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Social media and social relationships

The dynamism of Chinese social media is truly impressive. Even more impressive, however, is the speed of response of Chinese social media users. They pick up almost instantly on each subtle gesture and movement allowed by social media, and skilfully apply these to navigate their relationships with families, friends, romantic partners and even with strangers online. A whole set of social norms have emerged regarding the use of social media, which people soon take for granted: social media thus comes to feel an essential part of their daily lives, as if it had always been with them. In this chapter we will explore different kinds of social relationships in the context of social media usage. The evidence in this chapter suggests that social media has not only become an integral part of everyday life, a place where people live alongside their offline life. It also provides the potential for people to experience relationships that are not fully developed, or do not even exist, in prior offline situations. In this chapter we will explore different kinds of social relationships, which are also called 'sociality' in anthropology,[1] in the context of social media usage.

'Thank you for keeping me on your contact list'

This is a general understanding of rural migrants' social media contacts. Since the autumn of 2014 people in GoodPath have been bombarded by a particular type of text message from their WeChat contacts. A typical one reads:

> My dear friend, it's getting cold, please keep yourself warm as I do care about you. btw, this a group message. Copy this, and send it as group message to all your contacts so that you will see who have removed you from their contact lists since the system will tell. Try it; you will have a clear picture of your social relationships, and it's

> also convenient for you to clean up those who had removed you. If you receive this message, then thank you for keeping me on your contact list.'

Starting with a sweet, caring line, followed by some practical advice about cleaning up contacts, such text messages have become so popular among people in GoodPath that almost everyone has experienced them. Some found them annoying, feeling that the subtext of the message seemed to be 'I don't really care about you, I only care about whether you care about me'. Many followed the suggestion, trying to figure out who had removed them. Some people who did so actually found a few contacts they were happy to discard. Others even discovered to their shock that those who had just borrowed money from them had already deleted the contact before they had returned the money; or that former colleagues who had recently moved to another town had already dropped them; or that their ex-partner, with whom they still wanted to remain friends, had actually severed the connection unilaterally.

The popularity of such group messages seems to indicate a pervasive insecurity and uncertainty about personal relationships, which can be explained partly by the life patterns of rural migrants. In the process of migration, this 'floating' population has experienced a large number of transient encounters and frequently had to say goodbye to others. During the research rural migrants, especially middle-aged ones such as 43-year-old Lao Zhou, talked from time to time about the interdependent rural communities they had come from:[2]

> When I was very young, in my village, if one household had difficulty in harvest, the whole village lent a hand. And when my grandfather died, male adults in the neighbourhood all came to carry the coffin . . . In a way you have to, everybody is watching you. If this time you don't help others, next time nobody will come to help you.

I happened to observe him on another day around dinner time, when the muggy evening brought a sudden shower: despite what he had told me, when Lao Zhou rushed to collect his clothes hanging outside in the collective yard he only collected his own. His neighbours' washing was left to get wet in the rain. I asked why. He replied:

> Neighbours? No, I don't think they are, who knows who they are? Almost every month people move in and move out. I can't be

bothered to recognise all of them. Of course, in my previous village I would have collected my neighbour's clothes, but here things are different. I am not mean, I just try to be realistic.

Knowing how fleeting a co-residence can be, rural migrants seemed to have little expectation of developing any long-term relationship with people who happened to work on the same assembly line, or happened to rent a room next door. Social connections, such as colleagues or neighbours, can be very close in the short term, but in the long run they were considered fragile and unstable, especially when one of the parties migrated to other places. Lao Zhou's experience from a 'super-stable' social structure in a village society, in which 'everybody is watching you', to an unstable and loose connection in a floating life – 'who knows who they are?' – is common among migrant workers in GoodPath. Such living experience set the tone for people's attitudes towards offline social life.

These differences help to explain the relationship pattern found on social media. Based on the analysis of 105 migrant workers' QQ profiles, Chart 4.1 shows that non-kinship relationships are dominant on rural migrants' social media. The majority of social connections on social media come from migration. Here people have more chances to interact with various kinds of people, such as 'colleagues', 'other friends' and 'online strangers'. The labels of different social relationships followed the colloquial terms and categories used by participants in this survey. For example, many people would add 'other' to 'friends' to indicate those friends were not their classmates, nor fellow villagers, nor colleagues. Nor are the categories are mutually exclusive: most classmates are fellow villagers, and some of the colleagues to whom people became connected on QQ were relatives or fellow villagers.

In comparison with the control group in Shanghai,[3] several of these figures for rural migrants on the chart stand out. One notable feature is the relatively small 'classmates' group. Classmate ties are usually extremely important in Chinese society;[4] the age-class grouping in school facilitates the formation of friendships and cliques, and the significance of the classmate friendship becomes greater over time.[5] In Shanghai, more than 36 per cent of social media contacts are education-related (classmates, school friends), whereas the concepts of 'classmates' and 'school friends' are very ambiguous among rural migrants, many of whom dropped out of school early. Furthermore, more than 80 per cent of participants in Shanghai had never added strangers on social media, let alone made friends with them. By contrast 'online strangers',

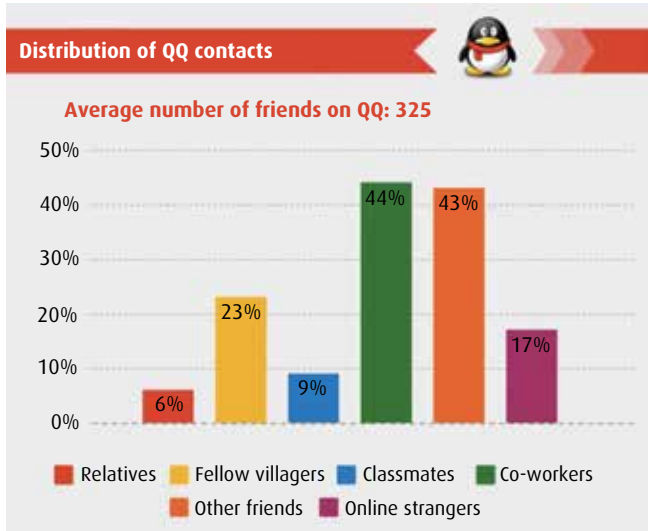

Chart 4.1 Distribution of QQ contacts among rural migrants in GoodPath

referring to contacts with no offline social connection at all, stand out as an important part of social media contacts among rural migrants.

In practice, being connected is one thing: keeping in touch is another. In fact mere figures of the distribution of various contacts do not tell even half the story. The word 'zombie' (*jiangshi*) was frequently used by many young people to refer to those online contacts with whom one hardly had any form of interaction (online chatting, commenting or sharing). Some people choose to keep those 'zombies' as contacts due to the fact that a large number of connections on social media is regarded as an achievement. Many previous colleagues and fellow villagers have become 'zombies' on QQ.

