Social Media in Industrial China

Wang, Xinyuan

Published by University College London

Wang, Xinyuan.
Social Media in Industrial China.
University College London, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/81844.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81844
2

The social media landscape in China

On 20 September 1987 the first ever email in China read: ‘Across the Great Wall we can reach every corner in the world.’

Compared to the brick-and-mortar Great Wall, the Chinese internet ‘Great Firewall’ (fan-ghuo qiang) is actually the more difficult for people to climb. To this day China has completely blocked the world’s four most visited websites: Google, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Yet it is by no means a desert in the social media landscape. As well as possessing the world’s biggest internet user base (649 million), China also has the world’s most active environment for social media. Of the online population of China 91 per cent has a social media account, compared to 67 per cent of people in the US. In practice, most Chinese netizens do not really notice the absence of global internet applications because they have accustomed themselves to indigenous websites; there is no particular sense of an absent ‘outside’. Far from being a desert, therefore, mainland China is a thriving rainforest which grows its own diverse and unique social media ‘species’. The discussion of Chinese social media in this chapter begins with a brief introduction to Chinese internet development. It then moves on to consider the main features of Chinese social media platforms, followed by a discussion of smartphones as the main digital device from which people gain access to social media.

A brief history of Chinese ICTs’ development

In 1978 China embarked upon a massive economic reform. The country’s leadership realised that modern China had to seize the opportunities of the ‘revolution in information technology’ taking place in the rest of the world. Modernisation of technology was included in the national development goal of ‘Four Modernisations’ (sige xiandaihua) in
1978. In fact ‘sponsor’ is more like the role played by the Chinese government in the development of ICTs. Using its administrative power and allocating national resources, the state made a remarkable effort to develop China into a technological superpower. Chinese policy makers have been using the internet to achieve a ‘digital leapfrog’ of economic development.

The explosive growth of digital development has contributed significantly to the modernisation of China, which in turn has legitimised the regime of the Chinese Communist Party. In 2003 China became the world’s largest telephone market, and in 2008 the number of Chinese internet users became the largest in the world. China had also overtaken

---

the US by that date as the world’s biggest supplier of information technology goods.\textsuperscript{11} Probably because of the huge concern and interest in the single issue of Chinese internet censorship, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the crucial role played by the central government – and also by local bureaucrats – in achieving this extraordinarily rapid shift to an efficient and widespread information technology sector.\textsuperscript{12}

The timeline (Fig. 2.1) shows the development of the principal Chinese internet applications in comparison with their global counterparts. As can be seen, QQ started five years earlier than Facebook. Yet viewing QQ in the context of a comparative global social media study risks reducing QQ to being purely ‘social media’. The first very important reminder, therefore, is that QQ is not a Chinese version of Facebook. It is also quite common to see the social media site ‘Renren’ described by Western media as the Chinese version of Facebook. This is misleading, however, because in terms of popularity Renren’s market share is not comparable. The chart (Chart 2.1) shows the monthly active users (MAU) of different social media platforms inside and outside China. Even though Chinese social media platforms share a limited international market, QQ has 843 million MAU – more than half of Facebook’s global users. Having explored the policy and company background, the following section will consider in more detail the three most popular Chinese social media platforms among people in GoodPath.

\begin{center}
\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart2_1.png}
\caption{Number (in millions) of active monthly users of main social media platforms}
\end{figure}
\end{center}
QQ: The dominant social media platform in GoodPath

In 1999 the Chinese central government launched a ‘Government online project’ (*zhengfu shangwang gongcheng*) which urged all levels of administration to set up their portal websites.\(^{14}\) In response to the project, the local government of GoodPath purchased a computer. However, the problem was that neither local officials nor residents found any use for it, even though many villagers felt the purchase boosted morale, as one of them recalled:

> Officials claimed that the computer marked the moment that our town had entered the high-technology age. Well, to be honest, you just heard so, but didn’t really think about what that meant exactly. At least, it sounded exciting… it was like our folk saying: ‘Even though you have never tasted pork, at least you have seen a pig running’ (*mei chiguo zhurou, zongsuan jianguo zhu pao*).

GoodPath’s ‘high-tech pig’ lay gathering dust for almost eight years until one day people found it was too old to run. For most people in this small town, the gap between the ‘national policy’ and ‘daily life’ remained unchanged until a penguin wearing a scarf walked into their life. The penguin (Fig. 2.2) is the mascot of Chinese ICT giant *Tencent*. In 1998 HuaTeng Ma, a young software developer, set up a software company called Tencent, and his first product was ‘QQ’,\(^{15}\) a free instant message (IM) service. Nowadays, in terms of numbers of users,
QQ is unquestionably the biggest social media platform in China. Besides IM, Qzone (QQ kongjian) is another important part of QQ’s digital service. Strictly speaking Qzone, the personal social networking platform on which users update statuses, write blogs and upload and share articles, photographs, music and videos with online contacts, is the social media platform usually compared with Facebook. For non-QQ users, QQ is truly different from other social media platforms in many ways. Five concepts will be used to consider the striking features of QQ: 1) high degree of anonymity; 2) high media convergence; 3) high customisation; 4) rich visuals; and 5) hierarchical structure.

A QQ account is actually a string of figures generated by the system, usually called a ‘QQ number’ (QQ hao). Users can choose any nickname they like for their ‘QQ name’ (QQ ming). Real names are very rarely used for QQ names, and usually do not even look like a traditional ‘name’. In many cases people use a sentence such as ‘I am crying with a smile’ or ‘soaring in the blue sky’ as their QQ names. Exchanging one’s QQ details always refers to exchanging the ‘QQ number’ rather than ‘QQ name’, as the QQ number will always remain the same. Young people frequently change their QQ names; during my research I had to make a note and ‘rename’ all my QQ contacts on my list so that I could recognise the users. In GoodPath 98 per cent of QQ users did not use their real names as QQ names; 64 per cent did not use real photographs as QQ avatars (profile pictures). The anonymity of profiles was slightly lower, but still very high among QQ users in Shanghai, where 95 per cent of QQ users do not use real names, and 50 per cent did not use a real photograph for their QQ avatar.

