1. Introduction

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Introduction

In the decades since the de facto Chinese leader Deng Xiao Ping ended the cultural revolution and opened up the economy towards more capitalist forces, China has witnessed the largest ever human migration.[1] Such an unprecedented flow of labour from China's rural interior to more coastal factories and cities has resulted in vast economic growth, urbanisation and the proliferation of labour-intensive industries. In 2015 the number of Chinese peasants who had left their hometowns to work in these factories had risen to 277.47 million.[2] If Chinese rural migrants were the population of a country, it would be the fourth largest in the world.

In 2013, following an assumption that those Chinese migrant workers would be highly dependent on the boom in Chinese social media to remain in contact with the families they had left behind, I went to study social media usage in a small factory town in southeast China, a site for tens of thousands of migrant workers. However, during the subsequent 15 months of field work, mostly spent living inside one of these factories, I began to understand that the reality is very different from anything I had imagined.

First, I was surprised about the motivations for migration among the new generations, which I had assumed would be essentially economic. Second, I was largely wrong about what kind of social media use I would find among what is known in China as a 'floating population': it was not mainly about retaining links to users' places of origin. Most of all I had not anticipated my primary finding, which was that this would be a study of two migrations conducted in parallel: one from rural to urban, and another, undertaken simultaneously, from offline to online. We can call these parallel because both, in their own ways, were journeys to the same destination of an imagined modern China. Finally this book will make a surprising claim as to which of these migrations seems to have been more successful in reaching this goal.

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Chinese migrant workers are evidently Chinese. However, many key stereotypes of Chinese people do not apply to this particular population. For example, many migrant families have managed to dodge China's one-child policy[3] and usually have at least two children. Education, generally believed to be highly valued in Chinese society,[4] is actually valued in a far more utilitarian way. Many, if not most, rural migrant parents as well as rural migrant youth in my field site did not see success in school as a priority. In such a situation, as Chapter 3 argues, social media plays a key role in filling gaps left by lack of education. For young migrant workers who dropped out of school early and became factory workers before adulthood, social media is a form of 'post-school' education and schooling that implies their 'coming of age'.

It is also necessary to update the most widely held perception, in and out of China, of these Chinese migrant workers in terms of their social development. Recent migrants are very different from the initial wave upon which most academic accounts are still based, and which tend to focus on economic concerns.[5] For example, poverty is no longer the only reason behind migration. The initial motivation of the rural-to-urban migration was economic necessity.[6] Low productivity in the countryside could not support the livelihoods of the Chinese peasants who constituted the majority of the country's population; working in factories and cities seemed to be the only viable solution. Nowadays, however, the economic advantages of migration have become less clear. The combination of higher living expenses and increased consumption (influenced by the general lifestyle of urban areas)[7] means that marginal improvements in migrants' incomes hardly warrant the costs of, for example, no longer being able to care for their parents. For the new generation of rural migrants, the whole trajectory of rural-to-urban migration has shifted from the 'push' factor of economic necessity towards the 'pull' factor of aspirations towards modernity. For young migrant workers, migration means 'to see the outside world'[8] and to gain autonomy from one's family.[9] In such a context, social media is less of a bridge that connects individuals with what they have left behind in villages and more of a projector illuminating an ideal modern life to which they aspire.

Tens of thousands of migrant workers live in the small town where I conducted my field work, but almost none of them see the place where they live as 'home'. The living quarters in this factory town, as we will see later in this chapter, mainly serve to provide 'infrastructure for labourers rather than offering places in which human beings can maintain social relationships and feel security and emotional belonging'.[10] So where do people actually live? What does it mean when a young

factory girl says 'life outside the mobile phone is unbearable'? By mobile phone she meant her social media profile, to which she keeps constantly logged in and in which she portrays herself as a modern lady.[11] What her statement suggests is precisely that social media has become an alternative, and indeed a better, home to those migrant workers: given the offline conditions of their floating lives, many find social media to be the place where a new personal identity, with a 'higher human quality' (*you suzhi*),[12] can be created. This point is central to the ethnography that informs this volume. True, I spent most of this period of field work living in a factory, whereas most people just work there. In some ways I too lived with these factory workers, in as much as I shared the active social and imaginative lives they led online, rather than merely spent time in the same physical space.

