6
The wider world: Beyond social relationships

Chapter 4 mapped out a whole range of social relationships from the perspective of social media use, while Chapter 5 focused upon the topics related to 'power'. By the end of Chapter 5 we could also appreciate that when we talk about 'relationships' in everyday lives, these include both offline and online contexts. The latter continues the work of our individual imaginations and our social beliefs and practices. In this chapter we extend the discussion to encompass even more significant ties. Perceived relationships between a person and the universe, his or her ancestors and the place where he or she came from, as well as with 'oneself', all significantly shape how people live through and make sense of their daily lives. Here we explore these other significant relationships, as expressed through or transformed by social media. These range from the apparently metaphysical to the intensely personal.

The atheist, folk religion and death

Lao Zhang died at the age of 81 without a struggle; he simply passed peacefully away. Local people believed that this was a 'good death' (*hao si*), something only achieved by those who are blessed (*you fu qi*). On the day of Lao Zhang's funeral a 'master' (*da shi*) led the way, chanting spells aloud in a flat tone which, from time to time, was overwhelmed by the fireworks.

A middle-aged man who worked as a driver for a local Party official brought me down to earth by commenting that, 'You know what? Because he [Lao Zhang] was a senior Party member, the Party paid

not only the regular funeral expenses, but also the fee for the master (*dashi*).' This seemed confusing to me, so I pressed further:

> 'Really?! . . . but . . . why does a Communist Party member need a folk religion master to perform the funeral ritual?'
>
> 'Why not? The Party leadership thought he deserved a proper funeral.'
>
> 'No, no, no . . . I mean, isn't the Communist Party atheist?'
>
> 'Hey look, he worked for the Party when he was alive, but the problem is the Party can't take care of him after his death, right? So now everything is taken over by the deities (*shen ming*)!'

As the man jerked his head forward, clearly punctuating his statement with an exclamation mark, our conversation was interrupted by shouting from the front of the procession. 'Dad, run! Run fast!' someone exclaimed. 'There will be a big fire!' A chorus of voices shouted 'Run!', 'Run!', 'Run!', 'Run!' – warning the spirit (*hun*) that the body was going to be carried into the incinerator.

After an hour the procession moved on to inter the ashes, led by the master. Before the sealing of the stone cave where the ashes were placed, he re-arranged the display of offerings for better 'Feng Shui',[1] then toasted a cup of spirit (*shao jiu*) to the god of the Earth (*tu di gong*). The toast was a rhetorical negotiation with the deity, which basically ran along these lines: descendants of Lao Zhang will visit here every year and make offerings; therefore, in turn, the god of the Earth shall take care of Lao Zhang under the ground and bless his descendants. After the toast, Lao Zhang's relatives started to burn piles of 'spirit money' – the funeral banknotes (Fig. 6.1) that, according to tradition, would be 'transferred' to Lao Zhang's account underneath the ground, to be used by deities and himself. As we noted in Chapter 2, money is always regarded as a proper expression of family feelings; it is also used in Chinese folk religion to maintain a good relationship with the gods. As a folk saying declares, 'the god of the Earth runs a bank; money opens the way to the gods' (*tu di ye kai yin hang, qian tong shen lu*), reflecting a common belief that 'money' was used widely as 'capital by the gods themselves in transactions with human beings'.[2]

The 'underground' banknote, with a face value of 1 billion, is issued by 'the bank of Earth and heaven' (*tian di yin hang*). It appears to be very international: the layout and signatures are those of the US dollar, while on the side two Chinese characters read 'pounds sterling'. In the middle is an image of Jade Emperor (*yu huang da di*), the supreme

Fig. 6.1 'Spirit money', the funeral banknotes

God in Chinese Taoism. The face value has nothing to do with inflation, but simply suggests that one has an unlimited supply of money – literally, money to burn.

On the way back, the driver took an extremely strange detour, basically turning right and left randomly at each intersection we passed. He explained:

> We need to confuse the sprit. It remembers the way we came here and will follow us, so I need to make a lot of detours to get rid of it. Otherwise we will both suffer from disaster (*zai*) in the following days.

The next day an image of *GuanYin* (Avalokitesvara) was shared on this driver's Qzone (Fig. 6.2). *GuanYin* is a mother Buddha[3] who is also worshipped in Taoist temples. The posting commented:

> If you see this image please share it on your Qzone and WeChat; it will help you to avoid bad luck in the coming seven days. If you don't share, you will have a disaster (*zai*) soon.

Lao Zhang's daughter also posted the image of *GuanYin* on her WeChat and wrote, 'A safe trip, my father'.

People in GoodPath would never use terms such as 'religion' or 'cosmology'. To them, what happens in daily life is a reflection of their beliefs and fears about the universe, deities, bad luck and death.

Fig. 6.2 An image of *GuanYin*, a mother buddha figure, shared on social media

The Communist Party's official doctrine would describe what the driver did both offline and online as 'feudal superstition' (*fengjian mixin*).[4] In practice, however, such folk beliefs, including Feng Shui, have become so deeply rooted that in many cases the Party, or the Party officials actually appear to endorse it.[5] From here we see that, despite the huge effort made by the Communist Party for more than half a century to reshape the 'superstructure' of Chinese society,[6] it has failed to change the essential beliefs held by much of the population. Such beliefs have been practised in folk rituals and handed down from one generation to the next, reinforced by a myriad of folk tales, over hundreds or even thousands of years. 'Say one thing and do

another', (*shou yi tao, zuo yi tao*) as people say, and it appears that they do. In the survey I conducted, an overwhelming majority of people (86 per cent) wrote down 'nil' to the inquiry about religion (*zongjiao xinyang*).[7] However, when it comes to immediate personal interests and welfare, such as trying to ensure the best 'after-death life' for a loved one, people have no problem in abandoning the 'politically correct' doctrine and following their own systems of belief. Social media, the platforms on which people feel freer to express themselves, has become one of the major places where people can practise folk religions. The situation is especially true for rural migrants, whose 'floating' lives make practising such folk religion more difficult.