The main feature of the QQ ‘menu bar’ is a contacts list, with other add-on functions. In contrast to Facebook, which does not highlight ‘contacts curation’, QQ strongly guides users to sort out their contacts into different categories. The default categories of QQ contacts are ‘Friends’, ‘Family’, ‘Classmate’, ‘Work colleague’, ‘Strangers’ and ‘Black list’; users can always rename the categories.

As one can see on the menu bar (Fig 2.3), QQ offers multiple digital services. These include group chat (QQ group), video call, social media (Qzone), microblog (Tencent Weibo), email, online game, online music, and online shopping (QQ shop). Offering a whole package of digital solutions, QQ is the starting point for many people in China of their digital life: QQ email is the first email, Qzone is the first social media platform, QQ music is the first online music programme and QQ games are the first online games. Nowadays the ‘convergence culture’, in which previously separate multiple media technologies have gradually merged
into one, has become the mainstream in the West. However, few have acknowledged that the trajectory of digital development in China actually started with a high-level media convergence.

The high customisation of QQ is well illustrated by the hundreds of personal webpage models, background pictures and music, and decorative elements offered on Qzone (Fig. 2.4), as well as thousands of online clothes and accessories enabling users to dress their online avatars up as they desire (Fig. 2.5). Among hundreds of Qzones I have visited during my research, none have ever been identical.

Customisation of digital space is actually commonplace throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and such a feature contributes to a far more humanised relationship between users and online spaces. One illuminating example on QQ is the ‘check-in’ (qian dao) service. Unlike on Facebook, where a check-in service allows users to mark the physical locations they are currently in online, the check-in service on QQ actually refers to checking into the online space of QQ, no matter where the

Fig. 2.3  The main body of the QQ menu bar
Fig. 2.4 The decorative elements on Qzone

Fig. 2.5 Dressing up avatars on Qzone

users may be in the offline world. QQ offers different check-in stamps for users. For example, Fig. 2.6 shows the daily horoscope and Fig. 2.7 shows the ‘everyday wish’ stamps, offering helpful guidance: ‘no procrastination’, ‘quit smoking’, ‘go to bed earlier’, ‘do exercise’, ‘do not waste food’. Xue, a 25-year-old factory officer, tried to use QQ check-in to quit smoking, acknowledging ‘To some extent I think it [QQ check-in] helped … it’s always more effective when you know that you’re being watched’. For weeks Xue checked in on QQ every day, and his QQ friends would see a ‘quit smoking’ stamp from Xue’s news feed, which meant that he did not smoke on that day.

The feature of ‘high customisation’ and ‘strong visuals’ are highly consequential. Chinese website design has been known for its richer colours and more complicated, cluttered layouts compared to Western websites, which value simplicity far more. On QQ the situation is the same. As one of the most popular good wishes at Chinese New Year, nian-nian youyu (to have ample surplus by the end of every year) suggests,
to have ‘more than enough’ is traditionally considered the lucky sign of prosperity. The principle of ‘the more, the merrier’, frequently found on Chinese dining tables, also contributes to the ‘visual feast’ available on QQ. Unlike the blue and white uniform of Facebook, the Qzone interface appears much more colourful and visually rich.

Finally the QQ level system is another unique function of QQ, reflecting its ‘hierarchical structure’ feature. Launched in 2004, the QQ level system is based on customers’ usage time – the longer the user is
signed-in on QQ, the higher the QQ level that can be obtained. Different QQ levels offer users different functions and services: the higher the level, the more online privileges users enjoy, such as the ability to set up a QQ group and access more decorative elements.

At that time [around 2001], everybody in my middle school was crazy about the QQ level, people with a higher QQ level were even more likely to have a say...I also used all the means to gain a higher level...even today I have no clue of what kind of privileges I've got or whether I've really used any of them, but at that time you just felt good about being upgraded to a higher level...maybe it’s just about mianzi (face).

Huo, now a 26-year-old factory worker, sensed that the varied QQ levels, like all other systems of hierarchy, divide people into different classes; he thus felt the urge to gain a higher level on QQ to gain some face (mianzi), even though he hardly saw any instrumental value in a higher level. Huo even asked his older sister, who worked at a local internet cafe, to sign in on his QQ during the daytime when he had no access to the internet. Ten years ago Huo was just one of millions of Chinese QQ users working hard to climb the social ladder on QQ. The practice of signing in on QQ for as long as possible, purely for the purpose of upgrading to a higher level (guaji) became so popular among the population that the Chinese National Grid had to warn of the nationwide waste of electricity caused by QQ. In 2005 Tencent had to change the QQ upgrading algorithm to address such criticism. The new algorithm counts days of active usage, rather than hours, and two hours per day is counted as an active day of usage.

Besides the basic QQ level system calculated by time, users can also purchase different kinds of privileges or QQ VIP membership. Juan, a 20-year-old rural migrant who worked at a local foot massage shop, bought herself a VIP QQ membership, which cost her around 250 RMB (US $40) for a year. As such, Juan's QQ name was shown in red with a golden VIP label, and was always listed at the top of my QQ contacts list. When asked why she wanted to spend almost one-tenth of her monthly salary for a VIP membership on QQ, Juan shrugged her shoulders: 'I don't know...I just feel good being a VIP.' At the foot massage shop where she worked, the VIP guests were usually rich factory owners – the da laoban (big bosses) as Juan addressed them. According to her, they were treated as kings. For Juan, the VIP title on QQ is the only affordable VIP status in her life, and it truly made her feel better about herself.
At the first glance, the whole QQ level system seems simply to reflect the deep-rooted hierarchical social structure in Chinese social life; people seem intrinsically to accept the rules of the game. In practice, however, the hierarchy on QQ is fundamentally different from the social hierarchy in China. In offline life it is very difficult or almost impossible to overcome various existing inequalities and to reduce class differences, as the rural–urban divide, based on hukou household registration (see Chapter 1) clearly demonstrates. Deep frustration about reality was common among rural migrant workers, especially young people. The older generation of migrant workers appeared to have accepted reality after years of ‘floating’ life; they were primarily concerned with how to make the best of the existing situation. The new generation was more likely to challenge and refuse to accept such inequalities, constantly struggling with the gap between dream and reality. Such frustration, however, does not exist on QQ, since the rules are much simpler and more straightforward: as long as one spends either money or time, success and upgrading is almost guaranteed.