In previous studies of Chinese rural migrants the issue of gender is one of the core topics. Almost all the studies focus on female Chinese rural migrants, suggesting that women workers are the most subordinated group within Chinese migrant populations.[13] Some of these claims and findings are still relevant today, but other things have changed. For this particular migrant group gender inequality may in some respects have reversed, leading to male rural migrants becoming the relatively disadvantaged group. This does not apply only to the job market or marriage market, but also to the social pressure and discrimination they suffer, compared to that of female migrants. Through male migrants' social media usage such gender anxiety comes to be represented and experienced.[14] It is worth noting, however, that this gender imbalance often reverts after marriage.

During the time of writing this book, the *Economist* published an article[15] about the children of Chinese migrant families left behind by their parents. This article rightly pointed out that such children were a damaged generation, suffering significantly higher states of anxiety and depression than their peers – a situation that may be connected to a lack of support following early separation from their parents. It is said that in 2010 there were 61 million children below the age of 17 left behind in rural areas; in several provinces more than half of all rural children had been left behind.[16] Such children have truly become a severe social problem in modern China. However, even this latest article still fails to cover some of the most recent developments and consequences of such problems. In the town where I conducted my research most young migrant workers had once been 'left-behind' children; they had dropped out of school at ages ranging from 14 to 17,[17] and then joined their parents to work in factories. Even as academics and journalists continue

to discuss the population of 'left-behind' children, many of their subjects have already made themselves part of a new generation of migrant workers.

Most research and reports about Chinese rural migrants focuses on the 'first tier' cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.[18] However, the 2013 national survey on 'floating populations'[19] shows that 47 per cent of Chinese rural migrants work and live in small and medium-sized towns. Here migrant parents are significantly more likely to live with their children (more than 60 per cent of the new generation of rural migrants live with core family members in migration destinations). In the factory town where I worked more than 80 per cent of newborn babies came from migrant families, while migrant children also represent the majority at the local primary school.[20] This new generation faces difficulties, however, as it is not yet integrated into the local society.[21] Today's young migrants confront the same problem as their parents did, of not being able to access urban social welfare. They may feel even more frustrated by social discrimination,[22] as they are usually keener to integrate into modern city life.[23] This new generation of migrant workers has been experiencing insecurity and impermanence since childhood. As a result them seem to have learned to present themselves as unflappable or even unconcerned about their own lives. Such a highly performative attitude almost detaches them from either their own or other people's judgements. Once again it turned out that a study of social media was also a really effective strategy for understanding these young people; only through this inner but online world[24] did it seem possible to find out who they really are and what they really want from life.

Social media use among Chinese migrant workers also challenges some basic ideas that have formed the premise of several heated debates about social media worldwide. For instance, there is a constant worry that the mediation of social media has rendered our social relationships in some way less authentic. Here, however, people find social media is the only place to establish a 'purer' (*geng chun*) relationship, free from all the practical concerns of offline life.[25] Furthermore, when we are questioning the impact of social media on friendship we may not be aware that merely using the concept of 'friendship'[26] is problematic. This is particularly so when applied to people from traditional communities in which kinship and regional relationships (such as fellow villagers) are dominant; the Western notion of a separate sphere of friendship may simply not exist.

As Chapter 4 illustrates, it is on social media that Chinese migrant workers have created and experienced a real sense of 'friendship' for the first time. A similar situation occurs when we look into the issue of privacy. In the West, it has become commonplace to accuse social media of being a threat to privacy,[27] but what if the very idea and practice of privacy has hardly existed in a society? Migrant workers have their origins in village families with no provision for individualised space, a situation compounded in adulthood by current conditions of shared dormitories. Many are also linked to a traditional idea that 'anything that is hidden from others must be something shameful or bad' – in effect saying that a mere preference for privacy is a bad thing. Given such factors, one has to consider the use of social media from a totally different perspective. In the real life of migrant workers, social media has remarkably increased the experience of privacy and legitimised the right to it.

