionnaire containing only multiple choice or number responses. Questions included the quantity of contacts, the prevalence of friending family members on social media, face-to-face interactions, sharing of passwords, spending money online, and responses to advertising and online dating. This questionnaire was far simpler to complete than Questionnaire A, and was distributed in local businesses and to the homes of people already known to me, with the majority of respondents filling in the form by themselves. A significant minority of these questionnaires were also entrusted to a local summer tuition school, where students were asked to complete them in bulk during class time. Once again, this questionnaire was designed to be comparative, so that it could be completed in the nine different field sites of the study.

In total 175 responses were collected (81 females, 86 males, 8 gender not provided). This questionnaire was targeted at users of social media, and responses were skewed towards younger people. (56 per cent were aged 13–19 years; 21 per cent, 20–29 years; 15 per cent, 30–39 years; 6 per cent, 40–49 years; 1 per cent, 50–59 years; one respondent did not give age information.)

### Questionnaire C

Questionnaire C was conducted in January 2014, and was aimed solely at middle school students. The questions in this survey focused on aspects of mobile phone, internet and social media use (including types of accounts used, presence of multiple accounts, QQ level obtained, password sharing, preferred activities).

In total 312 students completed this questionnaire; 146 respondents were female and 145 respondents were male. In terms of their school age, 38 students were in grade 7 (12–13 years of age), one student was from grade 8 (13–14 years) and 273 students were from grade 9 (14–15 years). The survey was completed with the generous assistance of teachers responsible for each of the class groups who distributed the questionnaires to students for completion in classrooms; they were immediately returned to the teachers who passed them on to the author for processing.

# Glossary of selected Chinese terms

Pinyin	Chinese	English
<i>a'li wangwang</i>	阿里旺旺	Prosperous Ali (chat client)
<i>bai</i>	百	one hundred
<i>bai</i>	白	white
<i>baijiu</i>	白酒	sorghum wine
<i>baishi</i>	白事	'white event', mourning
<i>baobao</i>	宝宝	treasure, baby
<i>baobei</i>	宝贝	treasure, baby
<i>baoxi, bu baoyou</i>	报喜不报忧	share happiness, not sadness
<i>bu zhengchang</i>	不正常交往	abnormal relations
<i>jiaowang</i>		
<i>bubugao</i>	步步高	BBK (phone brand)
<i>chuanyue huoxian</i>	穿越火线	Crossfire
<i>ciji</i>	刺激	stimulating, exciting
<i>dandiao</i>	单调	monotony
<i>dingyue</i>	订阅	subscriptions
<i>disanzhe</i>	第三者	illegitimate lover
<i>doudizhu</i>	斗地主	'Tease the landlord' (a card game)
<i>dubo</i>	赌博	gambling
<i>erhao</i>	二号	second account
<i>fa</i>	发	to become rich
<i>fan</i>	烦	troublesome, annoying
<i>fangbian</i>	方便	convenient
<i>fanghuo changcheng</i>	防火长城	Great Firewall of China
<i>fujin de ren</i>	附近的人	People Nearby
<i>fuza</i>	复杂	complex
<i>getihu</i>	个体户	small private trader

<b>Pinyin</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>gua QQ</i>	挂QQ	remain logged in to QQ
<i>guanxi</i>	关系	connections, relationships
<i>guimi</i>	闺蜜	bosom buddy, close friend (between female peers)
<i>haoke</i>	好客	friendly, good hosts
<i>hei mingdan</i>	黑名单	blacklist
<i>hexie wenti</i>	和谐问题	harmony problem
<i>hongshi</i>	红事	'red event', celebration
<i>jindun gongcheng</i>	金盾工程	Golden Shield Project
<i>jing</i>	精	semen
<i>liuyan ban</i>	留言板	message board
<i>luan</i>	乱	messy
<i>luanjia</i>	乱加	messy adding
<i>meng sanguo</i>	梦三国	Dream of Three Kingdoms
<i>nü zhu nei, nan zhu wai</i>	女主内男主外	women live on the inside and men live on the outside (proverb)
<i>pengyou quan</i>	朋友圈	Moments
<i>piaoliuping</i>	漂流瓶	Drift Bottle
<i>pingbi</i>	屏蔽	to silence notifications (on a device)
<i>pusu</i>	朴素	sincere and honest
<i>putong</i>	普通	normal
<i>qingming jie</i>	清明节	tomb sweeping festival
<i>qiushou</i>	秋收	autumn harvest
<i>qiuzan</i>	求赞	requesting 'likes'
<i>qiuzhuan</i>	求转	requesting 'shares'
<i>QQ dengji</i>	QQ等级	QQ levels
<i>QQ huiyuan</i>	QQ会员	QQ membership
<i>QQ kongjian</i>	QQ空间	Qzone
<i>QQ qun</i>	QQ群	QQ group
<i>qun guanliyuan</i>	群管理员	group administrator
<i>qun zhuren</i>	群主人	group owner
<i>Renmin Ribao</i>	人民日报	<i>People's Daily</i>
<i>riji</i>	日记	diary
<i>shang wang</i>	上网	to go online