QQ – once the symbol of urban lifestyle

I begged my brother to get a QQ for me. I thought it would be extremely difficult for our rural people to get one…you have to get your application stamped in government offices or things like that…anyway, now you may think it’s silly…I felt so happy and so proud of having a QQ, even though I didn’t have internet at home and I didn’t know what to do with it at that time. You know, only a few people in our village have ever heard of QQ, let alone used it.

Da Guo, a 22-year-old factory worker, had his first QQ nine years ago. At that time, he was still a schoolboy, living in a poor village in inland China and knowing nothing about the internet. His older brother had already worked away in cities for two years. During Chinese New Year when his brother came back for the family reunion, Da Guo heard for the first time about the magical QQ that urbanites used. As Da Guo remarked, once upon a time QQ was regarded as the symbol of modern life, especially among people in rural areas.26

In the early stage of internet development in China, the eastern area had much higher rates of internet penetration than the less developed western and inland regions.27 China’s commercial internet came into existence in 1995 in urban areas such as Beijing and Shanghai,28
and was mainly used by urban elites.\textsuperscript{29} Even though the ‘digital divide’
between urban and rural has been reduced following two decades of
major investment in internet and information service infrastructures in
rural China, by the end of 2014 only 27.5 per cent of 649 million netizens
in China belonged to the rural population.\textsuperscript{30} Due to the digital divide and
other gaps in material life, as well as the \textit{hukou} status assigned at birth,
urban lifestyles have long been considered superior,\textsuperscript{31} and admired by
the rural population.\textsuperscript{32} In such a context QQ, perceived as a digital privi-
lege enjoyed by the urbanites, immediately gained a lofty status among
the rural population when it first appeared in their lives. Clearly among
rural young people such as Da Guo, the symbolic meaning of QQ out-
weighed their actual use of it. To get a sense of how many people had
a QQ before they had private access to the internet, a survey was con-
ducted in September 2014 among 200 people in GoodPath and 48 peo-
ple in Shanghai (Chart 2.2).

In Chart 2.2, both in Shanghai and GoodPath, the use of QQ started
before the ownership of personal digital devices (PC or mobile phone). In GoodPath 63 per cent of people had QQ before the ownership of a
mobile phone. QQ had been used for 5.8 years on average, with 11 years
as the longest and 4 years as the shortest. It is also clear that the popu-

ularity of QQ first started among China’s urban population and spread
from urban to rural (the average years of use of QQ is 7.2 in Shanghai
and 5.8 years in GoodPath). The digital gap between urban population
and rural population in terms of ownership of digital devices seems to
still exist, but when it comes to smartphones the gap has become less
obvious.

\textbf{Chart 2.2} Use of QQ and ownership of digital devices in GoodPath
town and Shanghai

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GoodPath (small town)</th>
<th>Shanghai (city)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a QQ before having a private mobile phone</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership of Smartphone / functional mobile phone</td>
<td>89% / 100%</td>
<td>98% / 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using QQ before having a personal computer</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership of PC</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average years of use of QQ</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Despite all the disparities and differences in terms of QQ usage between rural migrants and residents of Shanghai, there is one common feature: after more than a decade of popularity among Chinese people, and despite remaining the biggest social media platform, QQ has lost its ‘coolness’ and its association with urban life or ‘modernity’. The contrary now applies with some people even using terms such as ‘old friend’ or ‘hometown’ (lao jia) to describe QQ in a nostalgic tone. As Xu Hong, a 30-year-old factory officer, said, she would not give QQ as her contact details any more since on her Qzone one may discover ‘an immature girl of ten years ago’. However, she did not want to delete any of the postings on her Qzone as it was always good to go back and visit her much younger self on QQ. For Xu Hong, her QQ has become her digital legacy.33 Among young rural migrants who are active QQ users, the use of QQ per se has become a routine of daily life. This is precisely the reason why they spend a lot of energy on designing and beautifying their Qzones to make them more stylish and unique (gexing), as being unique is still considered to be modern. Meanwhile for urban young people QQ has become a land of ‘hustle and bustle’, which has somehow become associated with rural youth culture.

Compared to QQ, which is no longer associated with urban fashion, WeChat, a smartphone-based messaging app launched in 2011, has become the major new social media platform used by urban residents. In 2015 the penetration rate of WeChat (the percentage of people who use WeChat at least once a week) in Chinese ‘first tier’ cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) had reached 93 per cent,34 while in small counties and fourth or fifth tier cities the figure was 26 per cent.35 The survey conducted during field work36 in Shanghai also illustrates the absolute dominance of WeChat: 86 per cent of people in Shanghai reported that their use of QQ had become less active since the use of WeChat. Meanwhile 95 per cent have now switched to WeChat as the main communication tool in personal relationships. Consequently when it came to the question: ‘How would you react if somebody wanted to add you on QQ?’ a typical answer is that of Yi, a 30-year-old white-collar worker in a Shanghai international company: ‘If somebody asks for my QQ, I would be like . . . Are you kidding me? Can you be any more rustic (tu)?! . . . Sorry, I don’t think we are on the same planet.’ Yi’s opinion of QQ was actually representative of the majority of interviewees of Shanghai. Of these interviewees 61 per cent, like Yi, admitted that in their eyes QQ was out of fashion (guoshi) or rustic (tu), and exchanging QQ numbers in social life37 would appear awkward.
GoodPath also witnessed the fast growth in popularity of WeChat among rural migrant workers (Chart 2.3). At the beginning of the research a survey\textsuperscript{38} shows that 19 per cent of people in GoodPath town had WeChat on their smartphones, whereas 96 per cent of them used QQ. Among these only 11 per cent regarded themselves as active WeChat users,\textsuperscript{39} whereas 85 per cent of them use QQ as their main personal social media. About a year later a similar survey\textsuperscript{40} shows that 65 per cent of people had installed WeChat on their smartphones and the rate of WeChat active users had soared to 45 per cent, whereas the rate of QQ’s active users had slightly reduced to around 80 per cent.

The figures above come from relatively small samples. Yet they do serve to showcase the different cultural capital ascribed to the use of QQ and WeChat, which has been confirmed by the long-term ethnography. To analyse the difference between QQ and WeChat further, we need to have a closer look at WeChat first.

