Conclusion: The dual migration

This book started with a series of claims. The first was that, in effect, this is a study of two simultaneous migrations, both taking place on a vast scale: one from rural to urban, the other from offline to online.¹

At first this may appear to be simply a ‘neat’ attention-seeking analogy. It might seem glib to try to equate the vast upheaval represented by a population leaving its ancestral home for the alienating environment of a huge factory system to the increasing use of smartphones and social media. Now, however, having reached the end of the book, it should be clear that this was never intended as a mere analogy. It is rather entirely possible that the study of social media has revealed a migration as profound and as consequential as the physical movement with which it coincided.

The deep rupture offline

The process of the rural-to-urban migration is first of all a deep rupture. It began with the fragmentation of the rural collective community and then took shape as a turbulent ‘floating life’ leading to severe social exclusion. At the start of the book we saw the example of Dong, the young factory worker who dropped out of school when he was 16, trying to escape the boring and depressing life of a child left behind by his parents to embrace the modern life that he had dreamt of instead. For many young Chinese factory workers, unlike their parents, the decision to break with that rural life was not determined purely by the pressure of poverty. Many were willing and determined to take what they saw as the first step towards a better life. However, what they were not prepared for was the frustrating gap between the dream of becoming modern and
the reality of being denied, excluded and even ignored as mere cogs in massive factory machines.

In GoodPath we have witnessed the estrangement between locals and migrants – a situation already evident in the local primary school, where children from local and migrant families were strictly segregated in different classes. We have also seen how anxiety about guanxi (social relations) has become pervasive, to the extent that it has become common practice among rural migrants to check whether one has been deleted from others’ WeChat contacts lists. What was happening in GoodPath was also taking place in hundreds of other similar ‘transitional towns’ across industrial China, places in which hundreds of millions of migrant workers were striving for a better life. However, rather than being a ‘good path’, the route they followed was a narrow, winding and uneven one.

The term migration can refer to a simple process by which people start from a fixed location A and end up in a new settled location of B. But the migration of Chinese people from villages to factories has always led to them being termed a ‘floating’ population since the regulations of household registration (hukou) did not really allow them to settle down as local residents in urban areas. One of the direct consequences of such a floating life is passivity. Many migrants seem apparently content with the status quo and less motivated for change, since efforts to improve either living and working conditions or to establish local networking are frustrated and begin to feel pointless. Therefore, as noted in Chapter 3, the concept of a ‘passing traveller’ (guoke) resonated among migrant workers, becoming a popular term on the memes they posted and shared on Qzone. The mindset of being a ‘passing traveller’ coats the ‘floating’ life with a protective layer consisting of an attitude of pretended indifference. People appear less interested, or even entirely uninterested, in their current job, their place of residence and those they meet in their daily lives. This was considered further in Chapter 5, which revealed how this ‘passing traveller’ mindset also partly explains the extremely low political participation rate among rural migrants, both online and offline. All in all, the absence of feelings of belonging and the rupture experienced within the urban/industrial space was fully expressed by Guo Biao, a factory worker, in Chapter 1: ‘It [GoodPath] is just where I work… of course it’s not a home. Home is where you go back once a year to celebrate Chinese New Year.’

Even though many migrant workers, like Guo Biao, tended to see their home villages as their real ‘home’, this book has revealed how the new reality is not that straightforward. In Chapter 6, Hua, the factory woman in her
late thirties whose youth had been spent as a rural migrant, commented that ‘homeland is the place you always miss, but will never return to’. Most migrant workers who had spent large parts of their lives ‘floating’ from one factory town to another experienced at some point a poignant moment of recognition: that their ‘floating’ journeys had led them to cross a point-of-no-return. As discussed in Chapter 6, one may visit one’s home village once a year, but returning to live there is almost impossible. Three decades ago Chinese peasants finally gained the freedom to leave their homes. Three decades later they have realised that, along the way, they have somehow lost the ‘freedom’ to go back.

Confronting rural migrants’ sense of alienation from both agricultural and industrial communities, a natural question then takes shape: where do (or can) these people really live? No more illuminating answer can be given to this question than the emic view of Lily, an ordinary young factory worker. I met up with her one summer evening in the small, run-down bedroom that she shared with her younger sister. It was hot and humid, and Lily’s sigh acknowledged this with a helpless smile: ‘Life outside the smartphone is unbearable!’ What she was claiming was that the place she most enjoyed living in, and where she felt most alive, was on her Qzone, inside the online world. The online has become the real home for most migrant workers who feel they do not belong in either villages or factory towns.

Fig. 7.1 A migrant worker uses his mobile phone during lunch break on the construction site of a factory. (Traditional Chinese painting 45 × 68.5 cm; painter: Xinyuan Wang)
The profound reconstruction online

Lily’s remark leads us to the other side of the story – the profound reconstruction in forms of individualisation and modernisation now taking place alongside this profound break. In fact, thanks to the vast empty space left by the rupture caused by migration, the personal pursuit of individual value and modernity has gained legitimacy and become more radical. Once affordable budget smartphones provided the material wherewithal, the perceived gap between aspiration and reality pushed young migrants to embrace to their utmost the new possibilities of social media. In such an environment young people from rural backgrounds find their post-school education and coming of age on social media. Here they discover and explore not only friendship, but also a new understanding and practice of various social relationships, including encounters with strangers online. They gain awareness of privacy, and often their first living experience of it, on social media, and all their diverse personal aspirations about a modern life and a modern identity find their fullest expression on social media rather than in offline life.