Chinese folk religion: Some background

In brief, Chinese folk religion involves three main categories of supernatural beings: gods, ghosts and ancestors.[8] The latter two both rely heavily on offerings made by living people. Ancestors have a permanent abode within an individual household or an ancestral hall, where they receive offerings of food, incense and flowers.[9] Ghosts however are 'unwanted beings' – usually people who have died a premature, accidental or other 'unnatural' death,[10] after which they wander around as lonely spectres. However, the terms 'ancestor' and 'ghost' are relative. Someone's ancestor can be another person's ghost, because ancestor sprits, unlike a deity, will only bless their own descendants and may be harmful to someone not related to them.[11] That explains why the driver at Lao Zhang's funeral perceived the spirit possibly to be an evil ghost who might bring him bad luck.

Polytheism, meaning belief in more than one god, is a striking concept. In practice Chinese people have no problem in worshipping deities from Buddhism or Taoism or saints from Confucianism all together. As one observed: 'All the deities out there are friends; they just speak different languages.' Most people are tolerant of this diversity in religion and see no reason for bothering about the distinctions.[12]

Orientation towards the secular is another striking feature of Chinese folk religions. The word *ling* (efficacy) is frequently used to describe whether supernatural beings can or would be willing to address the desires and claims from the secular world, whether these concern wealth, health or other specific wishes such as having a baby.[13] Gods are ranked according to efficacy, but such a rank is flexible according to different situations – all suggesting a clear

correspondence between Chinese folk cosmology and the structure of secular bureaucracy.[14] In GoodPath people would discuss which temple is the most efficacious one, and a similar rank of deities can be also seen on social media postings.

Deities on social media

GuanYin and *GuanGong* are probably the two deities ranked most highly by rural migrants. It's not the first time *GuanYin*,[15] the mother Buddha, has been mentioned in this volume. In Chapter 1 the young factory worker Dong posted the image of *GuanYin* as he wished for his grandfather to recover from a stroke. In this chapter we also saw how people posted images of *GuanYin* after Lao Zhang's funeral, for various reasons. Traditionally *GuanYin,* is regarded as a mighty goddess who blesses fertility, safety and health; she is worshipped most widely across Chinese society.[16]

Unlike *GuanYin*, whose image was posted and shared by both men and women, images of the male deity *GuanGong* are mainly shared among men on social media. In history *GuanGong* was a great general and minister during the Han Dynasty (in the third century AD); after his death he was worshipped as the deity of the martial virtues.[17] Kai, a factory worker, shared the image of *GuanGong* on his Qzone (Fig. 6.3) when one of his closest colleagues was leaving. On that post Kai wishes that their brotherhood would be like 'The Oath of the Peach Garden' (*Tao yuan jie yi*). The story, recorded in a famous historical novel *Three Kingdoms*,[18] describes how *GuanGong and* two other men took an oath and became sworn brothers in a ceremony in the Peach Garden. The legend is based on historical fact: these three sworn brothers established the state of Chu Han during the Three Kingdoms period.

The popularity of *GuanGong* posts on social media among male rural migrants reflects the widespread ideal of brotherhood they share. Loyalty is always regarded as the most important virtue of such a brotherhood. *GuanGong* was a royal general who had never disobeyed the orders of his sworn elder brother, the emperor Liu Bei. Here brotherhood, in many cases, aligns with China's hierarchical social system, serving as one of the dominant channels of social mobility and networking for men.[19] For young male rural migrants,[20] who have very limited social resources and have to rely on the protection and security of such brotherhoods, this is now even more true. In many cases

Fig. 6.3 An image of the deity *GuanGong* shared on social media

such brotherhoods assumed forms of patronage, mentoring and 'discipleship'.[21] Unfortunately, however, as happened in history,[22] the brotherhood among young male migrant workers can be very fragile and easily quashed. Feige's story in Chapter 4 provides a typical example of a once-valued brotherhood that was actually very short-lived – partly because it was formed under the pressure of survival in a specific situation, and was not strong enough to endure the test of 'floating' life in the longer term.

The image of *GuanGong* on Kai's post,[23] therefore, does not only portray a supernatural being with magical powers to be used for blessing and protecting his brotherhood. As *GuanGong* himself had a secular life and became a deity after death, he can also represent this ultimate ideal brotherhood[24] – something that rural migrants desperately long for, but can hardly ever achieve. The very figure of *GuanGong* resonated

with ordinary people, and enabled them to project their own lives on to it. The folk tales of *GuanGong* give the ground and material for people to imagine what brotherhood should be in a secular world. In this sense, traditional folk beliefs have never been separated from the daily practice of social relationships.

In some cases, posts related to folk religion are also a means of making relationships with deities more practical. A typical meme on QQ read:

> From 11 p.m. to 9 a.m. tomorrow morning, *GunYin* Bodhisattva will open the heaven treasury. If you shared this amulet image (*ping an fu*) for people who were born in the year of the cockerel (the years 1969, 1981, 1993 and 2005) they will have good fortune and be healthy and wealthy forever. Share it, and bring good luck to your friends who were born in the year of the cockerel!

There are several similar posts featuring different zodiac animals[25] and offering good luck to people who were born in the year of the rabbit, the goat, the tiger, the dragon and so forth.