**Chart 2.3** Change in QQ and WeChat use from June 2013 to August 2014 in GoodPath

---

**WeChat — China’s favourite new social media**

Launched in 2011 by the same company that owns QQ, known in China as *WeiXin* (literally ‘micro letter’), the growth of WeChat is impressive: by November 2015, the total of monthly active users of WeChat was 650 million, already 72 per cent of WhatsApp’s global achievement.\textsuperscript{41} In 2014, a survey by Global Web Index\textsuperscript{42} shows that WeChat is the most popular messaging app in the Asia-Pacific region. In terms of basic functions (Fig. 2.8), WeChat provides text messaging, voice messaging and video calls, as well as multimedia sharing (links, photographs and videos). WeChat ‘moment’ (*pengyou quan*) is the personal profile, and the WeChat subscriptions/public account (*gonggong zhanghao*) is where users can subscribe information from more than 10 million accounts\textsuperscript{43}
on the platform – ranging from media outlets and various institutions to personal blogs and more. Information on WeChat is storable and searchable. Users can save postings to their built-in WeChat files, or search for postings and conversation logs by key word on WeChat. In 2015 a WeChat user on average read 5.86 articles per day, 20 per cent of WeChat users read articles from subscription accounts, while 80 per cent of users read on WeChat personal accounts. Given that in 2015 Chinese people only read on average 4.56 books per year, far less than in neighbouring east Asian countries, one can conclude that WeChat has also become also a ‘reading app’.

To summarise, there are seven features of WeChat. Some of them are actually very different from QQ, which in a way also explains why WeChat and QQ are favoured by different groups of people: 1) smartphone-based; 2) visually oriented; 3) strong voice message function; 4) low degree of anonymity; 5) high degree of privacy; 6) closed community; and 7) high monetisation.

Being launched at the time of the fast growth of the smartphone market in China – in contrast to QQ which started as a web-based messaging service and then was adapted for mobile – WeChat leapfrogged the PC era to the smartphone direct. WeChat is designed to suit the ‘smartphone lifestyle’ and has become an aggregator of mobile services. Compared to the ‘visual feast’ on QQ, where users are allowed to design and decorate the whole page of their personal profiles, the room for customisation on WeChat is limited. The layout of WeChat profiles is fixed, and one can only change the avatar and cover photograph, which is similar to Facebook. However, WeChat gives priority to the visual in a different way. Posting on WeChat is designed to be visual-orientated. For each
posting one has to upload at least one image first, before the text input area appears. As a result it is effectively impossible to post anything on WeChat without an image. On WeChat the word ‘album’ (xiangce) is used to refer to a user’s personal profile, which also highlights the importance of the visual. In this perspective WeChat works a bit like Instagram, where images are regarded as the main body of the post. Even though later on WeChat added the ‘pure text’ function – meaning that if users select ‘long press’ then select ‘add a new post’, a pure text posting is possible – this was known by less than five per cent of people in both Shanghai and GoodPath field sites during research. WeChat did not officially prompt the pure text function. Studies have proven that visual clues are much more effective in directing attention to core information, enhancing comprehension of information and strengthening memorability.47

Visually orientated and mobile-based entry on WeChat also encourages users to take more photographs with their smartphones to capture ‘on the go’ occasions. These visuals are not only shared with others immediately, but also stored on WeChat for users’ future recall. Such patterns of communication seem to boost more positive interpersonal communication, as well as offering the possibility of enhanced emotional well-being.48 It is known that a timely response to good or nice things in daily life serves to maximise their positive effects on our lives.49 In addition ‘savouring’, namely a mindful engaging in thoughts or behaviour that highlights positive emotions, heightens and enhances the positive experience of daily life.50 Having said this, the study in GoodPath and Shanghai shows that different social groups actually made very different use of, and had very different attitudes towards, the visuals on WeChat. This will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

Besides visual orientation, voice messaging, another major function of WeChat, also enhances the platform’s media richness.51 Statistics in 2014 show that 84.5 per cent of WeChat users employ WeChat for voice messaging,52 and in 2015 the average daily amount of WeChat voice messaging was 280 million minutes – equivalent to 540 years of phone calls.53 In GoodPath 60 per cent of WeChat users send or receive voice messages almost daily. In Shanghai voice message is also becoming popular among the elderly, as noted by Sang, a 66-year-old retired company official. ‘[Leaving a] voice message is as simple as making a phone call. I never use instant messages because first I don’t know Pinyin,54 second I can’t see such small words on a small screen.’

Voice messaging has enabled an older generation of Chinese, in their fifties and above, to enjoy much easier communication; text entry
has always been a big barrier for users over 50 who are not good at Pinyin.55 Having said this, WeChat users are in the main still very young, with those aged between 18 and 35 accounting for 86.2 per cent of the total.56 Besides ‘being convenient’, some other nuanced implications of voice messaging have also been acknowledged, as noted here by Guli, a 21-year-old factory worker:

I only feel comfortable about talking with my boyfriend in whatever situation; with others you will be worried about whether your voice is right or not or sending voice message is proper or not.

To Guli, voice messages are more personal and private than sending a text message. She was once annoyed by a male colleague who recorded his own singing and sent it to her as a voice message:

…It’s so disturbing; if it’s just text I can easily ignore it… but why did you send me voice? Why don’t some people understand the simple fact that they can’t sing? …Anyway I just think you shouldn’t send voice messages at all to people who are not that close to you.

Compared to text, voice messaging – carrying the unique biophysical feature of a person – is commonly regarded as an intimate mode in personal communication. Like Guli, many saw voice messaging as primarily suitable for intimate and private contacts. Only 28 per cent of rural migrants in GoodPath town reported that they had ever sent voice messages to their managers, and this reduced to only nine per cent in Shanghai57 who had ever used voice messages in supervisor–subordinate relationships.