When it comes to the impact of social media on politics, the ideals of the 'cyber-utopian',[28] which regards the internet as a politically progressive force and has become a very popular argument worldwide, may also be problematic. In the specific case of China and the Chinese internet, it is also widely believed that the development of the internet and social media might actively empower a future civil society. However, the ethnography suggests an entirely different picture, based on the evidence for the daily use of social media and its political content at a grass roots level. As will be shown in Chapter 5, the evidence here is that social media has far less impact on political participation than expected and rather than empowering or encouraging political participation, its use tends to diminish any motivation for turning discontented thoughts into active political action. Rather, in many ways social media helps to monitor and channel public opinion (*yulun daoxiang*)[29] and further legitimise the Chinese party-state.

Here, then, is a litany of ways in which the results of this research differ from the expectations of both myself and others. Given the degree of these discrepancies, and the many quite surprising claims that follow, much of this book focuses on the evidence that arose from the ethnography and provides the foundation for these claims. It is also hoped that the detailed ethnographic descriptions will also provide a sense of empathy and immersion in the lives of these people. We perceive them in the irresistible tides of these social transformations, and can see what this 'floating population' felt, believed or mistrusted; what their fantasies, hopes and fears might be; how they understood situations and reacted offline and online. This book is composed from hundreds of voices and

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images and fragments of individuals' daily lives, but not one of them is trivial. In addition a bigger, but also very different and distinct picture of modern China appears in view when we bring these individuals together analytically.

A brief review of the book

This book is about a new population and a new media. It depicts a situation in which a very particular group of people has emerged as an adult working population alongside the rise of social media in China. The Chinese rural migrant population that did not exist three decades ago is taking on its new form, very much facilitated by the capability they find in social media. At the same time social media, a new media that did not exist two decades ago, has rapidly come into daily use for a large proportion of the population. We can only make sense of both modern China and social media if we appreciate the dynamic, dialectical context within which both are being formed.

In Chapter 1, besides an introduction to the context of this study, we take a tour around the factory town and meet the people who inhabit it. Chapter 2 gives a detailed description of the Chinese social media landscape and budget smartphone market, while Chapter 3 focuses on what people post on their personal social media profiles – thus opening a window on to individuals' aspirations and anxieties, expectations and social lives. Drawing on Chapters 2 and 3, Chapter 4 maps out social life on social media, exploring in detail the ways in which people navigate various relationships. Why, for example, are classmates, neighbours and colleagues valued less than strangers online? Why and how does the mediation of social media constitute a 'purer' interpersonal relationship? Answers to those questions can be found in Chapter 4. Meanwhile Chapter 5 focuses upon the specific impact of social media on politics and gender, both closely examined through the online and offline behaviour of different groups of local people.

Finally Chapter 6 further explores how we can make sense of the dialectical relationship between 'online' and 'offline' – from postings of deity images to bring good fortune to the QQ homeland albums which in a way 'transport' people's home villages to online; from 'recording the youth' in salon photography to practising a modern life online. An understanding of people's struggles and their negotiation between online and offline leads to one of the main arguments of this book: that dual migrations are taking place simultaneously in the daily lives of

Chinese rural migrants – one from rural to urban, the other from offline to online. Could it be the latter which in practice proves more efficient and effective than physical migration, and which empowers people to achieve their aspiration of modernity?

Chinese family and *hukou*

Before presenting the evidence and arguments, there are two key historical questions that provide the foundations for the situation encountered here. Where do these migrant workers come from? And why have they had to take up a 'floating' life?

The first question is an inquiry into a traditional agricultural society in which not only these migrants but also the vast majority of Chinese people used to live – merely half a century ago. Here we can find answers in the anthropology of a more traditional China. The scholarship is simply too rich to review here, but a few key concepts will be briefly mentioned as a starting point. In Chinese the word 'family' (*jia*) actually refers not only to kinship, but also to a group of people, an estate of property or an economy (a set of economic activities).[30] The Chinese institution of family[31] is regarded as the nucleus of society. No one who has delved into the intricacies of Chinese social relations would deny the leading role kinship plays in Chinese political[32] and economic[33] affairs; this further sets the foundation for Chinese cosmology, where ancestors were worshipped as deities by descendants.[34] Patrilineal descent, or agnate kinship,[35] in which only men can inherit family property and a child's lineage is only calculated from the father's side, constitutes the social order of both the domestic and public domains.[36]