Not that this is necessarily a problem. Lu Li, a 25-year-old waitress at a local restaurant, has become more and more reluctant to keep in touch with her best childhood friend on QQ. Yet when she left the village six years ago both of them had opened QQ accounts in order to keep in contact:

> To be honest I feel the only thing we could talk about was childhood memories and nothing else. I am not interested in her life in the village and she couldn't appreciate my sense of fashion or imagine the ups-and-downs in my life here . . . We no longer live in the same world, you know . . . but no harm in keeping her on my QQ. You look better online with more friends than less, don't you?

The experience of 'working outside' (*da gong*) has broadened the horizons of migrant workers, and so an invisible division has started to separate people who have remained in villages from those who have already experienced 'the outside world'. Even though physical distance is no longer a real obstacle, given the communication technology now available, rural migrants fail to keep many of their previous social connections: a non-physical barrier has developed between the experiences and mindsets of these two groups that is perhaps even more difficult to bridge. Many of these differences from Shanghai make sense once it is understood that, as noted in Chapter 1, the 'push' factor of economic necessity that once determined the trajectory of rural-to-urban migration has now been supplanted by the 'pull' factor of aspiration towards modernity. This also needs to be taken into account in explaining the nature and experience of social media connections considered in the next section.

The 'hot and noisy' principle

The introduction to this book discussed the importance of interpersonal relations (*guanxi*) and face (*mianzi*) in exploring Chinese social relationships. Both *guanxi* and *mianzi* emphasise the importance of the harmony (*hexie*) of social groups, which works as a powerful mediation between the individual and the society. More specifically, another principle is widely applied to achieve a harmonious ambience of social life. This principle can be literally translated as 'hot and noisy'.

From time to time people would say 'come and leave your footprints on my profile' (*lai wo kong jian caicai!*) to their friends, inviting them to visit their QQ profiles[6] (Qzone). On Qzone not only the user, but also the user's other QQ contacts can check who has paid a visit. Having said this, one is supposed to 'leave footprints' (that is to leave comments on others' profiles) in order to show the evidence of caring for one another. For example, two girls who work together on the same assembly line would still come to leave footprints on each other's Qzone after work, even though they have seen each other 10 hours a day, 29 days a month at work. Usually 'footprints' resemble a long string of banter between friends on one's QQ profile. 'Don't you think with more people coming here and more footprints left, it will appear more *renao*?' a female factory worker asked.

'Re' in *renao* means hot, and *nao* means noisy. Putting the two characters together, *renao*, creates a frequently used Chinese word,

referring to a lively, bustling and exciting ambience of social connection. Traditionally *renao* was regarded as a positive and ideal status of Chinese social life, and was highly sought after.[7] For instance, in the celebrations of Chinese New Year, 'hot and noisy' is essential as the festival mood.[8] The expression 'join the hot and noisy' (*cou renao*) is commonly used to describe the attendance of any kind of meeting with others. As shown in chapters 1 and 2, social life in GoodPath is more dependent on any gathering of people, rather than people fitting themselves into a space specifically designated for that purpose. Any activity in public which is 'hot and noisy' thus automatically becomes a social event.

In GoodPath, one of the most *renao* events is the Chinese opera show. Every two months a traditional Chinese opera troupe from a nearby village would perform a show on a makeshift stage in the parking area. Hundreds of people always gathered around the stage, even though not everyone was interested in opera. Noise off the stage was just as loud as the singing on the stage. When the show was over, more than half of the audience remained in their seats, chatting with each other. It seemed that for many people *renao,* rather than the opera, was the real reason why they had come to the show. The parallel between the opera audience and social media users shows that the expectation of an ideal ambience of social life has migrated from offline to online. Social media has become the main place where peers hang out to join the *renao*.

And in some situations, it is difficult to tell the fine boundary between online and offline when it comes to a 'hot and noisy' ambience. In GoodPath, internet cafes are very popular among young men. Each internet cafe has around 100 computers. At night, around 90 per cent of the machines are in use, with male users accounting for around 85 per cent. Almost all these male users are playing massive multi-player online games. Many young men come to the internet cafe in groups and play games with their friends together. The internet cafe was always extremely noisy. As Wuli, a 21-year-old factory worker, explained:

> Playing a game alone is definitely not the same. If I win playing alone, no one can share the excitement with me! With friends I can give a shout, letting everybody in the room know that I've won – it feels so good! . . . And you know, you feel the brotherhood when you go to the internet cafe together and kill enemies together!

Wuli visited the internet cafe almost every day after work with a group of his fellow villagers who worked in factories. When the group was playing games together, they talked so loudly that everybody in the

room could hear. Conversations that could be heard were not necessarily about gaming: they might involve boasting about one's new girlfriend or a new purchase of an iPhone. 'The human being is a part of the machine', as a factory manager said. For factory workers such as Wuli, who received little attention during working hours, the loud noise they made in the internet cafe seemed to be one of the few moments they obtained any attention, and they relished it. Furthermore, in Chapter 3 we saw that compared to women, men are less likely to portray bonding through posting group photos on their social media. Here we can see that this is not because there is less bonding, but rather that male bonding is expressed in an alternative way: through this more physical and performative companionship.

From leaving footprints on Qzones to playing online games in a 'hot and noisy' internet cafe, the principle of *renao* was followed both offline and online. As a result, the boundary between online and offline has become very blurred. Following this general discussion of 'sociality' on social media, this chapter will focus more closely on social media usage in different categories of significant social relationships.

Couples and wider family relationships on social media

When I first saw Lan, she was producing linings for pet carriers in a dark workshop. It was a small, underground workshop, converted from a residential room and hidden deep in a narrow lane. On becoming aware of my presence, Lan immediately bowed her head even lower, and hushed the two children playing around the sewing machine to be quiet (Fig. 4.1).

It took a while to make friends with Lan, her son, aged almost five, and her daughter, aged three. Like many young rural migrants, 24-year-old Lan had dropped out of school and left her village early in search of a better life. Five years previously she had married a truck driver from a neighbouring village. A year ago the couple had moved to GoodPath, working together in a factory. Then, in order to support each other and their young children better, Lan's husband took a better paid job in Shanghai, a position to which he was introduced by a fellow villager. However, the living costs for the whole family in Shanghai were prohibitive. So as a compromise Lan's husband worked in Shanghai, staying at the collective dormitory, and Lan remained behind, taking care of their children in GoodPath. She had to quit her assembly line job at a factory and take a lower-paid job

Fig. 4.1 Lan and her two children. (A partial image of a traditional Chinese painting 'Locked album', 145 × 75 cm; painter: Xinyuan Wang)

at this illicit sewing sweatshop, run by a local peasant. More flexibility was allowed at the workshop, and she could take her children there to save on daytime nursery fees. In Lan, one can see the typical kind of traditional, virtuous Chinese woman who is devoted to her family. Her Qzone possessed a few 'locked' albums, not open to visitors. 'Only my husband and I know the password', she explained. 'I only uploaded photos of our children to the albums so that he can check them over there.'