'Luck' is probably a universal concept. However, the 'luck' in Chinese folk belief represents a more specific emphasis on human endeavours and efforts. In contrast to 'fate' (*ming*), which refers to one's life-long, immutable fortune, luck (*yun*) refers to a something that people can change or 'shift' (*zhuan*) through their own efforts (such as providing offerings to deities or consulting fortune-tellers).[26] The Chinese character 转 (*zhuan*) is used in both the phrases meaning 'to change one's luck' (*zhuan yun*) and 'to share something on social media' (*zhuan fa*). Thus these two phrases with the same head vowel formed a catchy expression, as people said: 'share it (on social media), so you can have a change of your luck (*zhuan fa jiu zhuan yun*).'

Guang, a factory worker in her thirties, frequently shared images of various deities on her QQ profiles. Her reasons seem to be instinctive rather than carefully considered:

> Well, I don't know exactly why . . . Anyway . . . it's a good thing to do. At least . . . I think the deities (*shen ming*) will be pleased if you show respect to them, and in return you will be blessed (*bao you*), which is very important.

Guang was not alone, Even the majority of people who had shared similar posts failed to give a clear answer to why and how those postings

would bring them good luck; they all believed that the very act of sharing the images of deities is, in its own right, a way to please them.[27] As one said, 'It's always safer to believe that they exist rather than not (*ning ke xin qi you, bu ke xin qi wu*). Who knows whom you will offend?' To put it in another way, given the fact that there are so many deities, some of whom are benevolent and some not, people had learned to show respect to all of them so that they will not offend (*de zui*) any by mistake.

Whether the issue was one of pleasing or offending these deities, people assume that these gods were just like human beings, capable of being pleased and offended in the same way on social media. It is thereby evident that Chinese deities are philosophically 'down to earth' in contrast to deities in other religions who are believed to be entirely transcendent, above and beyond humankind.[28] In Chinese folk religion, therefore, people are in a better position to negotiate with deities for their own benefits. Building relationships with various deities is a very similar process to the practice of *guanxi* (social relations); social networking is pragmatically applied on the principle of reciprocity and it seems that deities are rather similar to secular bureaucrats who can be bribed. In addition, the practice of folk religion has been deeply and tightly integrated into people's everyday lives: managing relationships with various deities has always been a part of life for ordinary Chinese rural migrants. Viewing the images of deities that people post on social media, it can be easy to focus on the sharp contrast between the 'digital' and the 'deities', while forgetting that the latter were part of daily life way before the digital age. As a result, when people began to embrace the digital in their lives, they naturally included the deities.

Other kinds of deities are worshipped only by respective kinship groups. As previously noted, in Chinese folk beliefs all people become deities after death; ancestors are then dependent upon regular worship and offerings from their descendants, since without offerings those ancestor spirits will become unwanted ghosts. In return, ancestors will reward filial descendants by protecting and blessing them. There is thus a mutual dependence between the living and the dead.[29] Moreover, a common practice to ensure an efficient approach to higher ranked deities is to go through one's ancestor deities, perceived to be the nearest to the living; the idea of a direct leap from the human world to the metaphysical sphere seems not to be convincing enough.[30] Thus the strategy underlying *guanxi* (social relations), widely applied in human relationships, is also applied in those between humans and deities.

It is not the only one, however, as the traditional respect for ancestors and spirits can also be mediated by relationship to the places associated with them. Such associations of lineage and burial sites was indeed a major theme in the early anthropology of China.[31] Relationships with one's ancestors provide essential intermediaries within the greater human–deity relationship. On social media we can also find the representation of such relationships in the photographs of people's places of origin. However, in several respects this was not as might have been predicted.

The homeland on social media

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this research started with an assumption that social media would play a key role in enabling a displaced migrant population to re-connect with their homelands. However, the accumulated evidence from the ethnography suggests that the degree of diminished contact with their villages of origin was not because of the lack of technological support, but mainly from choice. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 4, rural migrants seemed to show more interest in exploring new kinds of social relationships on social media than maintaining contact with those left behind in their villages. The experience of 'seeing the modern world' has made young migrants unwilling to return to a backward and boring rural life: many regard themselves as no longer sharing the same values as those who remained behind.[32] In addition for the majority of migrant workers, as surplus labour, there is nothing left for them to do within the agriculture system: as soon as they return to the villages they risk losing financial independence, or even the chance to earn a living. On top of this, their social networks, built on reciprocity between fellow villagers, largely collapsed when the migrants no longer made any contribution to the local communities. For many, returning to their home villages has become a myth.

For many rural migrants in GoodPath, the feeling towards 'homeland' has become ambivalent. On the one hand, people want to get rid of the rural background and become modern; on the other hand, as the folk saying goes, 'no ancestors, no identity':[33] the home village is the only place to which they can link, and ancestors left behind in their homeland are the most reliable deities to whom they can turn. Moreover, as increasing numbers of the migrant population are born into, and grow up in, such 'floating' lives, many young migrant workers have no real-life connection to the villages where their parents or grandparents came

from and their ancestors are buried. Thus for them the homeland, in a way, is not lost – it never existed in the first place. In situations where the physical homeland has atrophied and one can no longer present offerings to ancestors direct, people choose not to return to their homelands physically, but rather to move the homeland where their ancestors live on to their social media profiles.

For Hua, the factory worker in her late thirties, Chinese New Year is a crucial opportunity to win good luck (*hao yun*) for the whole following whole year. Ideally she should go back to her home village for a family reunion and worship of her ancestors, but the length of the trip, plus other expenses and concerns, have prevented her from doing this for many years. However, she has always made sure that some relatives who had remained behind provided offerings to the ancestral grave on her behalf:

> People like us [rural migrants] depend heavily on our luck (*yun qi*) while working outside (*chu lai da gong*); you don't know what will happen, and everything can happen to you. My ancestors can protect me and my family from bad luck . . . My life has nothing great, well, you know, you can't really change your fate (*ming*), but nothing went terribly wrong . . . which is good enough.