Age, generation and gender served as the three hierarchical principles within a Chinese family: that is the old are superior to the young, the male is superior to the female, the older generation is superior to the younger.[37] The senior male members usually control family affairs, and were regarded as the maintainers, providers and protectors of the family. Parent–son relationships are the most important in a traditional family. In an extended family a married son is supposed to stand firmly by his parents' side, regardless of what he thinks is right. Filial piety requires children to 'show respect and obedience to their parents under all circumstances and a daughter-in-law is always in the wrong if she dares to talk back to her mother-in-law'.[38]

In traditional Chinese society, human relationships start with the immediate family as an in-group and then radiate to encompass

the extended family, village and wider social connections.[39] With Confucianism providing the philosophical basis of Chinese family and society,[40] the country has long been seen as a typical collective or 'low-individualism' society – placing the needs, interests and objectives of in-groups at a higher priority than those of individuals.[41] Other traditional Chinese ethical concepts, such as the importance of interpersonal relations (*guanxi*)[42] and face (*mianzi),* which refers to one's own sense of dignity and reputation in a community,[43] are all closely related to these collective features of Chinese society. These emphasise the distinction between in-groups and out-groups, the importance of engaging in co-operative tasks, and a focus on avoiding conflict in the ultimate pursuit of communal harmony.

In regard to the second question, the reason why Chinese peasants had to take up a migrant life, rather than settling down in cities, lies in a policy called *hukou.* Established in the 1950s, the Chinese household registration system (*hukou)* plays an important role in migrant workers' lives. One's *hukou* status determines one's rights to welfare, employment and land, with people formerly only being permitted to work and reside at their place of *hukou* registration.[44] Because of *hukou,* mainland Chinese were divided into rural residents and urban residents. Urban residents enjoyed a range of social, economic and cultural benefits that rural residents did not receive.[45] With its strict rules against migration between rural and urban areas, *hukou* tried to limit mass migration from the land to the cities to ensure social stability.

This situation started to change in the 1980s, when industrialisation of China needed more and more cheap labour. The control over rural-to-urban migration has been gradually relaxed, enabling a vast number of rural labourers to work in cities while remaining registered as rural residents.[46] 'Floating population' (*liudong renkou*), a term in Chinese official discourse,[47] describes the migration pattern[48] of those rural migrants. Peasant workers (*nongmin gong*), a combination of 'peasant' and 'worker', is another word used in colloquial discourse to refer to the same group. As this term suggested, migrant workers are still peasants; they do not have access to the same welfare benefits as urban workers do under the allocation system of *hukou.* In such a rural–urban divide migrant workers usually find it difficult to establish roots in their temporary residential places – despite being the backbone of China's economic miracle based on labour-intensive industries.

Three decades ago, when the first wave of Chinese migrant workers left their villages,[49] they were leaving behind dreadfully poor agricultural communities and entire families that were desperate to be

supported. Three decades later, the second or even the third generation has now become the main force of migrant labour,[50] and it is important not to extrapolate our understanding of the first generation and assume that it applies equally to these later generations. At this point, however, having considered these issues in the abstract, the actual ethnography encountered them through the lives of individuals such as Dong, a 21-year-old migrant worker and part of this new generation.

The story of Dong

The bad news finally arrived. At the other end of the phone call Dong's niece told him that his old grandfather (*lao ye zi*) had died.

Three days later, with his parents and two other relatives who work in the same factory, Dong was on his way back to his village in a mountain area of YunNan province to join the funeral. It was a long trip: 2 hours on a minibus, followed by 48 hours on the train, then 3.5 hours by bus, and finally an hour on foot. Before the smartphone battery ran out, Dong had a last check of his QQ (a Chinese social media platform). When the train left Zhejiang province, he deleted the *GuanYin* (the mother Buddha) deity image that he had posted on his QQ a week ago in the hope that his grandfather would recover from his stroke. '*GuanYin* didn't do me the favour,' he told me later on QQ.