In answer to the question ‘Have you ever listened to your own voice messages after sending them off?’,58 47 per cent of female and 22 per cent of male respondents in GoodPath said yes, whereas in Shanghai the figures were 70 per cent and 59 per cent respectively. The main reasons included: 1) ‘I want to check whether my voice message has been recorded completely’; 2) ‘I am curious about my own voice’; 3) ‘I want to check whether my tone is proper or whether I express myself properly’. In China few people have had the prior experience of leaving and receiving voice messages on telephone answering machines. Compared to Europe or America, therefore, voice messages are viewed as a much more radical innovation.

Jack, a successful businessman in Shanghai, uses WeChat to train his speaking skills.
The way you talk matters. I listen to the voice messages I have sent off to my business partners all the time. It’s like a voice ‘mirror’ so that you know what you sound like and how you can do better...

In the book *Webcam*, the authors noticed that one of its important features of the webcam is that it effectively acts as a mirror, allowing many people their first ever opportunity to see themselves in conversation. It is interesting to note that a similar novel state of communication is taking place in the case of voice messaging among Chinese users: people can actually listen to themselves in daily communication for the first time. Even though people started to use voice messages for speed and convenience, they ended up with a new awareness of their voice as something that one can creatively craft.

The three features of WeChat we have observed so far are: 1) smartphone-based; 2) visually oriented; and 3) strong voice message, all relating to the pattern of interpersonal communication. The fourth feature of WeChat, ‘low anonymity’, serves as the starting point of our inquiry into the nature of interpersonal communication on WeChat. Compared to QQ, real names are used more frequently on WeChat. For WeChat public accounts, registration with real names is required; even on WeChat personal accounts, real names are more often used than on QQ:

The majority of my WeChat contacts are either my family or friends who knew my real name in the first place anyway, or some business partners or clients where you need to use real names to talk with them. A non-real name is not professional.

This remark by Zhao, a 32-year-old businessman in Shanghai, serves also to reflect another feature of the WeChat network: its relatively closed community. There are a few ways to add new contacts on WeChat (Fig. 2.9), the most common being scanning a QR Code, using mobile contacts, QQ numbers or WeChat IDs. Scanning a QR code in most cases requires a face to face situation, which means contacts added by QR code are usually those one has met. Either mobile phone number, QQ number or WeChat ID all suggest a very targeted contact search; it is extremely difficult for users to add random strangers by those methods.

WeChat users can nonetheless still add strangers by functions such as ‘people nearby’ (*fujin de ren*), which facilitates users to search for...
strangers, listed by gender, who have allowed themselves to be located and are within one’s vicinity (Fig. 2.9). Another option is ‘shake’ (yao yi yao), which allows user to shake their device to find any random people who are shaking their smartphone at the same time all around the world (Fig. 2.10), or ‘message in a bottle’ (piao liu ping). In this function, as its name suggests, you can pick up digital messages in the form of a text or short voice clip from random people, as well as toss digital messages into a ‘sea’ and allow others to pick them up (Fig. 2.11). Even though there is no exact demographic data of people who use WeChat to connect with strangers, in field work it has become certain that young adults (18–29) and older adults (30+) remain in general less likely than teens to use those WeChat functions to connect with strangers. They may have tried once or twice and then stopped using them, whereas teens both in Shanghai and GoodPath were more attracted to those game-like functions. The exception is that male adults, from age 18–50, seemed to be as keen on ‘people nearby’ and ‘shake’ as teens, in order to pursue potential romance and/or sex.

Generally speaking, across China WeChat is mainly used by urban adults with a relatively stable social network, stable income and...
Fig. 2.10  The ‘shake’ function of WeChat

Fig. 2.11  The ‘message in a bottle’ function of WeChat
relatively high education. For those people, WeChat represents a closed community that mainly consists of offline network (family, friends and colleagues at work), with little room for online strangers. Also, since the urban user’s online identity overlaps strongly with their offline identity, real names are widely accepted and applied. However, the situation is very different for rural migrants, who constantly feel frustration in their ‘floating’ offline life. They therefore have a stronger desire for higher anonymity online, in order to lose or deny their unsatisfactory social identity offline. A survey in the study shows that 71 per cent of WeChat users in Shanghai applied real names or easily recognisable nick names or initial letters for their WeChat profiles. Eighty-two per cent of them used real portrait photographs (photos of themselves or their children) as WeChat avatars. Of the rural migrant users in GoodPath, however, only three per cent show their real names on WeChat, while the rate of real photos is as low as 12 per cent. Even though we label WeChat as ‘low anonymity’ in general, therefore, the situation can be very different in different social groups.

Designed mainly for urban users, the privacy setting on WeChat is stricter than on QQ and Facebook. For example, on QQ visiting one’s Qzone profile is in most cases visible not only to the profile owner, but also to all of the profile owner’s QQ contacts. This basically means that social media ‘stalking’ on QQ is difficult. On Facebook, by contrast, viewing someone’s profile trying not to be noticed is not only possible, but also popular.

Compared to the situation on WeChat, however, the visibility of one’s social network on Facebook is still much higher. On WeChat users have no access to their WeChat friends’ contacts list. On top of this, in many cases users have no access to the ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ left on their friends’ profile pages. For example, if A and B are both friends with C, but A and B are not friends on WeChat, then A cannot see B’s comments or likes to C’s posts. Moreover, one can only share postings from WeChat ‘public’ accounts. That is to say, sharing a friend’s post by just clicking on ‘share’, which is very common on Facebook, is not possible on WeChat. For Hu, a 33-year-old journalist from Shanghai, such filtering on WeChat is helpful. ‘I like the design, neat and simple; social relationships are complicated and it can avoid a lot of trouble if irrelevant contacts are separated rather than mixed up.’ It allows her much more freedom and flexibility to deal with different social networks:

Sometimes banters between me and my close friends on comment can be very improper in other’s eyes... If all my friends’ comments
could be seen by all my WeChat contacts, I am afraid my reputation would be totally ruined, haha!

Whereas, nothing is perfect, sometimes Hu also wished that the comments and likes can be seen by all, ‘…but funnily enough, things are different if you post some good news, then you actually want everybody to see that you are “liked” by many and you got such and such praises on comments’.