Lan's husband is a quiet man. I only met him once when he came back to visit his family. Being asked about his children's photographs, he remained silent for a while, then replied:

> I was too busy during daytime. At night, on the bed, when I couldn't fall asleep and worried about things, I would take out my smartphone and have a look at them . . . then I felt much better.

Then he became silent again.

A QQ album has become the essential connection between this young couple, bringing immense comfort to people who had no choice but to live separately.[9] Yet being physically apart was not always regarded in a negative light by a family. In some cases, it came across as

a great relief, as Yan Hong, the 37-year-old owner of a local nail salon, describes:

> When he was at home he never did any housework. I needed to take care of our daughter, him and the business of the shop. You know, I was not very lucky to marry such a lazy man! . . . . But now things have become more bearable. I no longer need to work as a maid, and I even feel that he cares for us more on WeChat and QQ. Before he had never taken the initiative to ask about our daughter's performance at school. But now he asks me about her from time to time.

Yan Hong believed that her marriage had become more 'bearable': with the help of social media, her once unpleasant, housework-loaded married life had been transformed into a more supportive and considerate one. Compared to rural migrant families, hers is definitely much better off. Yan Hong's husband is a businessman who works in a city in north China, thus rarely staying at home. Every day the couple talk by WeChat voice messages. Once a week they have a half-hour QQ video call, during which their 10-year-old daughter, who lives with Yan Hong, joins the conversation and says hello to her father. Yan Hong seemed to be happy with her WeChat strategy:

> . . . It [WeChat voice message] is similar to a phone call, but better . . . because you don't need to arrange a time for a conversation. Before, when I called him, he always sounded in the middle of something and impatient . . . which always pissed me off. But by voice message, it's still as if we are talking, but in a more relaxed way . . . I leave voice messages for him whenever I want, and he comes back to me when he is free.

The use of voice messaging on WeChat varied remarkably among different people. For many young people, especially those in the early stages of romance, WeChat voice messages could be sent and received so rapidly that it functioned as a synchronous mode of communication. It did not have to be, however, as in Yan Hong's case. She found that the acceptable time delay between WeChat messages has allowed her more control over previously problematic communication with her husband.

Furthermore, the 'stored' conversation on WeChat has brought some unexpected benefits. Yan had a few problems with her mother-in-law because the old lady was over-indulgent with her granddaughter;

she always became very protective of the girl when Yan Hong tried to establish discipline at home:

> I complained about my mother-in-law on WeChat, and my husband replied that, 'grandparents always spoil kids, so don't let her get involved too much, do what you feel you need to do'... The next day, she [the mother-in-law] gave me a bollocking again when I was scolding my daughter for not finishing her homework. So I said, 'ok, I can't argue with you, then let your son argue with you!' So I replayed that piece of voice message from my husband to her. She was totally shocked because my husband had never really supported me in front of his mother.

Yan Hong's husband had never considered that a fragment of the conversation between him and his wife would be taken from its original context and used as an argument by his wife against his mother – something he always tried to avoid. A similar situation also happened in other families. Jokes between family junior members on voice messages were replayed to senior family members, for example, causing embarrassment, or secrets were disclosed to non-family members by voice messages. Technologically it is possible to record a phone call, but before WeChat voice message, voice recording was very rare; most daily phone conversations had not been recorded automatically as happened on WeChat. In this sense WeChat voice message made people's daily phone conversations replicable for the first time. As a result these reconstructions of daily conversations, facilitated by the use of voice messages, have now become a part of both family life and wider social life.

Given the much higher penetration rate of smartphones and social media among older people in urban China, the one-month of research undertaken in Shanghai (July 2014) unfolded some new patterns of social media usage in kinship. These had not yet happened in GoodPath. For instance, surveillance on social media by senior family members has become a problem among people in Shanghai:

> Oh my, you just don't know how annoying it has become since my mum became a WeChat friend. I uploaded something after midnight; she left a comment, nagging me to go to bed earlier. I uploaded some photos with my friends having fun in a club; she called me the next day, nagging about why I couldn't have a proper girlfriend... In the end, I had to block her from those 'sensitive' postings.

Huang, a 28-year-old company official, decided to conduct self-censorship against his mother's ubiquitous surveillance. Compared to most men who try not to include their parents on social media, women seem to cope better with the experience of having family members there. Jing Yu Qi, a 32-year-old tourist guide, discovered that WeChat could be a nice buffer mechanism between her and senior family members:

> It's true that sometimes they were a bit nosy about my personal issues, but that's always the case, with or without WeChat. And on WeChat I can ignore their enquiries or reply later when I am in a good mood. In 'face to face' you can't do that; as the junior you can't say no to their face or ignore them . . . For me, WeChat is like a 'cushion'.

Such usage actually has many points of similarity to Yan Hong's WeChat strategy regarding her husband.

WeChat groups have also become popular among families in Shanghai, connecting several nuclear families together efficiently. For example, there is a WeChat group called 'Grandpa, what will we have for dinner?' on Fan's WeChat. A media worker in Shanghai, she explained that the name of the WeChat group came from the family tradition that every fortnight the big family, including four nuclear families, would try to have a family dinner at her grandfather's place:

> . . . In the beginning, the WeChat group was mainly functional, because it's quite convenient to check who will come for dinner on it rather than calling each family one by one . . . I forget when it was that one of my uncles started to post some photos on the group, and others were inspired to post various things such as family news or jokes too . . . now we basically catch up with each other almost every day in the group. And the funny thing is over family dinner, face to face, we continue chatting about the topics from our WeChat group.

For Fan, the WeChat family group has become the virtual family dinner. Some also found the interaction with senior family members on WeChat group allowed them to see a different aspect of their relatives. Ding Yi Han, a freelance artist in her late thirties living in Shanghai, described how WeChat transformed her relationship with senior family members:

> I have never seen him smile like a child, you know: the traditional, typical father never smiles like that. But since we had a family

> WeChat group, he has somehow learnt to use WeChat stickers, and all of a sudden I found he was no longer the serious father I knew before. He has become so funny and even childish. It's not only my father; my grandfather was also taught to use WeChat this year. He too has become a lovely person, I mean before he was just the 'grandfather', you know what I mean? . . . I think that's best thing WeChat has ever brought to me, and to the whole family.'

WeChat stickers (Fig. 4.2) are a popular feature of WeChat. Hundreds of sets of stickers like these are available. In traditional Chinese patriarchal society senior male family members are supposed to be serious,[10] yet because of those cute stickers junior family members have started to discover the 'human' side of their fathers as well as their grandfathers. Meanwhile, for the older generation, WeChat has also opened a window on youth culture.

