5
Moral accumulation: Collecting credits on social media

> To be honest, I don't know much about social media. I only go on Qzone to check whether my friends have posted anything . . . and to steal vegetables.
>
> —Chen Hao, 19 years old male, kitchen assistant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gamification is not an explanation

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

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

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

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

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

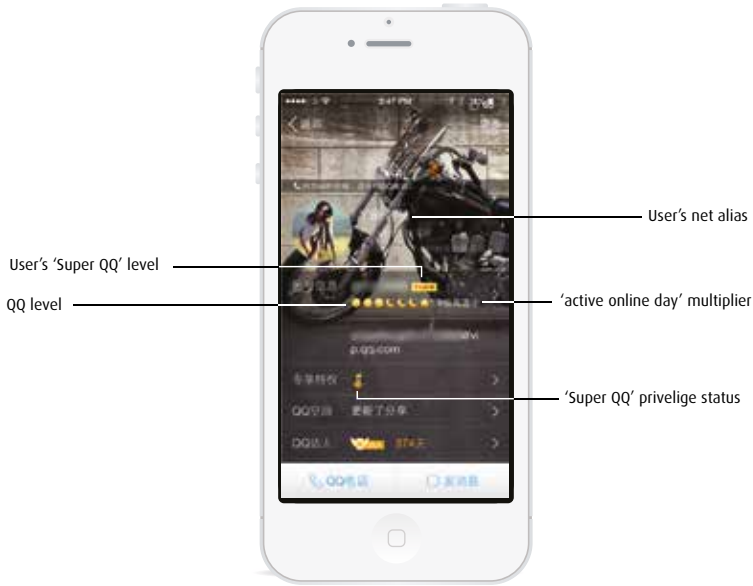

Fig. 5.2 User's QQ level and 'Super QQ' privilege status displayed on their profile page

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

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

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

'Online time': putting in the hours

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

Table 5.1 'Active online days' through online time accrual rate

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

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

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

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

Trading levels for invisibility

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

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

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

Paying for privilege

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

Table 5.2 QQ membership yearly accrual status

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

Table 5.3 Super QQ membership yearly accrual status

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 5.4 QQ IM's graphical representation of levels

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

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

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

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

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

Levels on other social media platforms

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

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

User agency: the manipulation of accumulation

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

Table 5.5 Graphical representation of Qzone level system

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

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

Staying logged in

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

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

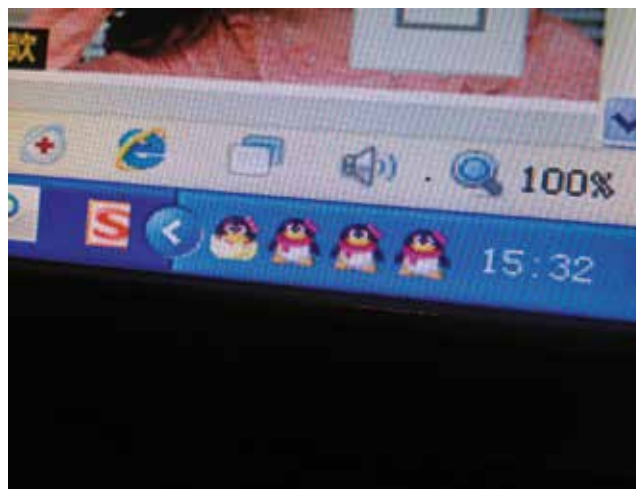

Fig. 5.3 The toolbar of a Windows PC in a business in Anshan Town. The four penguins denote four separate social media accounts that are logged in at the same time

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

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

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

(*Continued*)

Table 5.6 (Contd.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

> **Wang:** I only go on [Qzone] in order to try and get promoted a level.
> **Tom:** Where do you do that?
> **Wang:** School. In the computer class. Just once a week, and I don't get promoted quickly. I'm not even sure what level I am on now.

Getting the help of friends

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

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

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

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

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

Multiple accounts

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

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

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

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

Paid membership

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

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

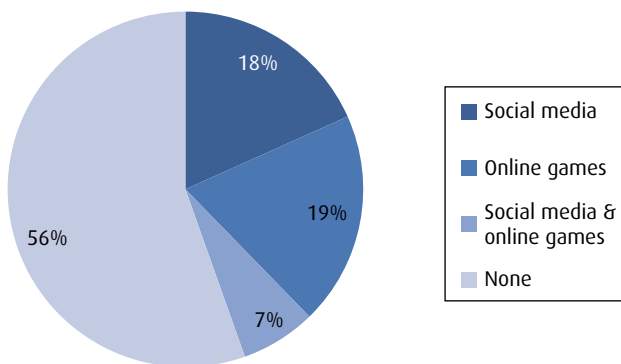

Fig. 5.4 Areas of online spending by social media users

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

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

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

Accounting for accumulation: level accumulation and morality

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

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

'Growing up' and level accumulation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Understanding accumulation: the hard work of gambling

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

and under set situations with clear rules and equipment, such as mah-jong or similar games.[40]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion: entrepreneurship, social media and social transformation

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

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

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

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

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