Besides posts of deities, Hua's Qzone features an album called 'homeland' (*jia xiang*) where she uploaded large numbers of photographs of the mountain behind her native village (Fig. 6.4). The homeland album on social media is commonplace among rural migrants. Around

Fig. 6.4 A typical 'homeland album' on social media

15 per cent of rural migrants' Qzones have a specific online album called 'homeland' or 'home village'. In her homeland album Hua wrote, in an almost nostalgic tone, that she has a strong emotional attachment to the beautiful mountain behind the village where her ancestors have their eternal sleep. Curiously, however, when I asked Hua whether she had thought about moving back to her home village, her answer was a definite 'no'.

'My home village is a place you always miss, but not really a place you want to return to,' she explained. On those homeland photos all the bad memories and negative associations of village life and homeland had been expunged, leaving only the ideal, purified images to symbolise her homeland and ancestors. Her birthplace has thus become a symbol – but one that exists on people's social media and helps to ground daily existence within one's 'floating' life.[34]

'History is always ambiguous, always messy, and people remember, and therefore construct the past in ways that reflect their present need for meaning.'[35] If the popularity of posting deities on social media reveals the continuity of the practice of folk religion, offline and online, then the homeland album takes a step further: through these albums, millions of rural migrants who have been uprooted from their homeland rebuilt their past on social media. In this sense social media, once a symbol of modernity,[36] has reversed the trajectory of Chinese rural migrants' movement from 'tradition' to 'modernity', effectively serving as an 'ancestral temple' where ancestors and other deities are worshipped and folk tales are related.

Nevertheless, to put things into perspective, just as political eradication and crackdowns on folk religions under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party did not change the essential beliefs held by large parts of the population, nor does the mechanism of social media make people 'become' more traditional or religious. Both political regulation and technological methods are outside forces which either restrain or facilitate people's activities in their daily lives. The real reason that social media has come to serve as a 'clan temple' is not because of the technological affordances of QQ or WeChat. It is because Chinese rural migrants strongly believe in the magical power of the deities, and the practice of traditional folk religion has always been part of their daily lives.

Folk tales on social media

Kai's post of the deity image *GuanGong* was associated with a whole range of associated folk tales. Such stories are not only an essential

part of Chinese folk beliefs. They also comprise the main body of folk literature – far more persistently and pervasively in history than the 'aristocratic literature' of more 'cultured' groups because they were more readily accepted by the majority of the people.[37] On social media, besides posts of deities and homeland, storytelling also represents a major genre. Almost half of rural migrants have shared at least one story on their social media in their last 20 social media posts.[38] Here are two examples of popular stories widely shared by rural migrants.

Story 1 (in brief)

A very good-looking village woman followed her husband to work outside the village. The couple worked together in a large factory, owned by a very rich man. The woman's beauty soon caught the attention of the factory owner, who seduced her secretly through money and fine promises. Soon the woman betrayed her husband and became the factory owner's secret mistress. Her husband discovered the affair, but was then threatened by the factory owner. Even though he was heartbroken, he decided to let his wife go since he loved her so much and wished her a better life than he could afford. He quit the factory job and came back to the village to take care of the couple's only son. The 10-year-old boy refused to accept that his mother would never come back, and secretly set off alone on a trip to find her. After a very tough, long journey the little boy finally arrived in the city where his parents had worked together. There, at the factory entrance, he had the shock of seeing his mother walking out with a strange man, hand in hand. Before she could recognise him, the little boy dashed away, but unfortunately he was run over by a speeding car. The whole village was outraged and everybody, including the mother's family, cursed her at the boy's funeral. However, the man said nothing. The mother felt so guilty that she committed suicide after the funeral. Hearing of his wife's death, the man still said nothing and disappeared. Two days later he appeared at the factory, where he stabbed the factory owner to death and then committed suicide. The whole village mourned for him and everybody worshipped him as a hero from then on.

The story ends up with a warning that people who live for money, and women who betray their husbands for money, will never come to a good end. Nor will the rich come to a good end if they do not treat the poor as human beings.

For Wei, a 28-year-old factory worker, whether the story is true or not does not really matter. He believed it because of his own experience:

> I have seen a woman like that. The wife of a workmate of mine left him without saying anything. He actually treated her very well; he had never beaten her, always gave her money to buy new clothes . . . but she still ran away, somebody said she had run away with a businessman. Poor man – now he has to raise two kids all by himself. Alas, there seems to be no way to prevent it; you know, nowadays most women, I bet, are much more realistic . . . I agree with the story: if you betray your husband for money, you don't deserve a happy ending, and the man had guts. So I shared it.

As noted in Chapter 5, young rural migrant women can improve their socio-economic status via marriage and other relationships, whereas young rural migrant men may risk being jettisoned. Wei's sense of justice has been expressed perfectly through the dramatic tension of the story he shared.

Story 2 (in brief)

When Qiang was a child, he spent the whole day idling around in the village where he lived. His parents became very worried about him, thinking he would end up achieving nothing. On the other hand his neighbour Ming studied very hard, and all the villagers believed that he would become somebody one day.

When Qiang and Ming were both 19 years old, Qiang, not surprisingly, failed the university entrance examination. He then followed other villagers to work outside the village on a highway construction site, earning monthly wages of 3,000 RMB (US $500). Ming by contrast received an offer from a top Chinese university to study road and bridge engineering, with a tuition fee of 5,000 RMB (US $850) per year. When they were both 23 years old, Qiang's parents arranged a marriage for him. The bride was a very capable and virtuous village girl. Meanwhile, Ming had fallen in love with a girl from the city. The following year Qiang brought his new wife to the construction site to look after him. Meanwhile Ming finally graduated and got a job in a construction company.