There are two definite trends of social transformation taking place beneath the observations of social media use in kinship discussed here. One is the massive rural-to-urban migration, and the inevitable rupture of kinship that occurs in the process; the other is the increasing popularity of social media and smartphones among low income people and the older population. In Lan's story we see a typical family pattern of rural migrants in diaspora, a situation in which the use of social media helped to overcome long physical distances and maintain a family together; features such as the 'locked album' with a password shared among family members made 'remote' parenting possible. Yan Hong's story, by contrast, reflects rather different usage. Here the new facility provided by WeChat (voice messaging) has been applied to break the

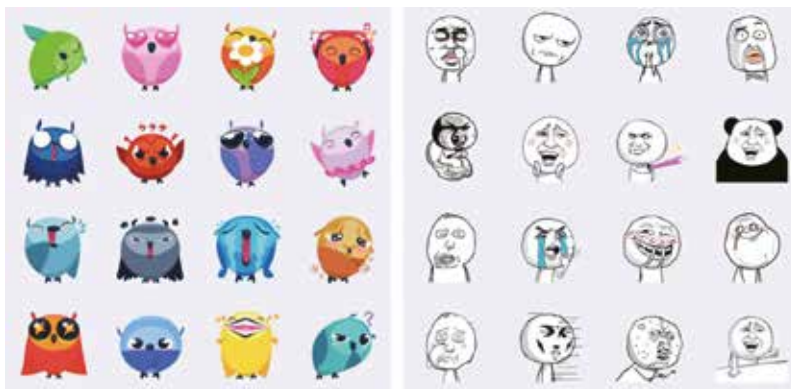

Fig. 4.2 Samples of WeChat stickers

pre-existing routine and hierarchy of family life. This may be taken further in the light of the findings from Shanghai that revealed that some new aspects of kinship were 'discovered' through social media use. From online albums to voice messaging to stickers, social media changes the practice of family relationships by providing many new possibilities for communication.

During the period of research (2013/2014), the use of social media in GoodPath was still largely confined to the younger generation (aged under 35). The majority of social connection online was still among contemporaries, and very few people connected with any senior relatives on QQ. Communication between parents and their adult children, or between senior family members in a big family, remained essentially a matter of phone calls. Thus the discussion here about social media use in family relationships among rural migrants only speaks to situations between young couples, or among junior relatives in a large family. However, the use of social media in romantic relationships is now pervasive among young people.

Romantic relationships on social media

Every day after work, a group of young female factory workers leaves the factory plant together, hand in hand. All of them are unmarried young women, and gossip about relationships is always the most popular topic. Girls chatter avidly on the 10-minute walk from factory to dormitories; everybody is trying to contribute something to the daily 'gossip time':

> 'Hey, did you hear that he just asked for her QQ number? I was surprised that he wanted to add her on QQ!'
>
> 'Really? I didn't know he was keen on her. Oh no – it is really bad news for his ex-girlfriend. A few days ago I just saw her new QQ status . . . sounds like she really regrets the break-up. Look, look . . .'

The girl then took out her smartphone, showing her friends the evidence she had spotted on QQ.

The very action of men and women adding each other on QQ can easily be interpreted as romance, since, in the words of one girl, 'QQ is not used for talking business or other things; QQ is for you to fall in love (*tan lian ai*)'. It has become almost a consensus among young people that one of the major functions of social media is to develop and maintain

romantic relationships. Xiao Lin, a 20-year-old factory worker, sent me QQ messages explaining how QQ helped him to become a better lover:

> I am much more bold and romantic on QQ . . . you just wouldn't say those sweet words face to face . . . And I used lots of cute stickers when we were chatting on QQ, which made her find me really funny.

Many young migrant workers, like Xiao Lin, think they can be a better lover on social media. Vivid stickers and emojis enrich people's expression; an element of time delay allows more scope for strategic communication. Behind the screens of their smartphones, people feel more empowered and confident. Rather than a diminished form of intimate interaction, romantic relationships on social media have become an efficient modality combining elements of voice, image and text, as well as emoji and stickers. There is another reason why social media is regarded a place for romantic love: a public display of love offline is usually frowned upon in GoodPath. Walking hand in hand was the most intimate interaction that one could spot on the street. When Xiao Yu, a 21-year-old hairdresser's apprentice, posted photos of herself kissing her boyfriend on QQ, she perceived QQ to be a romantic and liberating place where one can feel free to display intimacy as the 'public' was different:

> In big cities people won't make a fuss [about kissing in public]. But here some traditional people would dislike it . . . but the good thing is they are not on my QQ!

Xiao Yu's kiss photographs elicited many comments. Rather than feeling embarrassed, she felt that was exactly what she was looking for: '. . . When you posted something like that, you just knew what people would comment. If I am not sure, then I won't post it,' Xiao Yu explained. To the question 'do you think about what kind of reaction you will receive when you post something on social media?', the majority of participants, both in GoodPath and in Shanghai, said yes. Moreover in many cases the imagined audience and presupposed reaction justify the posting. A few days later, Xiao Yu finally uttered the real reason why she posted the kiss photos – to warn another girl to stay away from her boyfriend as she assumed the girl had been stalking her.[11] 'It's so annoying, she is still flirting with him (Xiao Yu's boyfriend) on his Qzone. Is she blind? I am pretty sure she saw the kiss photo on my Qzone.'

In romantic relationships, surveillance on social media can lead to jealousy in various ways. For instance, a delayed reply to a WeChat message can make the romantic partner feel unimportant, especially when he or she can see on other social media platforms that their partner is online. Situations such as that described by Cai, a 22-year-old waitress in a restaurant, are very common: 'I sent him a message half hour ago; he didn't reply, but ten minutes ago, he updated his QQ status . . . that made me feel upset.' She was always online throughout the day when working at the restaurant; the multiple social media platforms her boyfriend used allowed her to connect with him constantly, but such an environment also made it more difficult for her boyfriend to hide anything from her. Many young people share similar insecurities about their romantic relationships, As Zhu, a factory worker aged 20, complained: 'She [his girlfriend] never mentioned our relationship on her QQ. My gut feeling is she is not that committed, or maybe she is hiding something from me?'

Because social media profiles are continuously subjected to scrutiny to a greater extent than most offline spaces, for many young people such as Zhu a romantic relationship gained its 'legitimacy' by a public announcement on social media. However, in practice, the attempt to make a public announcement may backfire. Lujia, a factory worker, set up a QQ group of 78 contacts in order to win the trust of his new girlfriend. He explained:

> My girlfriend said she was not sure about my love, unless I showed it in public (*gong kai*); Once I set up the QQ group and show my love for her she will believe me.