Dong had mixed feelings about this old man. Left behind by his parents who had worked outside of the mountain village more than 20 years ago, Dong was raised by his grandparents. Ten years ago his grandfather suffered an attack by a snake in the field, which left him unable to do any more heavy farm work. The only job he was offered was that of a public toilet attendant in a nearby town centre. Dong thus accompanied his grandparents to the single room attached to the public toilet, and there he lived. 'My classmates called me *shiwa* [shit boy] from then on, and I hated my childhood and my schooling time … my grandparents really couldn't help me … I mean for them to make sure I was not ill or hungry or lost was the best thing they could do.' Both Dong's grandparents were illiterate and could hardly give him any advice on school problems. The experience of being left behind as a child and the bullying in school partially pushed Dong to drop out of education at the age of 16. He left his home village and became a migrant factory worker. Since then he had only visited his grandparents twice in four years.

'Everybody was coming back and saying the outside world was full of beautiful things, and I was so looking forward to a new life outside

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at that time . . . couldn't wait to escape the desperate village life and my grandparents,' Dong once recalled. After four years of hard work in various factories, he would not necessarily agree with his initial dream about working as a migrant worker (*da gong*) any more. Nonetheless, as he said, 'Even though life outside was truly not as easy as I thought, struggling outside is always better than waiting for death in the village'. Dong believes in the saying 'the real man travels the world' (*hao nan er zou si fang*). At least that is something he can boast about one day in front of his children: that their father once visited many places. Dong planned one day, when he had finally saved up enough money, to start his own business in the town centre – no longer just labouring work, but a real business. Much of what he shared on his QQ profile were stories of successful entrepreneurs who had started from scratch, some of them from an even worse situation than his own. After all, most of the factory owners for whom he worked were once peasants like him. If they could succeed, why not him? 'I just need a bit of luck and maybe some patience,' he observed.

Two days after his return to his home village, Dong updated his QQ status: 'Farewell grandfather, sorry for being so *buxiao* [unfilial].' Two weeks later Dong had still not returned to the factory. One day I got a message from him on QQ: 'I am not coming back; I am going to marry a girl in our village soon.' The marriage was arranged by fellow villagers, and after the wedding the young couple are going to work together in another factory town in southeast China. As for Dong's current job, a relative working at the same factory would help him to sort everything out. Hopefully Dong would still get a proportion of his final month's wage, but to be honest he did not expect to receive it.

I realised that the moment when I saw him off to the local bus station would be the last time I ever saw Dong. 'Oh, my poor *nv boshi* [female PhD], I think that is something you can never learn,' Feige, a forklift truck driver, remarked. 'Things happen like this all the time: there's nothing unusual in saying goodbyes. You know, I have seen so many new faces appear and disappear in factories and nobody really cares . . . except for you.'

The GoodPath: A transitional town

Feige is probably right. In GoodPath, a small factory town, people do come and leave, day in day out. GoodPath town for them is indeed a 'path' rather than a destination. Although others have talked of the town

as a destination point, it is more accurately a transitional place connecting village and city.[51] The town itself is not an enclave in a city, but a rural place in the process of 'becoming' urban.

GoodPath has a long history as an agricultural village that dates back to the Tang Dynasty (610–907 BC). However, as a factory town it is very young. It was only in 2004 that the local government decided to develop industry. A decade of industrialisation has turned 76 per cent of the farm land in the centre area of GoodPath into 61 massive factories and 224 related companies. In 2004 agriculture contributed 89.2 per cent of GoodPath's GDP; in 2013 this figure has shrunk to 12.7 per cent.[52] Rural migrants who work in factories account for two-thirds of the resident population (totalling around 62,000). The population density of GoodPath has also jumped to 1,341 persons per km^2, compared to 142 per km^2 for China as a whole and 255 per km^2 for the UK.

Many rural migrants chose to come to GoodPath because of the job opportunities that are gained through the personal network of fellow villagers or relatives. Here 79 per cent of local rural migrants live with at least one family member, with only around five per cent living alone.[53] On the one hand these figures are consistent with the 2013 Chinese national census of domestic migration,[54] which shows that across China 70 per cent of rural migrants live with at least one family member. On the other hand, these numbers reject the cliché of Chinese rural migrants being totally isolated in their new locations. As a 'transitional town' GoodPath provides everything for rural migrants – except the sense of belonging. '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.' Guo Biao, 49, lived with his whole family in GoodPath; his three adult children work in two different factories. GoodPath for him is still by no means 'home', even though he has spent a good deal of time here.