For Qiang, as a worker, life was not too bad. After work he had plenty of time to enjoy playing cards and watching television. Ming's life

as an engineer was much more stressful. During the daytime he had to visit various construction sites, and in the evening he had to work extra hours. Since he was too busy, his girlfriend finally broke up with him. When they were both 28 years old, Qiang had already saved up 200,000 RMB (US $35,000) and had become the father of two children. He went back to his village, where he built a new house and opened a pig farm. Meanwhile Ming finally gained his intermediate engineer qualification certificate, but was still single. So finally he accepted an arranged marriage. For his new family Ming bought an apartment in the city on a mortgage; each month he had to pay the majority of his salary to the bank.

By the time Qiang and Ming were both 35 years old, Qiang had made a fortune from his pig farm. Ming was actually in debt, however, because of his monthly mortgage and the high cost of his son's education. When they were both 50 years old, Qiang had become the grandfather of three grandsons. He enjoyed the sunshine in the village every day. Meanwhile Ming finally got his senior engineering qualification certificate – but he still had to work very hard every day.

When both men were in their seventies Qiang fell ill. He held his wife's hand, saying: 'I have lived for almost 70 years. I have sons and grandsons. I am so satisfied with my life.' Ming also held his wife's hands, saying: 'I was always busy, never at home. I know you have suffered a lot for decades. I feel so sorry.' Soon Qiang recovered, thanks to the clear air of the countryside and fresh vegetables and meat from his own farm. However, Ming was not so fortunate: years of intense work and stress, plus a poor quality of life under the busy pace of the city, finally took their toll. He soon passed away. The story concludes with the scene of Qiang in his eighties, standing in front of Ming's tomb and sighing with emotion as he reflects: 'we only live only once, and how different we are'.

It seems as though the life of rural migrants has been dramatically romanticised in this story. Some Chinese experts[39] have suggested that urban white-collar workers may very well be its original target audience. There certainly is a rather dark sense of humour in the recognition that 'after all the struggles to succeed, a senior engineer's life may end up even worse than a rural migrant's'.[40] Having said that, the story also became popular among rural migrants with a different interpretation. Bobo, a 19-year-old factory worker, dropped out of school two years ago. She shared this story on her Qzone with the comment 'so true':

> Well, I know you would say knowledge can change one's life, but actually education is not that useful for us . . . Education just isn't my thing, and I don't want to waste money or time on it.

Half a century ago in China, university education almost always ensured a 'job for life' and a secure urban identity.[41] However, this is no longer axiomatic in the context of a market economy with no job guarantees: the massive expansion of university enrolment in China[42] also means that graduates are no longer regarded as the 'elite'. Moreover in China, where top universities are state-owned, the tuition fee for the first tier university is the cheapest or may even be free. By contrast private universities charge a far higher tuition fee to students unable to get into state universities. This means that students pay more for less qualified universities. For rural students, who grow up with relatively poor educational resources and limited family guidance, it has become very difficult to get into first tier universities. As a result many perceive higher education to be a waste of time: years are spent pursuing an expensive but useless university certificate that could have been spent earning money in factories. Faced with such pragmatic concerns, many young people from rural backgrounds choose to drop out of school and work in factories from a very early age. Such decisions are generally supported, or at least not opposed, by their families. This story exactly reflects the attitude towards education among rural migrants, one surprisingly different from the well-known high valuation of education to many Chinese.

There are several common points between the two stories. First, both took place within the setting of ordinary rural migrants' daily lives, settings to which people can easily relate. Second, both contain quite a bit of drama, which both purifies and spices up everday life into a legend, and through which strong and distinct thoughts and attitudes unfolded. Third, they both safeguard and reinforce values and morals shared by the specific rural migrant group.

All these features remind us of the folk tales, which also serve as a pedagogic device, reinforcing morals and values 'particularly, but not exclusively, in non-literate societies'.[43] In those stories we watch the heroes and traitors, the perceived justice and unfairness, the doomed fate and the up-and-down rollercoaster of everyday life. Stories on social media, the folk tales of a digital age, play an important role in recording and shaping the world view of Chinese rural migrants. Compared to other text-based publications, stories on social media have the lowest threshold in terms of getting stories published, and thus the most accessible outlet for less-educated people who may otherwise struggle to get their voices heard. Folk tales were traditionally spread by oral transmission, making them products of an entire community rather than a particular writer.[44] Similarly on social media stories are spread and reproduced by sharing – and in the 'charmed circle' of sharing people

contribute their personal experiences and different interpretation. It has been said that 'each of us comes to know who he or she is by creating a heroic story of the self'.[45] By arranging the episodes of their daily lives into stories, Chinese rural migrants seek to invest a fragmented and confusing experience of living with a sense of coherence, and so to discover the truth about what is right and what is meaningful in their on-going 'floating' lives. These new folk tales on social media help people think through changes in their current lives.[46] All of this suggests that there is a clear trajectory of applying social media to deal with one's past and current life, from deity images and homeland albums to the relating of contemporary 'folk tales' on social media. To complement this, the next section explores the ways in which people use social media to create a vision of their future lives.

Future life on social media

In GoodPath there is a popular saying that helps people to deal with the tough life they lead at present: 'bitterness first and sweetness will follow' (*xian ku hou tian*). It is a belief that one day, when enough money is saved and everybody has settled down, one will finally lead a happy, urban-style life without any worries. Before that, however, one has to endure bitterness (*ku*) in life. Such a philosophy of life was mentioned again and again by many migrants, ranging in age from their early twenties to their late fifties, although none of them managed to say when exactly the 'sweetness' (*tian*) would arrive – 'one day', as people always said (Fig. 6.5). The belief that things will be better 'one day' gives meaning for the current struggle to keep going, but what exactly does the future look like in peoples' minds?