Like Hu, Hao Wen, a university graduate in his twenties has also spotted the consequence of the ‘common friend only’ (gongtong haoyou kejian) setting on WeChat. However for him, rather than feeling regret that he cannot make highly praised posts visible to all the contacts, he actually makes his less popular postings appear to be very popular:

The point is you don’t know exactly how many people liked or commented on my posts since you have no idea how many are not our common friends…then that’s something I can work on. For example, I comment on my own posting saying ‘Thank you to all of you and I am really touched’. Now this comment can be seen by all, and people would believe that there are actually many people who have commented on or liked this posting; they couldn’t see any just because those who commented or liked were not common friends…I guess it’s also about mianzi (face); you just don’t want to lose face in front of your friends.

It is difficult to judge how many WeChat users actually applied the same trick as Hao Wen did to produce a more popular and positive self-image online. Interestingly what Hao Wen revealed was an anxiety about one’s public image in a relatively closed and strong-tie based online community.

“‘Face’ represents an individual’s claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction.” In this instance social media is the context of social interaction, with concerns or even anxiety about one’s positive image on social media being commonly shared among people in the research. Without doubt Hao Wen successfully solved the problem by taking advantage of the setting of online display, and made the disadvantage of WeChat’s function in certain situations into a valued trick.

The features of ‘low anonymity’, ‘high privacy’ and ‘closed community’ on WeChat are embraced by many urban citizens, but they are not necessarily viewed as advantages among rural migrants in GoodPath. In fact the opposite is true: more than two-thirds of migrant
workers, especially younger people, showed a clear preference for QQ over WeChat. Some of them gave as a reason that on QQ the social connection is more open. As we will discover in Chapter 4, visitors of Qzone are encouraged or even urged to engage with more interactions, which help to contribute to a ‘hot and noisy’ (renao) ambience of Qzone. Furthermore, strangers on QQ have become an important part of social life online for rural migrants whose real names are cautiously avoided, given the discrepancy between people’s online and offline social identities.

‘High monetisation’ is the feature of WeChat to emerge most recently. The field work has witnessed a successful monetisation of WeChat, beginning at Chinese New Year 2014. On 28 January 2014 WeChat launched a new function called ‘WeChat red envelope’ (hongbao), which allowed users to send ‘digital red envelopes’ of money to WeChat contacts electronically. ‘The red envelope’ (which contains real money) has a long tradition in China as a festival and ceremony gift (for example a gift for Chinese New Year or a wedding), with the implication of bringing good luck and best wishes in addition to the monetary value. The new function on WeChat allows Chinese people to move this tradition online, and to make it more fun: the sender can either send a ‘fixed amount’ digital red envelope to certain contacts or alternatively decide how much to hand out in total to how many people and then leave everything else to the system, which randomly chooses how the total is divided. For instance, A decided to hand out 20 RMB to five WeChat contacts. The money could be divided into five digital red envelopes by the system randomly as 2.4, 3.6, 2.3, 1.5, and 0.2 RMB. Then the first five WeChat contacts of A who clicked the link got envelopes. Being the first one does not guarantee the most money, however: he or she may unfortunately end up with the envelope containing the least. The gambling-like red envelope grabbing soon went viral. From Chinese New Year’s Eve to 4 p.m. on the first day of the Chinese New Year (31 January 2014), more than 5 million users tried out the feature to deliver in excess of 75 million red envelopes. Every minute an average of 9,412 virtual red envelopes were received during this period.

Given the fact that users had to link their bank account(s) to their WeChat accounts before they could hand out or withdraw money from red envelopes, the red envelope phenomenon significantly fuelled the monetisation of WeChat. This in turn paved the way for mobile payments via WeChat. Via a WeChat ‘wallet’, the WeChat payment account (Fig. 2.12), users can make instant payments for online as well as in-store
purchases. In 2015 at least one in five active WeChat users were set up for WeChat payment. Besides business institutions, all the WeChat public accounts can also sell products or services on WeChat. WeChat payment verified service accounts (retailers) on its platform. Through WeChat payment, service accounts are able to provide direct in-app payment service to users. Customers are allowed either to pay for items or services on web pages inside the app or to pay in store by scanning the digital ID (WeChat QR codes) of products provided by offline retailers. In 2015 WeChat launched the ‘City Services’ project, further expanding the scope of services to pay utility bills, book a doctor’s appointment, get bank statements, send money to friends, obtain geo-targeted coupons, etc. Through such practices WeChat has become an aggregator of the most frequently used and popular services available on mobile devices. We can conclude that WeChat has gone far beyond a social media tool. It has the potential to become a highly hybrid mobile and social commerce platform, with built-in payment accounts (e-wallet), LBS (location-based services) and much more.
The high monetisation of WeChat leads us to a wider exploration of e-commerce in China. China is leading the way in this field with high mobile purchase rates (69 per cent of Chinese consumers made a purchase through their smartphone, as opposed to 46 per cent of consumers in the US) and a more active participation in social media. In GoodPath, around ten per cent of people actively engaged with e-commerce, for example setting up one’s own online shop or selling goods on one’s personal WeChat profiles. Most of them have full-time jobs and do WeChat business part-time; others do it more professionally, since they sell the same products in their physical stores. Around 60 per cent of people engaged at least once with mobile payment functions or other forms of online commercial events, with an even higher rate among young people of 95 per cent.

Generally speaking, special/local goods (local specialities) or products endorsed by friends sold by friends sell best. Dee in GoodPath represents a successful example of doing business on WeChat. Her best-selling product is free-range chicken eggs from her parents’ farm. Towards the end of 2013 the outbreak of bird flu seriously affected the chicken farm’s business because all the regular buyers stopped purchasing. Hundreds of organic chicken eggs became unmarketable products overnight. This became one of the most difficult moments in Dee’s life as she watched the family business slide into a desperate situation. Inspired by the commercial posts on WeChat that she encountered every day, Dee decided to turn to it. She posted a photograph of a basket of eggs and wrote:

My dear friends, if you want to buy healthy, organic eggs, please let me know. My parents’ chicken farm offers 100 per cent healthy and organic free-range chicken eggs at the most reasonable price! And also please spread the word!