Like many other Chinese 'urban villages', newly developed in the process of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation,[55] the economic and social development in GoodPath is unbalanced. The co-existing urban and rural elements manifest themselves in complicated, often conflicting ways. The changes served to disrupt the existing social order; crime rates shot up and living conditions deteriorated, with local people blaming rural migrant workers for all the troubles.[56] In GoodPath there is a very limited social bonding between local people and rural migrants. Seventy-two per cent of rural migrants reported[57] that they had no communication with local people apart from functional relationships such as 'shop owner/customer', 'landlord/tenant' and 'factory manager/factory worker'.

Such separation begins at primary school. In GoodPath's only primary school most of the students (around 85 per cent) come from migrant families. There were five classes at each grade, divided in turn into four 'outsider classes' (*waidi ban*) and one 'local class' (*bendi ban*). Better teachers were allocated to the 'local class', which only enrolled local students. A local teacher explained the reason behind the structure:

> ... (Local) parents were so worried that their children will pick up bad habits from those 'wild kids' from rural migrant families ... which in many cases was true. You cannot expect children to be well-behaved if their parents do not care about their school performance and they have no discipline at home ...

The social and economic transformation of GoodPath described above has been taking place gradually. However, the change in this small factory town's appearance seems to have happened overnight. During my stay in GoodPath, an advanced cinema, which can show 3D movies, popped up in the first six months. On the one side of a busy national motorway there is a freight parking area. On the other side a large shopping mall with an advertising pillar like London's Big Ben rose from the ground (Fig. 1.1). On the front facade of the mall a huge advertising hoarding depicts a foreign woman holding a box of Häagen-Dazs ice cream. A slogan beside the billboard recommends 'keeping up with the world' (*yu shijie tongbu*). Together with the heavy trucks and the long-distance minibus, the massive industrial area seems to give concrete form to the numerous abstract forces driving China's 'reform and opening-up policy' over the last three decades – especially globalisation, migration, industrialisation and commercialisation.

The following section seeks to capture a greater awareness of GoodPath, a place within which all these transitions and transformations

Fig. 1.1 The varied scenes of a freight parking area, farmland and a modern shopping mall in GoodPath

occur. 'Walking' around in the town and 'talking' with people as a researcher usually does may help you to become more familiar with the town and its people, and so understand better all the stories in this book. A map of the town centre is given (Fig 1.2) to help anchor the discussion in this particular place.

A tour of GoodPath

The first stop: The high street

A mere country road a decade ago, the high street today has more than 100 shops lining both sides. Along with the development of the factories, the local government repaved the road and sold the land on both sides to property developers to build residential buildings, four or five storeys in height, with shop fronts. Most shops deal with useful household items and men's and women's clothes and shoes, as well as hairdressers and digital devices. As you walk along the street, all of one's senses are overwhelmed: loud music, bright colours, strong scents, flavours of food, and people everywhere.