<b>Pinyin</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>shangdi</i>	上帝	God
<i>shangji</i>	上级	higher levels
<i>shengren</i>	生人	stranger
<i>shixiong</i>	师兄	older classmate (of the same teacher)
<i>shuoshuo</i>	说说	speak speak
<i>shuren</i>	熟人	close friend
<i>sixiang pinde</i>	思想品德	ethics and morals
<i>ta de dongtai</i>	他/她的动态	his/her happenings
<i>tan lian'ai</i>	谈恋爱	courting
<i>tili huo</i>	体力活	heavy work
<i>tong</i>	同	same, common
<i>tongxiang</i>	同乡	person from same village/ town/province
<i>tongxue</i>	同学	classmate
<i>tongshi</i>	同事	work colleague
<i>toucai</i>	偷菜	stealing vegetables
<i>touru jinqian</i>	投入金钱	invest money
<i>touru shijian</i>	投入时间	invest time
<i>tuanyuan fan</i>	团圆饭	reunion dinner
<i>wan</i>	玩	fun
<i>weibo</i>	微博	Weibo
<i>weiji ke</i>	微机课	computer class
<i>xiangce</i>	相册	gallery
<i>xingfu</i>	幸福	blessed
<i>Xinwen Lianbo</i>	新闻联播	National Network TV News
<i>xiu kongjian</i>	修空间	decorate Qzone profile
<i>xuanchuan</i>	宣传	propaganda
<i>yaoyiyao</i>	摇一摇	shake
<i>yi ye qing</i>	一夜情	one night stands
<i>youzhi</i>	幼稚	childish
<i>zhaogu</i>	照顾	to care for
<i>zhidao</i>	指导	guidance
<i>zhifubao</i>	支付宝	Alipay
<i>zhongguo dianxin</i>	中国电信	China Telecom
<i>zhongguo liantong</i>	中国联通	China Unicom

<b>Pinyin</b>	<b>Chinese</b>	<b>English</b>
<i>zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi</i>	中国特色社会主义	socialism with special Chinese characteristics (political policy)
<i>zhongguo yidong</i>	中国移动	China Mobile
<i>zhuanfa</i>	转发	share
<i>zhufu</i>	祝福	blessing
<i>zhuhao</i>	主号	main account



# Notes

## Chapter 1

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- 53 Rainey, L.D. *Confucius & Confucianism*, 23.
- 54 The temple festival is the only day when purchase of an entry ticket to the temple was not required.
- 55 Questionnaire A (see appendix).
- 56 Ascertaining religious belief through survey methods is especially difficult, especially given the syncretic nature of popular religion in China. However national China Family Studies Panel data from 2012 lists atheism at 89.56 per cent, Buddhism at 6.75 per cent, 'New Christianity' 1.89 per cent, Catholicism 0.41 per cent, Islam at 0.46 per cent; Daoism 0.54 per cent. See, Lu, Y. 2014. Contemporary China Religious Situation Report – Based on CFPS Research Data (*Dangdai Zhongguo zongjiao zhuangkuang baogao – jiyu CFPS 2012 diaocha shuju*). Retrieved 20 October 2015, from [http://iwr.cass.cn/ddzjys/lw/201403/t20140311\\_16499.html](http://iwr.cass.cn/ddzjys/lw/201403/t20140311_16499.html).
- 57 Wang, R.R. 2002. Globalizing the Heart of the Dragon: The impact of technology on Confucian ethical values. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 29(4), 553–569; Bockover, M. 2003. Confucian values and the Internet: a potential conflict. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 30(2), 169–175.
- 58 Questionnaire A (see appendix). The remaining 6 per cent failed to answer the question.
- 59 Yan, Y. 2003. *Private Life Under Socialism*, 129.
- 60 The 'only child' restrictions were officially ended nationwide in 2016.
- 61 A local news article in 2013 noted that Anshan Town's family planning office was awarded a 'top level prize' for workplace management for ten consecutive years. The article also stated that between January and September 2013 there were only 20 recorded cases of infringement of the family planning regulations in the entire township.
- 62 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 63 This phenomenon applied to the majority of people born following the introduction of the family planning law in 1979.
- 64 Kipnis's ethnography of Chinese education (also conducted in the Shandong province) highlights how parents view education as a form of investment in their children which they hope will provide their own future comfort and financial security. See, Kipnis, A.B. 2011. *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 25.
- 65 For an example of social media use in the latter context, see Wang, X.Y. 2016. *Social Media in Industrial China*. London: UCL Press.
- 66 The phrase 'work unit' is used to refer to the organisation that an individual works for. The term was used extensively throughout the socialist era, and remains in common parlance today.
- 67 Questionnaire A (see appendix).
- 68 For a description of guest halls and their significance in social life, see McDonald, T.N. 2013. Structures of Hosting in a South-Western Chinese Town. Thesis (PhD). University College London, 131–189.
- 69 This had led to electric bikes being restricted in some large Chinese cities. See Pedals of Fire: China's Electric-Bicycle Boom. *The Economist*, 15 May 2010, 71.
- 70 It was becoming more common for young women to learn to drive during their university course.
- 71 Questionnaire A (see appendix).
- 72 Unfortunately, the original question in Questionnaire A (see appendix) grouped together motorcycles and electric bicycles as a single transport option. That was before I became aware of the gendering of these modes of transport. Nonetheless, the smaller number of motorcycles on the roads of the town suggests that the bulk of this segment is comprised of electric bikes.
- 73 Due to space limitations, this section describes the methodological issues relating to my research in Anshan Town. A full description of the comparative methodology used in the research project of which this study is part is included in Chapter 3 of Miller et al. *How the World Changed Social Media*.