On the same day she got five orders from her friends and all the eggs were sold within two weeks. A friend of Dee’s, Yun, who ordered 50 eggs on WeChat, commented ‘I think it is a good deal, I helped her out, but it’s not that she owes me a big favour (renqing) since I also benefited a lot from the good price of the quality eggs’. During the next two months of the egg crisis, I continued to trace the interaction between Dee and Yun on WeChat, observing that Dee’s ‘like’ and comments on Yun’s new postings had become much more frequent since the egg crisis. ‘I think I owe her a favour (renqing), so maybe because of that I paid more attention
to her updates on WeChat since then... and I do think we have a better relationship now,' Dee explained.

At first glance, Dee’s egg sale on WeChat is just one instance of ‘word-of-mouth marketing’, of which I encountered plenty in field work. This also seems to echo a study which shows that in China 66 per cent of Chinese consumers relied on recommendations from friends and family, compared to 38 per cent in the US. However, in Dee’s case there is something more to consider. On the one hand, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, in the collective society of China social relations (guanxi), the derivative of kinship or ‘in-group’ personal relationships, has its fundamental impact on a whole range of social interactions from business activities to public relations. On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that business activities which manifest themselves, for example, in a form of traditional red envelopes – the gift money which was given with the expectation of return – is always an integral or even necessary part of personal relationships in China.

In the anthropology of China, there is a rich literature on the ‘gift economy’. The major argument is that in the cycle of giving, receiving and the reciprocity of gift exchange, social relationships are established and maintained. In Dee’s case, the gift exchange does not take place in the form of a physical gift, but by way of a favour (renqing), which also follows the principle of reciprocity. Renqing literally means ‘human feelings’, and refers to the feelings inherent in personal relationships. In practice renqing also provides a moral sense of obligation (such feeling as ‘I owe you’) towards others, which motivates further gift exchange. In Dee’s case, therefore, her return ‘gift’ was actually more attention and more positive interaction with her friend on WeChat. In guanxi, ‘any act of helpfulness or generosity, no matter whether given or received, begins to draw one into the network of reciprocal exchanges’. In the end, as Dee remarked, the relationship between herself and her friend had become closer and more positive through the cycle of ‘gift exchange’.

Thus, unlike Western societies, where business is supposed to take place in a professional context without personal touch and element, doing business and establishing personal relationships in China are usually the same approach, with slightly different fronts. In this sense doing business on social media in China seems to match with the very feature of guanxi. The success of the monetisation of WeChat, to a large extent, is a result of Chinese personal relationships, which intrinsically include business elements; such forms of success cannot
necessarily be copied by other societies. Furthermore, in the case of WeChat red envelopes, we see a challenge to our very understanding of the social meaning of money. In the West money is traditionally regarded as an impersonal medium; it is only supposed to apply in business where social connections are mainly functional. In *The Philosophy of Money* Georg Simmel contended that money can never become an ‘adequate mediator of personal relationships’ as it ‘distances and estranges the gift from the giver much more definitely’. In China, by contrast, money has long been used to express concern and love in social relations. It has long been selected as a ‘perfect’ gift because it can be used to buy whatever the recipient desires, eliminating the unnecessary risk of choosing a wrong gift or the wastefulness of speculating on the recipient’s needs.

In retrospect, some features of WeChat actually emerged in the process of use given the ‘technology affordances’. In practice these features are interlocked, and work together as a new form of sociality online. A further discussion of how social relationships become reshaped or reinforced in the use of QQ and WeChat will continue in the rest of the book. But now let’s move to Weibo, another buzz word surrounding Chinese social media.

### What is Weibo?

For many Westerners, Weibo (microblogging) is the equivalent of Twitter. In China there are several Weibo platforms, such as Tencent Weibo and Sohu Weibo. Because of the popularity of Sina Weibo, however, with 212 million monthly active users, ‘Weibo’ is often used generically to refer to Sina Weibo. Many features of Weibo appear familiar to Twitter users, such as the 140 character limit, use of ‘@’ to mention people and addition of ‘#’ to keyword the postings. Additionally Chinese users were able to embed multimedia content in Weibo more than 18 months before Twitter users could do so in the US.

Weibo is a celebrity hub. Chinese celebrities depend on Weibo as a way to connect with their fans and drive their popularity. However, the statistics in GoodPath show that the usage of Weibo among rural migrants is extremely low. Even though many have heard of Weibo, less than one per cent actually used Weibo to post or follow others. Among the one per cent Weibo users, Tencent Weibo, rather than Sina
Weibo, was the main site – mainly because Tencent QQ ‘bind’ its users to embedded Weibo services. Gui You, a factory official in his forties, has Tencent Weibo which synchronises updates automatically with his QQ status updates:

When I updated a status on QQ, the ‘Weibo’ would do the same thing automatically. I have no idea about Weibo, but I can’t be bothered to figure it out.

Gui You’s confusion about Weibo is widely shared among people in GoodPath. Few know what it is really about or what it is good for. Duo Tian, a 26-year-old factory worker, explained why she abandoned her Sina Weibo account after using it for a couple of weeks. ‘I tried, but I really don’t like it… it’s too complicated, and you have no friends there.’ It is true that the specific grammar in Weibo, such as the @ and # function, are a bit confusing for beginners. However, the main reason seems to lie in the fact that Weibo is more like a public publishing platform rather than a personal ‘chat’ platform between friends. People find it more difficult to establish personal connections on the platform, and so prefer to remain with the platform that most of their contacts use.

Compared to WeChat, Weibo addresses a far bigger audience. Big cities are Weibo’s main market, since the urban population shows a stronger information-seeking motivation, driven by a need for richer, more diverse information. The limited market of Weibo in towns and villages further discourages people from using Weibo as a personal communication tool.

Having said that, the use of Weibo among China’s urban population has also witnessed a decline. It is not only my field work in Shanghai that has shown that people are using Weibo less because of the increasing use of WeChat. The WeChat public account has taken the place of Weibo for the purpose of news reading and information searching. National statistics show that the number of Weibo users in 2013 declined by 27 million compared to the number of users at the end of 2012. The level of activity also declined, with around 80 per cent of users hardly ever logged in.