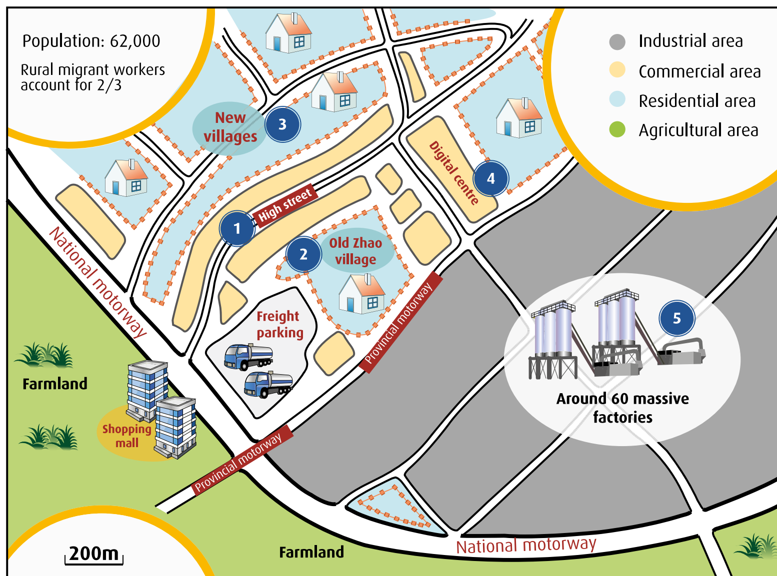

Fig. 1.2 A map of GoodPath town

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Even at first glance something is striking about the people here: young people and children are in the majority, and people seem to like being in groups. Around 22 per cent[58] of the pedestrians are babies and children under the age of 15; only three per cent of them are elderly; 79 per cent are walking in groups, and 38 per cent of the adults are accompanied by children. One thing that distinguishes rural migrants from local residents is that many of them are young parents with more than one child, in apparent contradiction to the Chinese one-child family plan policy.[59] This in turn explains the 'graffiti' on the whitewashed mortar walls of lanes off the main street. This graffiti is actually mobile phone numbers offering to provide all kinds of fake authorisations. One of them is 'birth permission' (*zhun sheng zheng*). Under Chinese family planning regulations, a pregnant woman will be turned down by a hospital unless she can show a birth permission document. Nor can a baby born without 'birth permission' be given a *hukou* (household registration), creating all kinds of problems in future life. For people employed in the public sector (government administration, education, hospitals, etc.), having more than one child will result in the loss of one's job and income, a penalty imposed on unplanned birth (*chao sheng*). People who work in the private sector may not lose their jobs, but they still need to pay a huge fine[60] to obtain a 'birth permission'. In rural areas, however, people are allowed to have a second child if the first one is a girl. A decade ago, when 'one-child' policy was carried out strictly, rural mothers had to give birth in secret (*tou sheng)* to avoid the penalties imposed on unplanned births. 'Years ago they [local officials] would chase you to the end of the Earth if they knew you had a baby hidden elsewhere, but now they can't be bothered', explained Ma, a factory worker aged 29. His three young children were born in three different factory towns.

On the high street, there is a mobile phone shop called 'Wan Hua China Mobile Franchise mobile phone shop'.[61] From time to time I helped at the shop. Wan Hua, the middle-aged owner, is a typical smart, shrewd and very hard-working local man; he opens the shop at 6.30 a.m. and closes at 10.30 p.m., seven days a week, 12 months a year, except for a ten-day break at Chinese New Year. Behind piles of mobile phone boxes there is a double bed where Wan Hua and his wife sleep during the night. In front of the shop is parked a brand new Ford car. Although he has little reason to drive, the car means a lot to Wan Hua. 'It's all about face (*mianzi*), you know. If I can't even afford a car, people will think I am doing badly!' As Wan Hua said, the concept of 'face' is truly important, important for understanding some aspects of social media use later in the book. *Mianzi,* known as 'Chinese face', is a sophisticated,

self-conscious feeling with regard to the opinions of others. It is a typical 'front-stage' behaviour[62] whose goal is to establish a particular favourable image in front of others.[63]

The second stop: Zhao village

Zhao village is a slum right in the heart of GoodPath, besieged by concrete residential buildings. The former busy pathway into the village is now an empty lane with scattered funeral supplies stores and blacksmith's shops (Fig. 1.3). Old people, the only local residents who continue living in this area, sit in bamboo chairs outside their front doors, looking at a world in which they no longer play a part. Nowadays their neighbours are often strangers who speak totally different dialects. After a century's wind and rain, most of the wooden buildings previously owned by local wealthy families are in poor condition; they are occupied by around 300 rural migrant households. Few toilets and no proper rubbish bins exist, with the result that everywhere has become a potential toilet or rubbish bin. The rural migrants who live here are regarded as the poorest, unable to afford a better room. Rent for rooms in these those old wooden houses is 50 RMB (US $8) per month, only one quarter of the cost of a room in concrete residential buildings.