On this QQ group, every few hours Lujia wrote something along the lines of '. . . darling you are the most beautiful woman in my life and I love you so much'. Clearly not everybody thought Lujia's declaration of love quite as sweet as his partner did, and most people soon quit the group. As one former member complained, 'he thought QQ was his own place to do whatever he wanted . . . But why should I read screenfuls of such goosebump-arousing nonsense?' What was evident in Lujia's case was that 'audiences' felt extremely disturbed and offended. Unlike posting something on one's own social media profile, Lujia's QQ group messaging, which constantly tried to grab people's attention to witness something of little relevance for them, was way too aggressive and inappropriate.

However, in most cases some subtle strategies regarding the public display of love on QQ had been applied. It was very common to see a couple talk to each other in a way that others would not be able to understand without knowing the context of the dialogue. For example, a conversation between a young couple on Qzone that could be seen by all the online contacts was:

> 'Don't forget you promised me that you wouldn't tell her about that.'
>
> 'Yes I promised, and I didn't tell her about that at all, quite the opposite, I told her that you said those three words on my birthday, and she was so delightfully surprised. I told you she liked you.'

Even though substantial information from the above correspondence was very limited, everyone who read the dialogue got the message that these two people were close to each other and that their relationship was exclusive. That is exactly the reason why, rather than this taking place on the seemingly more convenient and private basis of one-to-one chatting, the couple chose to talk secretly 'in public'. Such 'coded' intimate talk on QQ between lovers skilfully displayed love in public without disturbing others too much.

The self-exposure of personal relationships on social media is not always about positive emotions. Having arguments on social media, for example, is regarded as a fatal hit to a romantic relationship. Huang Ling, a 19-year-old factory worker, explained the problem:

> Each time, when we had some friction, he would update his QQ status immediately with things like 'please introduce girls to me, I need a girlfriend, blah blah . . . I really hated him for that!

Two weeks after their break-up, Huang Ling was still complaining about her ex's outrageous QQ usage, and every female friend of hers expressed the same resentment. As one of her close female friends remarked, 'How could he say so regardless of the place and the situation (*chang he*)?! He just wanted her to lose face'. Ling applied some 'media sanctions' to cope with the break-up's aftermath. First of all she locked her Qzone, which means nobody could view it except herself.

> I need some space you know. I don't want people to gossip about my break-up. Even though they do it out of kindness, I still find it so annoying.

Fig. 4.3 A photo of 'carved flesh' on Huang Ling's WeChat

Huang Ling's elder cousin even called her very late at night to ask her what had happened when he saw her 'unusual' QQ status update. She felt embarrassed to explain the reason to her friends and relatives, and therefore locked the only channel (Qzone) from which most of her friends got news about her. After four days Huang Ling reopened her Qzone, having already deleted all her previous QQ status updates. Meanwhile Huang Ling's updates on WeChat were very remarkable, even dramatic. During the four 'non-QQ' days she uploaded a large number of emotional remarks on WeChat. One day she even uploaded a photo of her arm, carved by herself with a steel ruler (Fig. 4.3). The two 'bloody' Chinese characters she carved on her skin were hate (*hen*) and love (*ai*). It seems that only carving her own skin would fully express her strong feelings about the frustrating break-up. She told me:

> Because some of my family members are on Qzone, I don't want to scare my relatives and other friends. Whereas the circle of friends on WeChat is much smaller; most of them are just colleagues at

> the factory, so it won't cause me too much trouble. And he [the ex-boyfriend] will see the photo either way as he is also my WeChat friend.

If we view Huang Ling's story together with the accounts of Xiao Yu's careless display of a kiss photo on Qzone and Lujia's less successful public display of love on QQ group, a more comprehensible picture emerges. First of all, we need to recognise that social media provides many possibilities; it enables people to practise romantic relationships online with much greater freedom than in offline situations. Social media has also become an essential arena in which romantic relationships take place in daily life. However, a more liberating place online does not equal fewer social norms. New norms about what is appropriate or inappropriate on social media dealing with romantic relationships emerged almost immediately. For instance, the release of private problems between couples on social media usually brought immense embarrassment, serving to trigger even worse consequences than in an offline situation. Sociologist Erving Goffman[12] used the word 'frame' to explain how people's behaviour is cued by elements that constitute the context of action. In the frame of social media, people were not only aware of the private/public nature of social media, but also intentionally played around with it to express the exclusiveness and intimacy of relationships – even though not everyone was successful at first.

Also, from the frequently applied and highly valued public displays of love on social media, we see how on social media the perceived public gaze is just as strong as in the offline situation. Online, young rural migrants may be free from the disapproval and judgement of senior relatives and fellow villagers, yet their peers' opinions or those of even strangers were highly valued, and can also cause concern. Regardless of what kind of social rules one follows, as long as there are 'others' the risk of 'losing face' always exists, and sometimes the uncertainty of who is watching online exacerbates the anxiety.

Another point that emerged from the varied use of social media in romantic relationships is that, in order to make sense of sociality on social media, a whole range of available communication tools must be taken into account. As suggested by the concept of 'polymedia',[13] it makes no sense to study only one particular media platform in isolation – the meaning and use of any one of them is relative to the others. As is clearly shown in Huang Ling's situation, her choice of WeChat only made sense in comparison with the role that QQ and mobile phones played in her social life. Furthermore, in a polymedia environment, once one has either the smartphone or a personal computer, the decision which

media to use is no longer much affected by either access or cost; instead it becomes a social and moral choices. For instance, in Lujia's case, his choice of using QQ group messaging to declare his love for his girlfriend had been regarded as very inappropriate. The approach of polymedia, as well as the arguments put forward about new social norms on social media, are not confined to the analysis of romantic relationships on social media. We will now see how they apply equally to the analysis of all kinds of relationships on social media.

Friendship on social media

A common belief about social media friends in GoodPath, especially among young people, was basically 'the more the better'. During a survey, when asked how many social media friends one had, many people answered proudly: 'Countless, at least hundreds of them!' Some would further add comments such as 'to make more friends is what social media is for', or 'to work outside is to see the world and make more friends'. In most cases, having a great number of social media friends is regarded as convincing evidence of one's personal charm and modern taste. Bing Bing, a 23-year-old waitress in a local restaurant, articulated the opinion shared by many rural young people: that having many friends is an essential part of the experience of being a modern citizen.

> If you remain in a small village you will never know the importance of friendship. But being outside, the world is different; people in cities all have many chances to meet new friends and they have many friends, and friends will have fun and sadness together, help each other . . . I mean real friends will be like that.