- 74 McDonald, T.N. 2013. Structures of Hosting in a South-western Chinese Town. Thesis (PhD). University College London.
- 75 McDonald, T. 2014. Digital life in rural north China (*Zhongguo beifang xiangcun de shuma gushi*) (Trans.: J. Yuan). *Urban China (Chengshi Zhongguo)*, (64), 102–105.
- 76 <http://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.shtml>
- 77 <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post>
- 78 Wang, X.Y. 2016. *Social Media in Industrial China*.

## Chapter 2

- 1 Qiang, C.Z., et al. 2009. *Rural Informatization in China*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- 2 Wu, I.S. 2009. *From Iron Fist to Invisible Hand: The Uneven Path of Telecommunications Reform in China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Zhao, Y. 2010. China's pursuits of indigenous innovations in information technology developments: Hopes, follies and uncertainties. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 3(3), 266–289.
- 3 Wallis, C. 2014. Micro-entrepreneurship, new media technologies, and the reproduction and reconfiguration of gender in rural China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 46.
- 4 Oreglia, E., and Kaye, J.J. 2012. A gift from the city: Mobile phones in rural China. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work*. New York: ACM, 137–146.
- 5 Liu, C. 2012. The myth of informatization in rural areas: The case of China's Sichuan province. *Government Information Quarterly*, 29(1), 85–97.
- 6 Questionnaire A (see appendix).
- 7 It is important to acknowledge inherent limitations with self-reported data of this kind. For example, the figures for average length of use and average time spent online per day in Table 2.1 seem especially high, and this may partly be due to the fact that some respondents included staying logged in to social media all day without actively using the platforms in their responses.
- 8 Koch, P. T., Koch, B. J., Huang, K., and Chen, W. 2009. Beauty is in the eye of the QQ user: Instant messaging in China. In G. Goggin and M. McLelland (eds), *Internationalizing Internet studies: Beyond Anglophone Paradigms*. New York: Routledge, 265–284.
- 9 Although the figures given for these platforms refer to worldwide users, the majority of these users are located in China.
- 10 Tencent. 2015. Yiche, Jingdong, Tencent Announce Partnership Strategy (*Yiche, Jingdong, Tengxun Xuanbu Zhanlue Hezuo*). Retrieved 24 March 2015, from <http://www.tencent.com/zh-cn/content/at/2015/attachments/20150109.pdf>.
- 11 Xiong, C. and Lv, Y. 2013. Social network service and social development. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 13(2), 133–138.
- 12 Adding a QQ contact is comparable to the action of 'friending' on Facebook.
- 13 It is also possible to view a simplified version of Qzone through the QQ IM app for smartphone.
- 14 <http://qzone.qq.com/>.
- 15 In Chinese the pronouns for 'his' and 'her' (*ta*) are homonyms, despite being written using different characters according to gender. However, on QQ (and other social networks) the pinyin 'TA' is instead displayed, leading one linguist to speculate that the original form seems more palpable and eternal to users. See Mair, V. 2013 *The Degendering of the Third Person Pronoun in Mandarin*. Retrieved 24 March 2015, from <http://languagelog ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=8937>.
- 16 Including 'Speak speak' entries, photographs and diary entries.
- 17 The social nature of online gaming in China has been noted by a number of scholars. For example, see Lindtner, S. and Szablewicz, M. 2011. China's many Internets: Participation and sites of game play across a changing technology landscape. In D. K. Herold and P. Marolt (eds), *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*. London: Routledge, 89–105.
- 18 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 19 CNNIC. 34th Statistical Report. 33.
- 20 Svensson, Marina. 2014. Voice, power and connectivity in China's microblogosphere: Digital divides on SinaWeibo. *China Information*, 28(2), 173.