For anthropologists it is important to set this discussion alongside the kinds of material presented in the first half of Chapter 6. Chinese folk religion, popular among rural migrants, is very different from religions such as Christianity and other systems of belief. It follows a set of pragmatic principles, related not to a transcendent world, but rather what might be called ‘magical practices’, intended to gain luck and prevent misfortune. Understanding the magical quality of those religious beliefs helps us to appreciate that social media may itself be invested with ‘magical’ properties. Even as erecting a physical temple constructs a particular kind of sacred place, so does creating a particular online space in which we can now circulate images of deities and other ideal images.

Such an awareness led on to the subsequent developments explored in Chapter 6. These revealed the ways in which people use social media to align themselves with what they perceive as the new styles of ‘cool’ and ‘modern’ – for example by purchasing a virtual fast car or noble title. As far as social media users are concerned, migrating to online has brought them closer to the cool, stylish world of modern China with its images of wealth and successful pop stars to whom they want to get closer. Knowing how folk religion works among migrant workers, we should at least not dismiss the real power of such ‘magic’ on social media. In Chapter 4 the widely held philosophy of ‘bitterness
first and sweetness will follow’ (xian ku hou tian) further reflected the fact that the ‘floating’ life itself is future-oriented – namely the imagination of a guaranteed, sweet future that helps people to survive today’s bitterness and stress. In other words, millions of Chinese rural migrants are always living in an anticipated future, rather than in the problematic present. In this sense the magic they experience on social media is no more ‘virtual’ than the role of magic in their pre-digital lives. It works, and is perceived as an intrinsic part of actual life. Real life is not where rural migrants live offline, which is constantly insecure and in flux. Instead they rely upon their ability to engage in the imaginative construction online of what they might one day become. That is where millions of people now live.

At this point the focus moves to Chapter 4, which provides the core evidence of what it is now like to live inside social media. The chapter describes a key expression for this experience: ‘hot and noisy’ (renao), which is exactly what people want this space to be like. It is not just a person who has to spend boring and exhausting hours in a factory who wants to spend their leisure time in this online world. Such space also attracts those who are shy or lonely; a person who constantly feels the pressure of living up to the social standards of being a good man or a good woman; a person who no longer feels connected to the village from which he or she once came; a person who does not bother with offline friendships in this factory town, since tomorrow he or she may be living elsewhere. All of these people turn to the online for their sociality or self-expression. Here they seek the familiar ‘hot and noisy’ experience that so many now miss in offline settings.

The claims made concerning the reality of dual migration are thus based on evidence presented over several chapters of this book. We can thus say that the images discussed both in Chapter 3 and at the end of Chapter 6 are not just fantasy. They are in effect solid visual technologies that give people a better sense of where they live and where they belong.

Most studies of social media in China have focused on the use of social media among urban populations, who have easy access to a whole range of digital technologies and are supposedly social media savvy. This book argues that it may actually be Chinese rural migrants – a relatively digital have-less population, still in the process of becoming ‘modern’ – who provide a more appropriate subject for such research. This is because China’s rural migrants may in certain respects represent a more radical population, notably in how they fully embrace the possibilities that online can offer. In the global project of which this study
is one part, it has been found that the online world of people in various countries (for instance the English, Italian, Indian or traditional Chinese) corresponds more closely to their offline world. Yet in the case of Chinese rural migrants we have encountered an unprecedented rupture, severing the constraints of traditional social expectations (‘what they should be’) and shifting the focus on to potential and aspiration (‘what they could be’), given expression through the advent of social media. In this sense Chinese rural migrants epitomise a genuine ‘social media population’ that provides an unusually clear guide to the new possibilities represented by social media.

We need to put this discovery in perspective. The frustrations of their offline lives are certainly important, but poverty is not the only reason why Chinese factory workers embrace social media to this extent. After all, many people who do not live in conditions of poverty are also migrating part of their lives to online. Most people in most places are experiencing some variant of this offline to online migration, though generally less extreme in form and more integrated into their offline lives. Moreover, social media was not the first – and is not the only – ‘place’ where ‘magic’ takes place. Films such as Muriel’s Wedding which predate the digital era portray the imagining and pursuit of a glamorous wedding as more important than the wedding itself – a fantasy that dominates the daily life of a middle-class Australian girl. An even greater claim could be made about the precedent represented by religion. For much of human history, and for most societies, religion has been a major, if not the single most important, component of many peoples’ lives. Both our comparative book and the other volumes that make up this series consistently refuse to regard online life as something virtual, inextricably opposed to another world of ‘real’ life.

What this book has in common with other comparative studies, therefore, is an insistence upon the integration of online life as a substantive part of peoples’ real lives. However, it is still possible to argue that the situation of these Chinese factory workers is exceptional, as the consequences of such an immersion in online life are both more radical and profound. The ruptures experienced by migrants more generally in their lives have opened them up more fully to the possibilities of this new online life. This explains the basic narrative of this volume. In China a vast population has embarked upon an offline journey from their villages to factories. Yet it is the parallel migration online that has so far allowed them to journey beyond the factory, to engage with an experience of the modern life that inspired this journey in the first place.