As we have seen both in folk religion and on social media, making something visual, or sometimes even making it immaterial,[47] is a form of efficacy in and of itself. Transitions between the tangible, physical world and the intangible world of the deities help people to reflect upon the relationship between the two, which may be what makes these manifestations efficacious. So if you can no longer actually visit the temple in your place of origin, you can equally well make a visual trip online without losing the efficacy. Moreover, such visibility on social media not only ensures the efficacy of deities; it also enables people to conceive a new understanding of themselves, and of what they want to be in the future.

Talking of visibility on social media, Liping, a 22-year-old factory worker, has her own understanding of the word. She once complained

Fig. 6.5 'Eating some bitterness of life for me is nothing.' So says Lao Qin, a middle-aged factory worker who loves smoking his pipe and works hard to support his family. (Traditional Chinese painting 34 × 34 cm; painter: Xinyuan Wang)

that I was always 'invisible' (in terms of my QQ status) online, which is true. The 'invisible' status means that people cannot tell whether the user is online or not. There are six online statuses on QQ: 'I am online'; 'Q me' (chat with me); 'Away'; 'Busy'; 'Do not disturb'; and 'Invisible'. However, there are other 'hidden' options in the advanced setting. Right click any QQ contact's avatar, in the drop down box, and you will see a few more options, including one meaning 'visible to him/her in invisible status' (*yin shen dui qi ke jian*). This enables the selected contact always to 'see' you, even when you are 'invisible' to others. For Liping, such a tailored 'visibility' has some significance in a relationship – 'It is like I am always there waiting for you, you know, very close and exclusive,' Liping explained.

'*To see*' is different from '*to look*': the latter happens all the time in social life, but does not necessarily lead to the former. A factory manager once remarked that the logic of the assembly line lies in perceiving humankind to be part of the machine. When asked whether he knew

any of the factory workers personally, given that he spends most of his time in factory workshops, the answer was 'no, it's not necessary'. In vast factory workshops, monotony on a daily basis is the grand narrative, eclipsing individuality. Most of the time migrant factory workers are 'invisible' as people. In the age when the availability of information has exploded, the scarcity of attention is always palpable to everybody; it has indeed been argued that attention has become the real 'currency' of business for an individual.[48] Migrant workers such as Liping are in general all deep in 'attention deficit'; they are always the attention givers, but rarely become attention gainers. In this sense social media is the only place where these workers can enhance their social visibility and see themselves as they want to be perceived.

JiaDa is a 23-year-old forklift driver in a factory. He sees himself as a 'wolf' – an animal that is always 'cool, alone and very masculine' – and he named his QQ group in similar vein as 'the youth who are like wolves and tigers' (*ru lang si hu de qing nian*). This QQ group includes JiaDa's 168 online friends, all of whom are also rural migrants. The group's profile includes 'group album' (*qun xiangce*), and 'group notification' (*qun gonggao*). The group notification reads: 'I hope everybody may be a person with *suzhi*.' *Suzhi* means 'human quality' and is a concept that has been constantly discussed in many academic studies of Chinese society, since the word is associated with the Chinese urban–rural divide.[49] People living in cities use expressions such as 'low *suzhi*' or 'without *suzhi*' to refer to rural people whom they regard as intrinsically inferior. The clear message is that within social media people can effectively create a world of self-respect that accords with the dominant ideals of modern China. Photographs displayed in the group album were collected from online, the most important criteria are again 'being cool' and 'being modern' according to JiaDa (Fig. 6.6). Images such as 'modern city landscape', 'consumer culture' (luxury cars and other goods), 'sex', smoking, large sunglasses, denim and some audacious gestures from the West such as the 'f**k' gesture are regarded as 'modern' and 'cool'.

One day JiaDa came to me and claimed: 'You know what, our factory owner's wife has a similar car (the brown luxury car in the photo) parked just outside the factory plant – isn't that cool?' He said this as proudly as if he owned the Porsche Panamera himself. In a way JiaDa is right: he does own a luxury car somewhere else. YY is another social media platform that he uses specifically for playing massive multi-player online games. This is where he keeps his luxury car: online, not offline.

On YY, there are not only fast cars, but also 'noble titles' which bring users privileges. The titles include 'baron', 'earl', 'duke' and 'king',