- 21 Liu Ruisheng. 2013. Zhongguo weibo fazhan taishi yu redian jixi (An analysis of hot topics and the development of microblogging in China). In Tang Xujun (ed.), 2013. *Zhongguo xin meiti fazhan baogao 2013 (Report on the Development of New Media in China 2013)*, Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 36. Cited in Svensson, Voice, power and connectivity, 173.
- 22 Svensson, Voice, power and connectivity, 175–179.
- 23 In practice the fact that the phone GPS receivers are rarely accurate to this level means that the figures given for distance between users within Momo are somewhat misleading. See, for example, Zandbergen, P.A. 2009. Accuracy of iPhone locations: A comparison of assisted GPD, WiFi and Cellular Positioning. *Transactions in GIS*, 13(s1), 5–25.
- 24 de Seta, G. and Zhang, G. 2015. Stranger stranger or lonely lonely? Young Chinese and dating apps between the locational, the mobile and the social. In: I. A. Degim, J. Johnson and T. Fu (eds), *Online Courtship: International Interactions across Borders*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 167–185.
- 25 Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2012. *Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia*. London: Routledge, 124; Madianou, M. and Miller, D. 2013. Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(2), 169–187.
- 26 Madianou and Miller, Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media.
- 27 For example, official figures place the usage rate of smartphones across China's internet users at 85.8 per cent, while desktops and laptops rank at 70.8 per cent and 43.2 per cent respectively. CNNIC. 2015. 35th Statistical Report, 19.
- 28 Questionnaire A (see appendix).
- 29 The term feature phone is used to describe low-end phones with limited capabilities such as voice calls, text messages and possibly limited internet functionality.
- 30 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 31 Nielsen Company. 2010. Mobile Youth Around the World. Retrieved 15 September 2014 from <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2010-Reports/Nielsen-Mobile-Youth-Around-The-World-Dec-2010.pdf>; Nielsen Company. 2013. The Mobile Consumer: A Global Snapshot. Retrieved 15 September 2014 from <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/corporate/us/en/reports-downloads/2013%20Reports/Mobile-Consumer-Report-2013.pdf>.
- 32 Questionnaire A. Five per cent of all those surveyed did not provide an answer to this question.
- 33 The '288 RMB Online Plan' offered 1080 minutes of nationwide calls and 1050 MB monthly in-province bandwidth.
- 34 Su, Y. and Mao, Q. 2014. Invest 20 Billion in 3 Years: Why is China Mobile Giving Up on WLAN? (*Sannian Touzi 200 Yi: Zhongyidong Weihe Fangqi Zhugong WLAN?*). Retrieved 24 March 2015 from <http://it.sohu.com/20140703/n401704351.shtml>.
- 35 Qiu, J. L. 2009. *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 24.
- 36 Questionnaire A (see appendix).
- 37 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 38 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 39 Qiu, *Working-Class Network Society*, 46–50.
- 40 Qiu, *Working-Class Network Society*, 46–50.
- 41 Oreglia, E. 2015. The 'Sent-Down' internet: Using information and communication technologies in rural China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 1.
- 42 The concept of affordances was initially introduced as a way to foreground how particular design decisions might make certain types of interactions possible. The term has been criticised for ignoring the agency of users. See, Oliver, M. 2005. The problem with affordance. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 2(4), 402–413.
- 43 The exception to this comes from when a contact comments on an individual's postings on their profile page (QQ's 'Speak Speak', or WeChat's 'Moments'), which is visible to all that individual's contacts. Even in these instances, the widespread use of user aliases and avatars (to be discussed in Chapter 4) provided an added layer of anonymity.
- 44 Kipnis, A. B. 1996. The language of gifts: Managing guanxi in a North China Village. *Modern China*, 22(3), 287.
- 45 Luo, Y. 2008. The changing Chinese culture and business behavior: The perspective of intertwinement between guanxi and corruption. *International Business Review*, 17, 188–193.