Having said that, in field work it was not difficult to notice that in offline situations, people still tried not to be introduced or referred to others as just 'friend' (*peng you*). In most cases, they used expressions such as 'my fellow villagers' (*lao xiang*) or 'my fellow workers' (*gong you*). Some 'extra' identity was always added to the person. 'Introducing someone as a "friend" does not provide any information about the background between the party and yourself',[14] and Chinese society traditionally sees non-kinship ties as less important and less formal. Another research piece on a comparison of networking between Chinese and American populations seems to reinforce the observation in GoodPath. It shows that in China on average 6.6 per cent of the people named were described

as friends, whereas in the US the figure is 67.8 per cent.[15] Nor are the Chinese alone in this. In many other societies the concept of 'friendship' as a form of social relationship only started to gain importance during the processes of industrialisation and modernisation, which allowed (or forced) people to meet and work with others outside of one's kin-ties and regional social networks that were confined to certain locations.[16] The experience of friendship seemed to have changed because of the use of social media. Evidence in this chapter shows that for migrant workers social media is not only the place where they explore and experience friendship, it is also the place where they start to value friendship in a different way.

The story of Feige, a 37-year-old forklift truck driver, presents a typical example to illustrate the argument. Feige once had three best friends, whom he called 'my good brothers' (*hao xiong di*). The four men used to work in the same section of a factory. The connection between people from the same hometown is always highly emphasised among rural migrants when it comes to social networks; it is practiced as a golden rule in the 'jungle survival' environment of factories. Fellow villagers are supposed to help each other and cover for each other, and thus form various groups in factories. In terms of recruiting new workers, section managers (*duan zhang*) – those at the bottom of the management hierarchy – have a say. In practice, section managers always try to recruit new workers from among their fellow villagers, so that their status in the factory will be reinforced. Bullying is common in factories, with victims always being those who have neither relatives nor fellow villagers at their workplace. For this reason Feige and the other three workers, who came from different provinces, 'naturally' became the victims. To cut a long story short, after enduring bullying for a couple of months, these four colleagues finally exploded and provoked a fist fight with the dominant group of over 20 workers. In the end, these four were badly injured and dismissed by the factory. 'Even though we lost the fight, we won the friendship', as Feige said.

It was in this context that Feige, for the first time, managed to establish some strong emotional attachment to his colleagues. The situation he experienced is common among factory migrant workers. For most people in a situation where nepotism dominates, it is very difficult to establish a stable friendship with colleagues who do not come from the same family clan or village, unless some dramatic event takes place in which friendship has a chance of being valued. Moreover, even if this happens, maintaining such friendship in the floating lives of rural migrants is usually very high maintenance.

Unfortunately, Feige's precious friendship did not end well. After being fired from the factory, the four men embarked on different journeys. In the beginning, though living in different places, they managed to keep contact with each other via QQ and phone calls, but as time went by such connections gradually diminished. Five years later one of the friends was killed following an explosion in the fireworks factory where he worked. The late friend's widow called the remaining three men frequently, asking for financial help, and this became the last straw that ended these friendships. 'Sometimes you really have no choice: life forces you to become more realistic and you lose your friends,' Feige said. From then on he has never managed to have such good friends as those three from his previous workplace. However, he does not regard himself as somebody who lacks friendship.

On Feige's QQ, there are more than 15 QQ groups, among which Feige actively participated in three. Members of those QQ groups are mostly factory workers with a similar rural background. Feige had never met those QQ friends in person, but they seemed to know much more about him than his colleagues who spent a lot of time with him every day did. '[Online] we are very open-minded, and you say whatever you want to say. I told my QQ friends a lot of things,' Feige explained. One reason that Feige has never worried that his QQ friends might release his secrets is that all the QQ groups he joined were anonymous. Nobody in the group knows anyone else's real name, offline address or other personal details. Usually people tell each other what they do, however, without giving any further details.

Feige is very popular among his friends on QQ. People found him funny and smart, and always asked for his opinions on social events and news, making him an opinion former in various groups. Gradually Feige's emotional attachment to his QQ groups grew to the extent that he could not bear being apart from them for even a short time:

> When I had to charge my mobile phone and went without it for a while, I felt restless and anxious, as if a very important part of me had been left behind . . . and when I finally went back, I couldn't wait to check my QQ.

The friendship online has been valued highly by Feige, and that is not rare among rural migrants. Particularly in the specific situation of 'floating' life, friends online seem to be the only ones who will never change places; in a way QQ itself has becomes a loyal friend, always there and never failing people. However, this does not explain the reason why

Feige failed to maintain his previous offline friendships online. In order to answer this question, we need to take a step back and consider the expectations of friendship. Here Feige's comment on his online friends seemed to provide a new perspective:

> They [online friends] like me and talk with me because they really like me, not because I am rich so that they can borrow money from me, or I am powerful so that they can get a job from me. Here everything is much purer, without power and money involved . . . The friendship is much purer (*geng chun*) on QQ.

Feige regarded the friendship between his QQ friends whom he had never met in offline situations as 'purer' (*geng chun*) than offline relationships, as there are no pragmatic concerns involved online. Furthermore, for migrant workers such as Feige, who are often frustrated by their social status, social media provides new possibilities of sociality free from social hierarchy and discrimination.

Curiously, people who enjoy a high socio-economic status seem to have the same problems with their offline friends. Ms Cheng, a local factory owner, avoided her school reunion event and the chance to meet her former school friends. The reason for that was that the last time she went to a school reunion she subsequently received at least six phone calls from her erstwhile classmates, all asking for financial and other forms of help. As she sadly observed:

> I feel nowadays society is very pragmatic. I am sometime very confused and frustrated. They said the relationship between previous classmates was the purest one because there is no benefit or interest involved. But in my case it was no longer true.

Ms Cheng was not alone. Many factory owners or local officials, the local rich and powerful people, have the same problem: people befriend them for pragmatic purposes. A retired local official commented how, following his retirement the previous year, he had suddenly found that 'many friends who used to be nice to you kind of disappeared . . . no phone call, no text message, let alone visiting you during festivals . . . because for them I am useless now'.

On WeChat Ms Cheng frequently visited a WeChat group where mothers share the experience of raising children. She could talk about her struggles in dealing with her two teenage children there. It emerged

that only on WeChat, with WeChat friends, did Ms Cheng feel free to release her stress and gain a great deal of support:

> At home everybody is busy with the factory stuff… but here [the WeChat group of mothers] I am a mother: just a mother, not a factory owner. I show my weakness and get a lot of support and comfort… I don't know exactly who they are, but I know they are all mothers and we share our problems with each other.