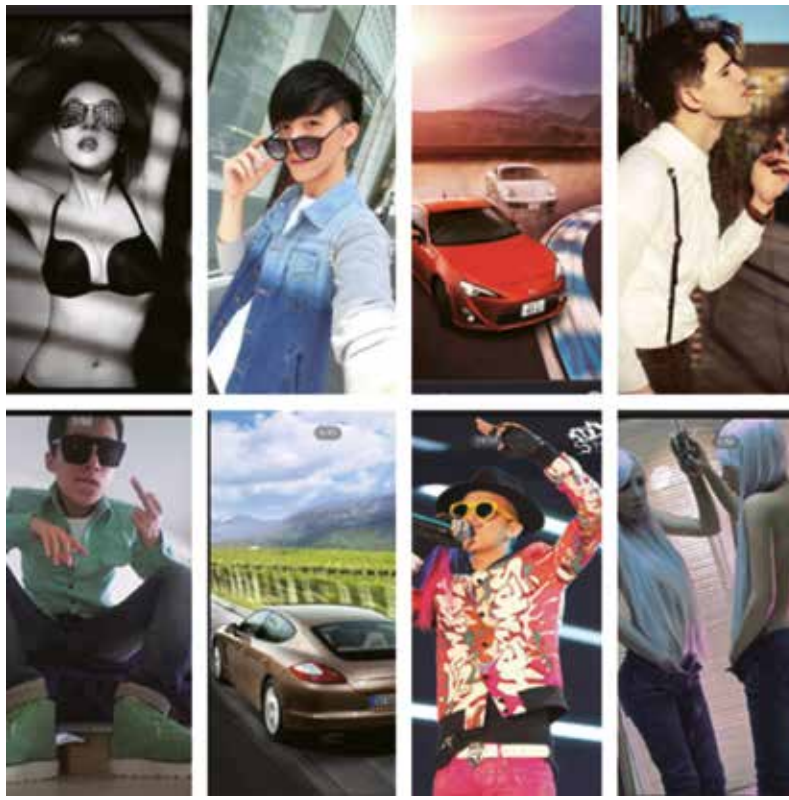

Fig. 6.6 Images about modern life shared on rural migrants' social media

all depending on how much you pay. For example, the lowest 'baron' costs 250 RMB (US $42) per month, while to be able to use the title 'king' online the user has to pay 120,000 RMB (US $20,000) per month. As shown on the screenshot (Fig. 6.7), section 1 is the photograph of the live show broadcaster of this channel; section 2 is a list of top monthly contributors (people are encouraged to buy gifts for the broadcaster); section 5 is a list of gifts one can purchase; section 6 is a virtual avenue for nobles who come in their luxury cars (a baron's car is a Smart car, and a king's is a Rolls-Royce Phantom). Here on section 6 the news feed reads: 'Let's welcome Viscount so and so to this show in his Mercedes Benz SLR!'

JiaDa bought himself a 'baron' title that cost him 250RMB per month – almost one-tenth of his monthly salary and more than the monthly rent of his small room. 'Well, maybe I can never afford a real

Fig. 6.7 The screenshot of YY

car, but here I can,' he said half-jokingly. Now it's easy to think how silly it is to spend the equivalent of a month's rent on buying a useless virtual car just to feel good. However, when this is compared to people who splash out millions and millions on real luxury cars or yachts, and consider what that amount of money could do in building rows of dwellings for homeless refugees, what JiaDa did to make himself 'feel good'[50] actually seems rather less ridiculous.

Like JiaDa, many factory workers talked of the luxury cars belonging to factory owners with a trace of pride. People took photographs of the cars, or even photographs of themselves with the cars. The fact that they could not afford such a fast car did not seem to bother people, as far as one can tell. On the contrary: they seemed to celebrate the moments in their offline lives when they encounter the glamorous things that they have been collecting online. Ownership of images of such luxury cars, either by collecting photographs of cars or purchasing virtual cars online, or even just taking photographs of a car, is viewed as a way of engaging with the modern world that they hope one day to inhabit.

Through JiaDa's wide online collection of luxury cars, alluring ladies and all the other 'cool' and 'modern' things, we also come to acknowledge the consumer culture among low income rural migrants. In such 'floating' lives, an imaginary existence built around an urban, luxurious lifestyle can provide an alternative 'reality'.[51] One can sense rural migrants' acute desire for these luxury goods, especially for the foreign ones. However, the use of photography to create a new reality

is not unique to the digital age. The definition of a fancy car may have changed, but the technique of archiving a 'modern' self remains the same. A century ago people went to a photographer's studio to have a portrait photograph taken with a foreign backdrop. An elaborate 'paper' car, for example, might be integrated as a prop in such a portrait.[52]

In addition, slide shows were very popular among Chinese peasants in the 1860s. People from the countryside, who had never had the opportunity to travel, learned about foreign places through such slide shows, discovering the world that existed beyond their villages.[53] The images people view on smartphone screens must be different from those that their relatives saw through a little hole of a peepshow half a century ago. However, it seems that the motivations behind the two viewings are in fact very similar.

Today a photography studio is located at the digital centre in GoodPath. All the young women in the town seem to dream of taking a nice set of 'art photos' (*yishu zhao*). Lily, a 19-year-old factory worker from a Chinese inland village, was delighted when the chance arose to create her own art photos:

> I always wanted to, but I didn't save up enough money for that. Last week they launched a sale, and with 50 Likes on WeChat[54] I was able to have a basic set of art photos for half the price.

It took the stylist two and half hours to make up Lily's face. Large amounts of foundation were applied to her skin and 'fake eyelashes' were glued to her eyelids, while meticulous hairstyling sculpted her straight hair into perfectly shaped curls. Finally, when all was complete, Lily was helped into an evening dress with padding at the breast and folds that exaggerated her hips. In just a few hours the stylist had transformed a factory girl into a generic look-alike film star, no longer recognisable to her parents or closest friends (Fig. 6.8). She explained why:

> I wanted to record my youth, the most beautiful phase in my whole life. One day I will get married, and no longer be young.

Yet such a perspective made her decision of taking 'art photos' seem even more bizarre. Why would she consider such a 'once-in-a-life-time' look to be the 'record of her youth'? According to the stylist all the young women attending the studio are satisfied by the evening dress on offer; none of them had ever worn one before. As the judge of fashion and

Fig. 6.8 An 'art photo' of Lily

beauty, his job seemed more like a punching machine in a factory, producing identical beauties from factory workers:

> My job is to make them fashionable and beautiful, no matter how plain they may be; after the styling and Photoshop everybody looks equally fashionable and beautiful. They don't need to have a clue as I know how to deal with everything.

In this sense, what Lily wanted is not to record her youth, but to have a beautiful youth created in the studio and preserved in an image. Such youth should be as beautiful as the photographs she collected on QQ (Fig. 6.9).