- 46 The notion of the 'information have-less' was first applied to rural-to-urban migrants. However this volume suggests that the category is becoming increasingly relevant to those that remain in the countryside. See also Cartier, C., Castells, M., and Qiu, J. L. 2005. The Information have-less: Inequality, mobility, and translocal networks in Chinese cities. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 40(2), 9–34.

## Chapter 3

- 1 Analysis was focused on Qzone because, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, this was the most popular social network in Anshan Town.
- 2 Questionnaire A (see Appendix).
- 3 For instance, Farquhar has noted that infertility evokes desperate anxiety amongst sufferers in China, who perceive this condition not as 'permanent structural abnormality of the body', but rather a failure to achieve desired bodily change. See Farquhar, J. 1991. Objects, processes, and female infertility in Chinese medicine. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 5(4), 370–399.
- 4 Pillsbury, B. L. K. 1978. "Doing the month": Confinement and convalescence of Chinese women after childbirth. *Social Science & Medicine. Part B: Medical Anthropology*, 12, 11–22; Chu, Cordia. 1996. Tso Yueh-Tzu (Sitting the Month) in contemporary Taiwan. In P. L. Rice and L. Manderson (eds), *Maternity and Reproductive Health: In Asian Societies*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 191–204.
- 5 Stafford, Charles. 1995. *The Roads of Chinese Childhood: Learning and Identification in Angang*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 178–179.
- 6 Stafford, *The Roads of Chinese Childhood*, 179.
- 7 Chau, A. Y. 2004. Hosting funerals and temple festivals: Folk event productions in rural China. *Asian Anthropology*, 3(1), 44.
- 8 Tencent recently launched Weiyun ([www.weiyun.com](http://www.weiyun.com)), a free cloud-based backup service for QQ users. However, it bears testimony to the adaptive nature of townfolk that they have already been appropriating Qzone as an online backup service for many years prior to Weiyun's launch.
- 9 Fong, V. L. 2004. *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 180–181.
- 10 Several anthropological studies of childhood in China have emphasised parental nurture of offspring as a means of creating a debt that children are obliged to repay in the future, although participants of this study made explicit the connection in relation to these one hundred-day baby photos. For examples, see Stafford, C. (2000). Chinese patriarchy and the cycles of yang and laiwang. In J. Carsten (ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 37–54; Fong, *Only Hope* 127.
- 11 Farrer, J. 2002. *Opening up: youth sex culture and Market Reform in Shanghai*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; Rofel, L. 2007. *Desiring China: Experiment in Neoliberalism, Sexuality and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- 12 Although the author defines this group as non-users, it is acknowledged that use of the term can be problematic, in that it can ignore uses of ICTs by such groups which fall outside the rubric of recognised and appropriate use (see Oreglia, E. The "Sent-Down" Internet: Using information and communication technologies in rural China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 1–6). Nonetheless, the term is employed here owing to its appropriateness for highlighting the significant general disinterest towards social media felt by a large proportion of Anshan Town people in their forties and above.
- 13 Freedman, M. 1958. *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*. London: University of London, Athlone Press; Hsu, F. L. K. 1967. *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Kinship, Personality and Social Mobility in China*. London: Routledge.
- 14 Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*; Freedman, M. 1966. *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung*. London: Athlone Press.
- 15 Santos, G. D. D. 2006. The anthropology of Chinese kinship. A critical overview. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 5(2), 300.