There are several reasons that the Chinese urban population has become less interested in Weibo. First is the decline in the quality of Weibo information, the result of an overflow of advertisements. In contrast to WeChat and QQ, strangers have the right to leave comments on
any Weibo profile, which leaves a loophole for the posting of commercial advertisements\textsuperscript{99} by the millions of ‘online water army’ (shuǐjūn) who get paid for such work. This has significantly diluted the user’s experience of Weibo. Secondly, since 2013 the Chinese government has started to ‘clean’ up the internet, targeting Weibo.\textsuperscript{100} Officials have intensified attacks on the spread of online rumours, and Weibo users can be jailed for up to three years for posting false information that is forwarded 500 times or viewed 5,000 times.\textsuperscript{101} As a result, a large number of online public intellectuals have had to give up their accounts. Some of them began to shift towards WeChat,\textsuperscript{102} as a WeChat public account works much less publicly than on Weibo. Information on WeChat spreads more slowly than on Weibo, but because of the ‘slow burn’ feature, which appears less intimidating to the regime, WeChat content seems to undergo less strict censorship.\textsuperscript{103}

This chapter has introduced the main social media platforms. Given the low rate of usage of Weibo among people in this study, the discussion of Weibo here will be relatively brief. It is also true that there are other Chinese social media platforms, but given the limited space they will not be introduced one by one, particularly as they are not used by the majority of people in the study. However, a few of them will be introduced later in the book when discussing a specific individual’s use of social media. The next section will focus upon the very digital devices on which most of the engagement with social media in China now takes place.

Social media and smartphones

By 2014 the number of Chinese mobile internet users had reached 527 million, making mobile phones the most common device for access to the internet.\textsuperscript{104} For people who cannot afford a PC,\textsuperscript{105} a smartphone has become their first private access to the internet. Budget smartphones dominate the smartphone market in GoodPath, the average price being around 500 RMB (US $80). The average monthly cost is around 100 RMB (US $16). A smartphone is definitely the number one internet device.

It has been young rural migrants who have driven the local budget smartphone market. The majority (80 per cent) of rural migrants aged between 17 and 35 already own a smartphone, and 70 per cent of those in current use are their owners’ first. One-third of people reported that
they wanted to have a smartphone by a ‘good brand’ (hao paizi) in a couple of years’ time, when they will have saved up enough money. A ‘good brand’ smartphone (such as iPhone and Samsung) is regarded as a symbol of social status.

According to the local mobile phone dealers, shanzhai mobile phones used to be very popular, mainly because of their huge price advantages (usually the price is between one-fifth and one-tenth of the ‘real brand’). A shanzhai mobile phone refers to a fake, low-priced mobile phone: shanzhai in Chinese refers to the mountain camps or mountain villages under the control of regional warlords or bandits, far away from governmental control. Several unique features of shanzhai mobiles attract users. For instance, the ringtone of most shanzhai phones is extremely loud and some of them even have a funky and sparkling ‘incoming calls flashlight’. This is regarded by customers as not only ‘convenient’ (as most rural migrants work in noisy factories), but also fashionable. The function of ‘Dual SIM card dual standby’ (shuangka shuangdai), which allows two different SIM cards in one mobile phone, is also welcome as people usually choose separate phone packages for keeping in touch with local people and those back in their original villages.

Since the end of 2012, however, the shanzhai mobile phones have started to shift in terms of sales strategy. Previously they just copied famous brand names. Now some shanzhai mobile phone manufacturers have set up their own branded phones, and newly designed budget smartphone brands such as ‘XiaoMi’ (Mi-One) have established their market position. Major Chinese telecom companies have also started to invest in the market for smartphones with a price lower than US $150 (qianyuan ji) and launched a few packages for contract mobile phones (heyue ji) together with Chinese local mobile phone manufacturers such as HuaWei. With a guaranteed consumption (baodi xiaofei) of US $10 to $15 dollars per month, one can get a smartphone for around US $50 or even for ‘free’. These inexpensive smartphones quickly captured the low-end smartphone market, offering not only a similar price advantage but also better quality and after-sales service than their shanzhai competitors (Chart 2.4). As a result the shanzhai era of Chinese low-end mobile phone market has already passed.

QQ was the first digital platform in China that successfully practised ‘media convergence’, and smartphones have considerably accelerated the process. Smartphones have not only been woven into the patterns of people’s daily lives, but also function as the ‘mega media’
that allow people to navigate various social networks, enjoy forms of entertainment and participate in consumer culture. Cara Wallis notes:

For those who study convergence among more privileged users, there is a tendency to downplay its technological aspect, or the way one device can increasingly handle numerous media functions. However, millions of people in the world must make do with a single delivery technology for most of their digital media use, and almost always it is a mobile phone.\textsuperscript{110}

As quoted, even before the smartphone had become available among this ‘information have-less’ group,\textsuperscript{111} mobile phones had already played an essential role in the lives of low income people. Now the smartphone has become the first music player, video player and camera, as well as the first private access to online reading, online payment and online social networking (Fig. 2.13). The popularity of budget smartphones has therefore largely closed the gap of the digital divide in China.

\textbf{Chart 2.4} Distribution of different kinds of mobile phone devices among 200 rural migrants in GoodPath
Conclusion

So what can be learned from Chinese social media such as QQ and WeChat and the wider technologies of the smartphone? The real significance of this chapter is only apparent if it is not read as a chapter about Chinese rural migrants and social media, or even a chapter about Chinese social media, but rather as part of a comparative ethnographic study on the very meaning and nature of social media.

The starting point has been the radically different historical trajectories of these developments between China and the West. In the West, people have a tendency to assume they know what social media naturally ‘is’, because there has been a slow incremental development based on clear precedents. In the developed West the smartphone has gradually been appropriated as a new digital device, the natural successor to the personal camera, mobile phone and PC. Social media has also been quite a specific development in personal communications, forming
a niche within more general IT development. By contrast the Chinese social media landscape has been formed as a result of a dynamic movement. It has been cut apart from the global environment outside China, pushed by a very deliberate policy of the party-state, carried forward by a vast domestic market demand, and accelerated by the booming growth of smartphones. In due course this was the demand that collided with the traditional pattern of social relations and technological innovation. This dynamism continues to grow apace, with new forces continually arising such as dating and commerce. We need to start by acknowledging the sheer, incredible scale of this. Now hundreds of millions of people, who only a short time ago had no experience of anything digital, suddenly find themselves in possession of instruments that are as powerful as their Western equivalents and, as we have seen, often used for an even greater range of purposes.