Lily updated her Qzone at least once a day. It is neat and clean, using the colours of light blue and white. Online Lily is surrounded by a group of admirers, and talks as if she was a princess who is waiting for true love. In GoodPath she is not alone at all; she lives with her parents,

Fig. 6.9 Princess images on Lily's social media profile.
The text with the photos reads: 'In my life I have always dreamt about my true love; he will treat me very well, protect me from all the uncertainties, instability, sadness and loneliness. However, I have always known that such a person will never turn up.'

younger brother and sister, while almost 40 other members of her large family live nearby. Lily's parents work in the same factory. The five members of her family inhabit two small rooms and share a toilet with two other rural migrant families. In summer the family wash themselves in the shared bathroom, which is without a shower: a plastic bucket and a plastic washbasin serve as a shower set. There is used toilet paper and dirty water on the floor, and the wall is stained. However, the toilet at home is still much better than the one at the factory plant, which people usually forget to flush after using it, attracting swarms of flies. In winter, when temperatures fall below 0°C (32°F) roughly once a week, the family go to a public bath to shower because there is no heating or hot water at home.

At home Lily shares the bed with her 11-year-old sister in the upstairs room, also used as a storage room of the small grocery downstairs run by the landlord (Fig. 6.10). In summer, during the day, the indoor temperature can exceed 38°C (100°F) and there is no air conditioning. One day after work Lily was 'working with' her smartphone, a

Fig. 6.10 The room Lily shares with her sister

Huawei smartphone, which she had bought for 1,850 RMB (US $308). She was captivated by the 'online world', as if she had completely forgotten where she was. After a while she looked up to see me. I was still sitting there, sweating like a pig. 'Life outside the mobile phone is unbearable, huh?' she smiled.

Lily's remark leads to the question 'where do people live?'. In GoodPath there are very many young factory workers such as Lily, who actually live simultaneously offline and online. We need to understand where people live, without assuming that the offline is necessarily more real or more material. In research on Javanese modernisation in Kampung, a dreadful residential town, the anthropologist James L. Peacock argued that the local theatre show, Ludruk, played an important role in the daily lives of working-class people there.[55] One Ludruk story is that of a young woman from a humble background who managed to gain higher social status through marriage and personal development, thereby becoming able to enjoy modern city life. Peacock argued that the reason for the show's huge popularity was that it enabled the working-class audience to participate in a purified and modern life. He observed that the show 'provides its participants with a series of symbolic actions which lead them to repudiate elements of Kampung society and vicariously move out of that environment into extra-Kampung realms of sexual and social happiness'.[56]

There are some striking parallels between Chinese rural migrants' use of social media and Javanese workers' engagement with Ludruk shows. For many rural migrants, what they post on social media reflects the far more interesting and modern world in which they want to live in the future. In a way, therefore, they already live in a future visualised and conceived in advance on social media. We are actually witnessing a dual migration: one from villages to factories, and the other from offline to online.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to present the typical ways in which Chinese rural migrants use social media in their daily lives, encompassing a wide variety of relationships in addition to core social ties. The chapter started by examining links with traditional spiritual realms, reflected in folk beliefs and ancestor worship. All of these existed before social media, but are highly significant today: they emerge as structural factors that deeply influence the use of social media among Chinese rural migrants.

Each section of this chapter focused upon a specific instance of this transformation in social media use. In the first section the presence of folk religion on social media illustrated how and why the efficacy of social media postings has become recognised. It showed how such efficacy has been widely accepted by people who view this as an integral aspect of the relationship between the secular world and the deities' realm. The point being made is more complex than simply suggesting that folk religion is expressed on social media. Such a sense of religious efficacy has a profound effect upon what people think a social media posting is, and what they believe it might achieve.

The chapter then considered the discrepancy between my own expectations of how social media might be used reconnecting with the homeland and what the ethnography actually encountered. Such discrepancy provided the basis for explaining a possible shift from offline homeland visiting to the creation of online homeland albums, in effect relocating the effective homeland for these rural migrants. In this way we saw how social media has been used as the agency for people to achieve this re-connection with their pasts and the places where they came from, but in an entirely different manner to that anticipated.

The third section revealed the way in which posts of folk tale-like narratives illustrate a key moment when social media became a centre

for a whole set of world views. Attitudes towards marriage, justice and education gradually emerged in the context of the current rural-to-urban migration. All the stories shared on the social media profiles implicitly, and often explicitly, constitute a moral judgement, reflecting the views of ordinary people about the dichotomy of right and wrong or good and evil within the given context of their 'floating' lives. Thus these new stories on social media provide moral guidance just as folk tales traditionally did, helping people to make sense of, and to think through, transformations of 'the current'.

The final section turned to the role of social media in creating 'the future', both as an imagined concept and a conceived, visualised place. Yet to appreciate this we need to return to the example of folk religion. In a way Chinese folk religion can confuse us, as it is highly pragmatic and materialistic – quite distinct from a Western perspective of religion in a transcendent heavenly sphere contrasting with life in the physical realm below. However, it is only by understanding such 'practical actions', through which folk religion is used as a 'technology' in everyday life, that we appreciate the role social media plays in creating an imaginary prospect set within everyday life.

Once again, however, social media is the means but not the cause. Before social media existed people already lived with an imaginary connection to their ancestors and other deities as well as a vision of an anticipated happy future – both ways of dealing with the trials of everyday life. Now, however, thanks to the visualisations of social media, one's future life arrives earlier, on and through social media. Considering all these sections together, we can see how social media constitutes an integration of one's remembered past, perceived present and anticipated future. As such, life on social media is not separated from 'real' life; it is rather an essential and integral part of rural migrants' everyday lives.