## Chapter 4

- 1 More recently, social science has focused less on kinship and more on other notions of relatedness, and themes of political and social change. For example, see Carsten, J. 2004. *After Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Fei, X. (1992). *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 63.
- 3 Fei, *From the Soil*, 63.
- 4 See also Kipnis, A.B. 1997. *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 27–28.
- 5 Fei, *From the Soil*, 44.
- 6 Fei, *From the Soil*, 44.
- 7 Fei, *From the Soil*, 43.
- 8 Yang, M.M.-h. 1994. *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets: The Art of Social Relationships in China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 114.
- 9 Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 193.
- 10 Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 193–194.
- 11 Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 194.
- 12 Fei, *From the Soil*, 41.
- 13 Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 111.
- 14 Kaiman, J. 2015. Lunar New Year 2015 – in Numbers. Retrieved 25 February 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/18/chinese-new-year-2015-in-numbers>.
- 15 Bruns, A. 2008. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and Beyond: From Production to Prodsusage*. New York: Peter Lang.
- 16 Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 116–117.
- 17 For a powerful account of the ways in which entrenched gendered power differentials in China result in unequal access to capital and social networks, see Wallis, C. 2014. Micro-entrepreneurship, new media technologies, and the reproduction and reconfiguration of gender in rural China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8(1), 42–58.
- 18 Miller, D. 2016. *Social Media in an English Village*. London: UCL Press, 125.
- 19 McDonald, T. 2016. Desiring mobiles, desiring education: mobile phones and families in a rural Chinese Town. In S. S. Lim (ed.), *Mobile Communication and the Family: Asian Experiences in Technology Domestication*. Dordrecht: Springer, 13–32.
- 20 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 21 McDonald, 2016. Desiring mobiles, desiring education, 13–32.
- 22 Parent–child relationships are occasionally found within QQ. For example, Chapter 3 showed how younger parents were often particularly keen to post pictures of their child on their own Qzone account, especially in the case of new-borns and babies. A small number of parents even expressed a willingness to create QQ accounts for their young children, in order to gift them to their offspring once they were deemed old enough to use it. As mentioned in Chapter 1, service workers who were private traders or who worked in state-owned enterprises, many of whom were middle aged, were the exceptional group of parents that had greater time for social media use.
- 23 Kipnis, A.B. *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 41.
- 24 Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire*, 46.
- 25 Yang, *Gifts, Favors, and Banquets*, 116–117.
- 26 Although not gaming as such, one further area in which young females were more active was in customising their Qzone pages, an activity referred to as “decorating Qzone” (*xiu kongjian*).
- 27 For a similar case, see Lindtner, S. and Szablewicz, M. 2011. China’s many inter-nets: Participation and sites of game play across a changing technology landscape, In D. Herold and P. Marolt (eds), *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*. London; New York: Routledge, 92.
- 28 I have borrowed the notion of concentric circles from Fei Xiatong’s description of social relations as a useful metaphor for understanding the growth of relationship types on social media, but there are important differences in this case. Most notably, while Fei argues that the family group lies at the centre of these social relations, in the online lives of people in Anshan Town their elementary and middle school classmates arguably form this base. See also, Fei, *From the Soil*, 63.

- 29 The display of net aliases and user avatars within social media platforms is illustrated in Figs 2.1 and 2.2.
- 30 Qiu, J.L. *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 99.
- 31 Farrall, K. and Herold, D.K. 2011. Identity vs. anonymity: Chinese netizens and questions of identifiability. In D.K. Herold and P. Marlot (eds), *Online Society in China: Creating, Celebrating, and Instrumentalising the Online Carnival*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 165–166.
- 32 Farrall, and Herold, Identity vs. anonymity, 173.
- 33 Farrall, and Herold, Identity vs. anonymity, 179.
- 34 Wang, T. 2013. *Talking to Strangers: Chinese Youth and Social Media*. Thesis (PhD). University of California, San Diego.
- 35 After adding a friend on QQ or WeChat, it is possible add a ‘note’ (*beizhu*) of this person’s identity, which will display in place of their real name, which makes subsequently remembering that individual’s identity easier.
- 36 The original English survey question ‘Which media is most suitable for flirting on?’ was considered too unsavory for local tastes, and inappropriate for conduct in a school, and so was changed to this version.
- 37 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 38 Sixteen per cent of the respondents of Questionnaire A (see appendix), which was largely carried out among adults, identified themselves as being ‘students’.
- 39 ‘Post-90s generation’ (*jiuling hou*) refers to those born between 1990 and 1999.
- 40 Evans, H. 1992. Monogamy and female sexuality in the People’s Republic of China. In S. Rai, H. Pilkington and A. Phizacklea (eds), *Women in the Face of Change: Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China*. New York: Routledge, 154.
- 41 Relevant in this regard is Jankowiak’s distinction between informal and formal dating in contemporary urban China. Formal dating consists of sequences of semi-public meetings and staged increases in expressions of commitment, with a view to marriage. By contrast, informal dating, is ‘conducted by individuals who truly love one another’ and is defined by ‘practical rules’ that emerge in response to frustrations with formal dating. It is initially conducted in secret and is characterised by public denial of such involvement. In the case of Anshan Town, social media is especially conducive to informal dating. See Jankowiak, W.R. 1995. Romantic passion in the People’s Republic of China. In W.R. Jankowiak (ed.), *Romantic Passion: A Universal Experience*. New York: Columbia University Press, 166–183.
- 42 Cui, S., Lao, M. and Zege, C. 2011. *The wife is the biggest (Laopo zui da)* (CD/Digital download). Beijing: Doushi Wenhua.
- 43 To watch a short film about this dance group and their use of social media, see <https://youtu.be/KWnDH5ltu7g>.
- 44 Evans, Monogamy and female sexuality.
- 45 For instance, imperial emperors would take on concubines in the belief informed by Daoist beliefs that it would nourish vitality and lead to immortality. See van Gulik, R.H. 1961. *Sexual Life in Ancient China*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 64–65.
- 46 Evans, Monogamy and female sexuality.
- 47 Zheng, T. 2009. *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 48 Zheng, *Red Lights*.
- 49 Evans, Monogamy and female sexuality.
- 50 For instance, see Bray, F. 1997. *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; Wolf, M. 1972. *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Judd, E. R. 1994. *Gender and Power in rral North China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