Chinese migrant workers and factory owners probably lie at the two extremes of the wealth spectrum in this industrial China field site, yet both appear willing to befriend and communicate with strangers online. In the study of social media, arguments as to whether real friendship is possible in a virtual environment, or whether social relationships will lose their authenticity in the face of social media, are constant.[17] This is mainly because of the assumption that one of the inevitable consequences of increased technological mediation in social relationships is the loss of authenticity. However, such arguments assume a foundational Western discourse, one entirely inappropriate to a situation in China that is experiencing the opposite trajectory. In this Chinese field site, friendships on social media that are mediated by digital technology were perceived to be more authentic than offline relationships – which in many cases are highly mediated (or 'polluted' as people say) by factors such as wealth and social status. Outside of such contested discourses, the premise of anthropology is that offline life has always been entirely mediated by all sorts of social norms; there is no such thing as an unmediated relationship, so there is no such opposition to authenticity.

These observations help to make more sense of the observation made at the beginning of this chapter through Chart 4.1. On rural migrants' QQ there are 43 per cent of 'other friends' and 17 per cent of 'online strangers', which altogether means that almost two-thirds of contacts have almost nothing to do with one's kinship, regional affiliation or school connections – the three kinds of relationship highly valued in Chinese society. And the general term for these contacts is 'friend': a kind of relationship that was less emphasised, or barely even existed in practice, in the hierarchy of sociality of the previous traditional society. The situation in GoodPath poses a sharp contrast to the huge debate in the West over the nature of friendship on platforms such as Facebook.[18] For the latter, the focus has been on whether friendship will lose its

authenticity on social media. For the former, however, 'friendship' itself as a modern concept barely existed in a traditional society, given the dominance of kinship and regional relations. Here it is on social media that people have the possibility of exploring and practising these new relationships fully. Viewed from the perspective of China, therefore, the approach of studying friendship on social media in the West seems to be parochial.

Friendship online has become an efficient supplement to one's social life, and such sociality facilitates the process of becoming modern among rural migrants. Reasons why rural migrants felt it was more difficult to make friends offline than on social media included the reduction in their time at school and the transient, floating nature of their lives, as well as the practical use of social networks (*guanxi*) to survive. The final aspect of online sociality to be discussed in this chapter, that of privacy, follows from this – in as much as once again the online and offline situation are very different, and that once again social media is perceived as offering an important experience in becoming modern for rural migrants.

Yin si (privacy) on social media

In the discussion of romantic relationships on social media above, it was found that Lujia's public display of love on QQ group did not go down very well. This was in part because his QQ friends felt that his behaviour violated their private space on QQ. Yet given the offline experience of living in GoodPath, such an emphasis on 'privacy' stands out as something unusual.

> Of course, you know people can see you, well it's their business, I am doing my own stuff, normal things, nothing wrong, and why should I care that much . . . If you care, which means you are doing something wrong, something under the table, so I don't care.

The daily life of Mr Ma, a 43-year-old shopkeeper, literally takes place on the street. His wife cooks three meals a day on a cylindrical briquette stove on the pedestrian walkway. The couple go to sleep on the bed inside their shop after they close the grocery in the evening. In the daytime everybody passes by their shop and can see exactly what they are doing. Most people in GoodPath would agree with Mr Ma's views, and it is quite common to believe that if people want to avoid the gaze of others there must be something weird going on.

Strictly speaking, there is no Chinese word for privacy. The Chinese word *yinsi* is widely used when it comes to the topic, but it actually means 'something secret which should be hidden from others', formed from the combination of two characters: *yin* (meaning hide) and *si* (meaning secret, with the connotations of 'illegal').[19] Linguistically *yinsi* in Chinese is not neutral but negative, according to the collective culture, which highly values the right of the collective.[20] Privacy refers to something much broader than secrecy, and the etymology of the English word 'privacy' is suggestive. The basic Latin form means 'being single' with the implied context 'being not the solitary human being, but rather the individual facing the potential claims of other persons'.[21] People keep something private for all kinds of reasons, but most of the time keeping private is an act of choosing boundaries and staying comfortably within them. In a collective society such as China, however, there are social pressures to consider 'nothing private and to label refusal to disclose private information as always being shameful and secretive'.[22] In GoodPath one can clearly feel such social pressure upon individuals, conscious that 'anything one tries to hide from family members must be something wrong'. The line between 'privacy' and 'secrecy' in people's real lives is also very thin. Within a big family there is no door (doors are always open) between rooms. Staying at home with your room door closed is regarded as something weird, and people walk into each other's places without knocking. The situation among rural migrant families is not dissimilar from that described in late imperial Chinese society, where 'privacy was not a legal right but a flexible privilege, the boundary of which varied according to one's social status in specific contexts'.[23]

It is difficult to generalise about China in terms of the issue of privacy. Current scholarship has been focused on the transformation of the notion of privacy in contemporary China, demonstrating emerging emphasis on individual rights to privacy and data privacy, as well as young people's increasing demands for Western-style individual privacy.[24] However, most studies only related to elites, middle-class and urban populations, thus appearing less relevant to a specific discussion of privacy among Chinese rural migrants. Here ethnographies of ordinary rural migrants and their experience of life would have more significance. Furthermore, even though research found that more recently in Chinese villages individuals' claims for private space had become evident in the major shift of household model from extended family to conjugal family (where couples can keep their independence and privacy from senior family members),[25] such a trend was not found

among rural migrant families. This was largely because, unlike in villages where spacious houses are possible, rural migrant families simply could not afford enough living space to make this a reality.[26] From this perspective, rural migrants are actually living in an even worse situation than those who remained in the villages. The latter may not necessarily have a strong awareness of privacy in terms of individual autonomy and liberty, but at least they may enjoy some private living space.

In this context, we can further examine the role played by social media and smartphones in rural migrants' private lives. As previously noted, following Huang Ling's break-up, she chose different social media platforms to avoid scrutiny from senior family members. The public/private nature of social media was not only recognised, but also applied and manipulated to address various issues in social relationships. However, not everybody was as good at handling the situation as well as Huang Ling did. Many learned from mistakes.

Hudong, for example, a salesman in his early thirties, came from a rural migrant family. For various reasons he did not have a close relationship with his uncle, who lives in a nearby town. However, as a close relative he was supposed to join the family dinner at his uncle's place. In order to avoid the event he told a white lie that he needed to work extra hours. Everything went well until Hudong's niece, who is a WeChat contact of his, accidentally showed photos at the family dinner of him having dinner with his friends. Unsurprisingly, Hudong's uncle was furious and a family crisis developed. The first thing Hudong did after the 'WeChat leak' was to block his niece on WeChat. He then sorted his WeChat contacts into several categories so that he could tailor each posting's visibility by privacy setting on WeChat.

Huang Ling and Hudong both made some effort at protecting their privacy on social media. By comparison, for many other young rural migrants: social media in and of itself means privacy. Such a view is held by CiCi, a 17-year-old hairdresser's apprentice:

> I am totally free on my QQ. People who can see my profile are my friends and would agree with what I do online: as for those pedantic idiots, they can't view my QQ . . . That's my privacy, isn't it?

