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.[1] Improving mobile telecommunications was a major part of these efforts, although distribution throughout China's countryside was anything but uniform.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5]

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[6] 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)[a]
QQ (incl. Qzone)	625
WeChat	355
Renren	45
Sina Weibo	129
Tencent Weibo	220[b]
Momo	40

[a] 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.

[b] 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.[7] 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.[8] 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).[9]

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,[10] 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.[11] 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),[12] 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,

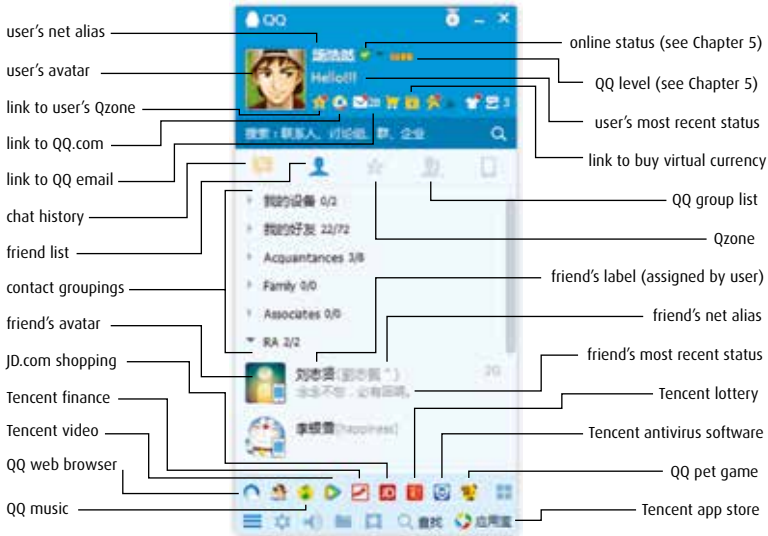

Fig. 2.1 QQ Instant Messenger main window

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[13] 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.[14] 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[15] happenings') displays an aggregated news feed of several elements of a user's profile.[16] 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 that 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.[17] 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.[18] 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

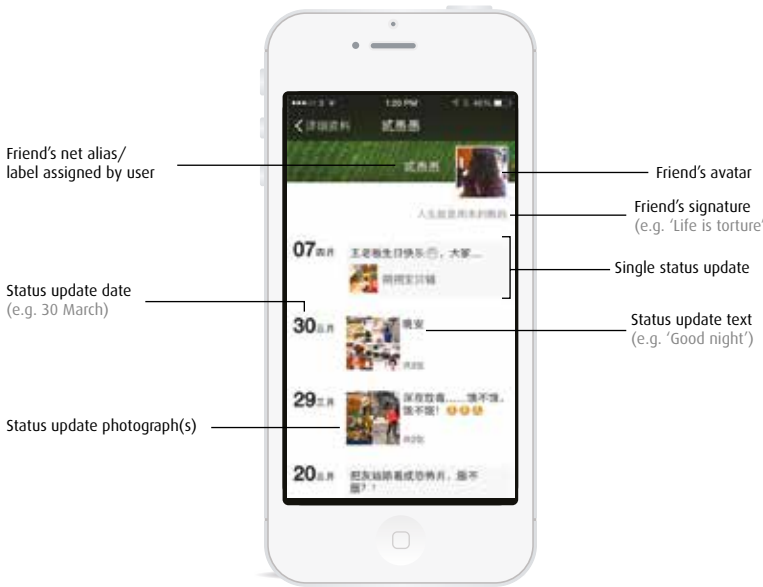

Fig. 2.2 An individual user's WeChat Moments profile

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 lifestyle 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).[19]

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'.[20] 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.[21] 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.[22]

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.[23]

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 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.[24] 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 townsfolks' 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, townsfolk 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.[25] 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.[26] 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).[27] Only one person from the initial survey of adults said they did not own a mobile phone of any kind.[28] Around a quarter of the initial survey group said that they owned only a (2G) feature phone.[29] 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.[30] 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).[31] 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

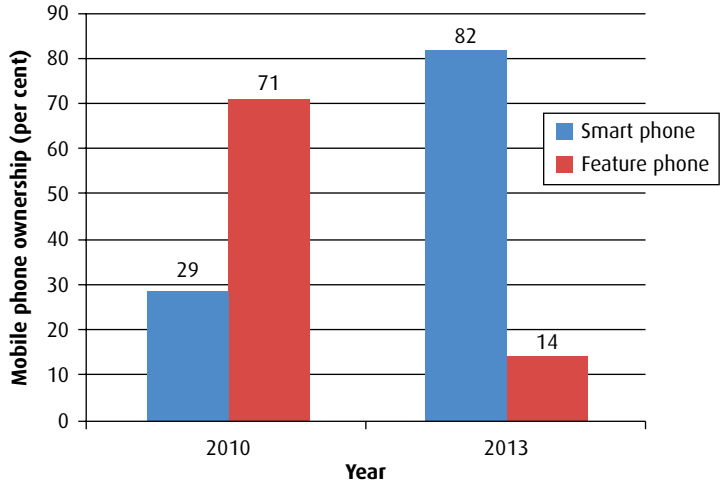

Fig. 2.5 Smartphone/ feature phone ownership rates for Chinese youth

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.[32] 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.[33]

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 townsfolk

and university students), may have had access to smartphones and data packages, elderly townsfolk, 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.[34]

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.[35]

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.[36] 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.[37]

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.[38] Despite the declining numbers of people using the internet cafés, they are an important 'commons'[39] 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,[40] 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[41] – 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.[42] 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.[43] 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',[44] and sometimes concealed to avoid envy or accusations of impropriety (real or otherwise).[45]

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'.[46] 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.