## Chapter 5

- 1 In this way, *QQ Farm* was similar to *FarmVille*, which had reached comparable levels of popularity outside China at the same time.
- 2 Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R. and Nacke, L. 2011. From game design elements to gamefulness: Designing gamification. In *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic*



- MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*. New York: ACM, 9–15;
- Escribano, F. 2012. Gamification as the post-modern phalanstère: Is the gamification playing with us or are we playing with gamification? In P. Zackariasson and T. L. Wilson (eds), *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future*. New York: Routledge, 198–219.
- 3 Zichermann, G. and Cunningham, C. 2011. *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps*. New York: O'Reilly Media.
- 4 McGonigal, Jane. 2011. *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. New York: Penguin Press.
- 5 Singer, N. 2012. You've Won a Badge (and Now We Know All About You). *New York Times*, BU3.
- 6 Fuchs, M., Fizek, S., Ruffuffino, P. and Schrape, N. 2014. Introduction. In M. Fuchs, S. Fizek, P. Ruffuffino and N. Schrape (eds), *Rethinking Gamification*. Luneburg: meson press, 7–17.
- 7 Tiessen, M. 2014. Gamed agencies: Affectively modulating our screen and app-driven digital futures. In M. Fuchs, S. Fizek, P. Ruffuffino and N. Schrape (eds), *Rethinking Gamification*. Luneburg: meson press, 251–269.
- 8 Steinmüller, H. 2011. The moving boundaries of social heat: Gambling in rural China. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17(2), 263–280.
- 9 The 'QQ levels' accumulation system is found on the QQ IM platform.
- 10 Tencent. 2015. QQ Level Introduction (*QQ Dengji Shuoming*). Retrieved 21 January 2015, from [http://im.qq.com/client/description/qq\\_level.shtml](http://im.qq.com/client/description/qq_level.shtml).
- 11 The State Grid Corporation of China (*zhongguo guojia dianwang*) is responsible for the transmission and supply of power throughout the country.
- 12 See also Fortunati, L. 2002. Italy: Stereotypes, true and false. In J. E. Katz and M. A. Aakhus (eds), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 42–62; Matsuda, M. 2005. Mobile communication and selective sociality, In: M. Ito, D. Okabe, and M. Matsuda (eds), *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 123–142.
- 13 Instantly activated privileges included the ability to have QQ Groups with over 500 QQ contacts, faster download speeds, offline file transfers and the ability to restore deleted friends.
- 14 For example, suppose a user remains logged in to QQ IM on their mobile for 6.5 hours within one calendar day, gaining one active online day; concurrently they are logged in to QQ IM on their desktop computer for three hours, gaining a further 0.5 active online days. Their online status is set to visible for two hours, earning a further 0.2 active online days. The same user has been paying for QQ membership for over two years, achieving VIP3 membership level, which increases the level accumulation speed by 1.5 times. The same user had also installed Tencent's antivirus programme increasing their multiplier rate by 0.2 points. In total this results in 2.89 active online days =  $(1.0 + 0.5) + 0.2 \times 1.5 + 0.2$ .
- 15 Stafford, C. 2010. Some qualitative mathematics in China. *Anthropological Theory*, 10 (1–2), 81–86.
- 16 Sina Weibo. 2015. Level Introduction (*Dengji Shuoming*). Retrieved 3 April 2015, from <http://level.account.weibo.com/level/levelexplain>.
- 17 Momo. 2015. 'Help Centre – Momo.' Retrieved 3 April 2015, from <http://www.immomo.com/help?action=detail&id=2745271157>.
- 18 CNNIC. 2015. 35th Statistical Report. 21.
- 19 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
- 20 Multiple accounts were far less common within WeChat, because the platform required a unique mobile phone number for registration.
- 21 Questionnaire B (see appendix).
- 22 Yan, Y. 2000. The politics of consumerism in Chinese society. In T. White (ed.), *China Briefing 2000: The Continuing Transformation*. London: M.E. Sharpe, 180.
- 23 Feuchtwang, S. 2001. *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor*. Richmond: Curzon, 40.
- 24 Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China*, vii.
- 25 Freedman, M. *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*. London: University of London, Athlone Press; Freedman, M. *Chinese Lineage and Society: Fukien and Kwangtung*. London: Athlone Press.
- 26 Wakefield, D. 1998. *Fenja: Household Division and Inheritance in Qing and Republican China*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