The first time CiCi heard the word 'privacy' was in a television opera a few years ago. The word sounded very fashionable and modern to her. Now, on CiCi's QQ profile, visitors are greeted by this welcome page (Fig. 4.4). The whole page is pink – even the model's nails and texts are

Fig. 4.4 The welcome page of CiCi's QQ profile

this, CiCi's favorite colour. Besides the model's 'cute' face and 'cool and rebellious' hand gesture, the text reads:

> I am not a tender and sweet girl. I am careless and casual; I swear from time to time; I hate unnatural people; I hate those women who pretend to be 'knowing the world' in front of women and 'knowing nothing' in front of men . . . you can play with everything, but don't play with my feelings, whether friendship or love; you are just not good enough to play with my feelings.

In the collective dormitory where CiCi lives she has almost no private space. Four young women sleep together in two king-size beds, set in a basic room with no other furniture. Everyone's personal belongings can be seen at a glance. Yet for CiCi even that is heaven: when she worked in a factory, a single room held eight female workers. As she recalled:

> At night, everyone was talking with their boyfriends on phone, as noisy as the food market . . . there seemed to be no secrets at all because you could always hear and see each other.

In order to have some privacy CiCi started to text more on QQ, rather than speak on the phone to her then boyfriend. Like CiCi, the majority

of migrant workers in GoodPath have never owned a private space that is undisclosed to anyone else's view. In such a context social media actually offers a place where people carve out their own private space. On social media they can 'shut the door', as Huang Ling did after her break-up, or refuse unexpected visitors, as Hudong did on WeChat to avoid conflict between relatives. Or, like CiCi, they can enjoy the freedom of QQ where there are neither roommates who overhear and see everything, nor elder adults to make disapproving comments.

When looking into the specific issue of the privacy experience in China, among people who grew up in a collective society where keeping private space was usually stigmatised, it is safe to say that instead of being a threat to privacy, social media and smartphones actually facilitate an increase in experience of it. Having said that, the experience of privacy is very contextualised. Such an increase of privacy on social media is relative in comparison with a collective tradition: social media does increase privacy, but has not yet reached the levels of some Western countries.

The essence of privacy is not about whether there is a public gaze or not, but more about whether individuals feel they have control of personal issues and are comfortable in a given situation. The concepts of public and private are always relative. When people choose to record their thoughts and stories on social media they recognise that these will encounter the public gaze. However, given the relative absence of senior participants, this online public is perceived to be significantly different from the offline public. Gossip offline may easily lead to harmful consequences, whereas online chat – with like-minded peers as well as friendly strangers who are not connected to anyone significant and therefore do not pose a threat – gives people the opportunity to let their inhibitions down to talk openly without too much fear.[27] In addition, sharing secrets always makes for a strong 'we-feeling' among those in-groups who know the secret.[28] Thus one can often witness people voluntarily exposing private thoughts to people online.

Conclusion

This chapter started with a relatively abstract chart used to characterise the complex pattern of social life online. For rural migrants the relationship to their classmates and kin from their villages has become somewhat attenuated. By contrast they seem to show more interest in developing new relationships with people online, and even with strangers. By the end of this chapter, the chart is hopefully no longer as

abstract. A central concern of social life in China is the process of *zuoren,* which literally means 'becoming a person' or 'to make oneself a person'.[29] The implication of *zuoren* is that a Chinese individual is not born as a full person: only through the process of self-cultivation and socialisation can a person gradually become a moral individual. However, the key to understanding this term is to appreciate that in China this process of becoming a 'full' person is highly socialised rather than just an individual pursuit.[30] The relationships between kin, romantic partner, friends, classmates and colleagues all contribute to the very process of 'becoming a person'. Z*uoren* has never been an individualising concept in Chinese people's lives. On the contrary *zuoren,* as a colloquial term, is frequently used in relation to social life. In GoodPath one can always hear somebody praising a person as someone who 'knows how to *zuoren*' (*hui zuoren*), indicating that this person is good at dealing with social relationships. Accordingly a major criticism applied to someone who is awkward in social life or has difficulties in following social norms is the phrase 'doesn't know how to *zuoren*' – literally meaning someone who has not learned how to become a person. From this perspective, the discussions in this chapter represent an effort to understand the role that social media plays in the process of Chinese individuals becoming full human beings. On social media people collectively negotiate what personal relationships are and what they want them to be.

Through looking in detail at individual stories we can understand not only why the pattern shown on chart 4.1 makes sense for particular people, but also that it is hugely important. Personal relationships are often the main factor that determines people's sense of happiness, confidence and ability to get by in the modern world. In addition to telling us about a medium, communication on social media is one of the best places to see the desires and concerns of modern China, and the preoccupation with particular moments in its history. In contrast to the traditional descriptions of Chinese kinship and sociality, we can see that the radical effect of social media is best understood not simply as cause but rather as an alignment with other radical changes experienced in the lives of these rural migrants to a factory town. These include the emergence of an unprecedented concept of friendship and the creation of a relatively autonomous place not only for privacy but also for the public declaration of intimacy – as well as markedly different relationships to kinship and to place.

This was perhaps a particularly good time to be studying the relationship between social media use and sociality in modern China. The population of this field site are not only Chinese rural migrants

who have travelled from rural to urban areas; they are also 'digital immigrants'[31] – a unique generation who grew up in the analogue era, but joined the technological revolution from analogue to digital. So in order to understand the transformations taking place on social media, we have first to recognise the radical difference represented by historical rural China, as well as the extreme situation of being rural migrants. The 'hot and noisy' principle discussed at the beginning of this chapter and the 'discovery' of privacy on social media highlighted at the end appear to bookmark the two ends of the social life explored and experienced on social media by rural migrants. Here the continuity of rural social life met and mixed with the new practice of modern life.

The full spectrum of sociality on social media, in return, helps us to understand further what social media is. Prior to social media, the main ways in which people communicate are either through broadcasting or one-to-one conversation. On social media, however, the two ends meet in situations that we have called 'scalable sociality'.[32] Here there are two scales, one from the most private to the most public, and the other from the smallest to the largest group. For example, as we have seen, Hudong's change of his WeChat privacy setting was to scale down his WeChat posting from full public broadcasting to more limited broadcasting; Lujia's public display of love, in contrast, led him to scale up his private and small group message to a more public statement conveyed to a larger size of group. Meanwhile Yan Hong's strategy of using WeChat voice messaging is intended to 'transplant' information from one private group to another; her slight adjustment of the group size from two persons (the couple) to three persons (the couple and her mother-in-law) made a significant change to her relationship with her mother-in-law. Similarly, by locking the QQ album, Lan's couple created a most private and exclusive space in the middle of public broadcasting on QQ. All these case studies show how social media as scalable sociality allows people to gain much better control of their social life.