- 27 For a full explanation of the impact of Freedman's theories on Chinese kinship studies, see Santos, G. D. D. *The Anthropology of Chinese Kinship. A Critical Overview. European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 5(2), 275–333.
- 28 Stafford, C. Chinese patriline and the cycles of yang and laiwan. In J. Carsten (ed.), *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 37–54
- 29 Skinner, G. W. 1964. Marketing and social structure in rural China: Part I. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 24(1), 3–43; Skinner, G. W. 1965. Marketing and social structure in rural China: Part II. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 24(2), 195–228.; Skinner, G. W. 1965. Marketing and social structure in rural China: Part III. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 24(3), 363–99.
- 30 Pharoah, R. 2005. *Visions of Authority: Leadership, Hierarchy and Power in Central China*. Thesis (PhD). London School of Economics and Political Science (University of London).
- 31 Jankowiak, W. R. 1993. *Sex, Death and Hierarchy in a Chinese City: An Anthropological Account*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- 32 Watson, J. L. 1988. The structure of Chinese funeral rites: Elementary forms, ritual sequence, and the primacy of performance. In J. L. Watson and E. S. Rawski (eds), *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 274–92.
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- 42 Basu, Profit, loss, and fate, 250.
- 43 Basu, Profit, loss, and fate, 152.
- 44 Basu, Profit, loss, and fate, 248
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- 46 Basu, Profit, loss, and fate, 246.
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## Chapter 6

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  - 17 Questionnaire C (see appendix).
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  - 22 Although it is conceded that Public Relations is often wryly associated with deliberate mis-information!
  - 23 The paired-down Mac version does not include these headlines.
  - 24 This practice is also commonplace in parks and public places around China.
  - 25 The claim that forwarding the message will result in the user's display name changing to a distinctive purple-red colour is a hoax.
  - 26 The same blessings were rarely posted in response to similar disasters that took place outside China, despite the fact that these were often featured on mainstream news channels (albeit with considerable less coverage given in comparison to domestic natural disasters).
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## Chapter 7

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- 11 This makes the context of study in China particularly unique. While in other national settings, one might expect populations to have different *national* ways of adopting particular *international* social media platforms, China is complicated by the fact that it has its own unique social media platforms. I argue that this does not remove the problem of considering how a platform is appropriated nationally, but rather makes such a task doubly important. For discussion around national appropriation of a social media platform, see Miller, D. 2011. *Tales From Facebook*. Cambridge: Polity, 158–163.

- 12 Realising the specificity of Chinese social media can also challenge the use of reductive statements that portray these platforms as simply equivalents or, more condescendingly, mere copies of Western social media platforms. This in turn allows us to acknowledge the creativity and innovation of China's technology industry.
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- 14 For example, one study found that almost 57.7 per cent of overseas academic articles regarding the Chinese internet focused on state authorities and the CCP, in comparison to just 10.8 per cent of domestic publications. See Qiu, J. L. and Bu, W. 2013. *China ICT Studies*, 141, A separate study showed that the bulk of scholarship produced by academics in UK and American institutions focused on themes of state control, democratic determinism and participatory action. See Herold, D. K. and de Seta, G. 2015. *Through the looking glass*, 31(1), 75.

## Appendix

- 1 Oreglia, E., et al. Studying the Sent-Down Internet.
- 2 Here 'non-users' refers to those with no social media account of their own, and does not necessarily mean they do not use these technologies incidentally or with the assistance of family members.

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China's distinctive social media platforms have gained notable popularity among the nation's vast number of internet users, but has China's countryside been 'left behind' in this communication revolution?

Tom McDonald spent 15 months living in a small rural Chinese community researching how the residents use social media in their daily lives. His ethnographic findings suggest that, far from being left behind, many rural Chinese people have already integrated social media into their everyday experience.

Throughout his ground-breaking study, McDonald argues that social media allows rural people to extend and transform their social relationships by deepening already existing connections with friends known through their school, work or village, while also experimenting with completely new forms of relationships through online interactions with strangers. By juxtaposing these seemingly opposed relations, rural social media users are able to use these technologies to understand, capitalise on and challenge the notions of morality that underlie rural life.

**TOM MCDONALD** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong. He received his PhD in Anthropology from UCL in 2013 and has published numerous academic articles on internet use and consumption practices in China.



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