Located in long and narrow lanes, a few illicit minibus service routes constitute the busiest areas. Minibuses run from GoodPath to around 70 counties in Guizhou, the poorest inland Chinese province from which almost half of the rural migrants in GoodPath originate. Given the fact that the central provincial coach station provides services to only two counties in Guizhou, GoodPath's transport capability clearly

Fig. 1.3 The Old Street in Zhao village, GoodPath town (traditional Chinese painting 82 × 34.5 cm; painter: Xinyuan Wang)

reflects the high mobility of its population. Along with many declining villages in Chinese factory towns, Zhao village resembles a large, withered tree. The birds that used to live on its branches have left, one by one; only old birds who cannot fly any more remain. Gradually the tree becomes a big trunk of standing wood, covered by thick moss. Yet when you look at it closely, you are amazed at the diversity of creatures still living on the tree.

The third stop: Peasant flats (*nongmin fang*) in the new villages

If Zhao village is a large, withered tree, then on the other side of the high street, in the new villages, are the clusters of trees in which most immigrant 'birds' dwell. Rural migrants account for two-thirds of the total number of GoodPath's residents. All the buildings are concrete houses, three to five storeys in height, built in the past 15 years by the local peasants, from which derives the name *nongmin fang* ('peasant flat').

> The reason for a five-floor house is mainly that my parents tried to build a taller building than our neighbours. Well it's about *mianzi*. Now thanks to those migrant workers, all vacant rooms are full.

Mr Fan's family had built one of these buildings, in which eight rural migrant families now live. Chun's family from Jiangxi province is one of them. In the corner of the room (Fig. 1.4) a pile of unpacked luggage seemed to indicate that the family is about to move out, or arrived only yesterday. Actually Chun has lived here for eight months.

A yard outside provides an extended living space. Here women cook in the open air on simple stoves; young men play cards around a short table; young mothers gossip with their female friends while breastfeeding their babies; children play at hide-and-seek behind strings on which their neighbours' underwear hangs. Many 'indoor' activities take

Fig. 1.4 Peasant flats in the new villages

place outside – not only because there is simply not enough room inside, but also because these residents, who have come from a rural area, like to maintain their habit of 'living in public'.

The fourth stop: The digital centre

Adjacent to the bustling new villages, the digital centre is another place full of life and colour (Fig. 1.5). The centre is a collection of 24 shops dealing with mobile phones, digital products and other digital services, for example digital photographic studios. Displays of newly launched mobile phones or internet payment structures are everywhere. One can find a range of smartphones varying from 300 RMB (US $45) to 4,000 RMB (US $600), as well as easy to use mobile phones for elderly citizens featuring larger buttons and louder sound (Fig. 1.6).

Chapter 2 discusses the budget smartphone market in the context of social media usage. Since early 2013 rural migrants have dramatically boosted the consumption of smartphones, especially budget smartphones. Ma Yu, a mobile phone dealer, rightly spotted the trend of smartphone use among rural migrants:

> Ninety-five per cent of budget smartphones were sold to local rural migrants. Those rural migrants know clearly what they want . . . they care about the memory card, the quality of the mobile phone camera, and whether it can play games, take videos, etc.

Fig 1.5 The local digital centre

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Fig 1.6 Mobile phones for elderly citizens

For rural migrants, a smartphone has become the ‘everyday essential’ since it is their only private access to the internet and all the digital entertainment to be found there. Where demand exists, a market will supply. Cheap digital content is also available in the digital centre. For 5 RMB (less than US $1), you can get 50 music tracks, while 10 RMB will buy five full-length films. Catalogue books for music tracks, smartphone pictures and films are piled up on tables for consumteers to select their purchases. All the content is smartphone-friendly; in most cases, people bring their smartphone to the shop and download content direct from the shop owner’s computer. Mr Zhu, a shopkeeper selling digital products, explained why the digital content business is profitable: ‘Most of them (rural migrants) don’t have a PC and they usually don’t have broadband at home, so they are willing to pay a bit money to buy them here.’

The fifth stop: Factory plants

From the digital centre, cross a provincial motorway to reach the industrial area of GoodPath. Here are more than 60 factories, many less than eight years old, though still older than the newly planted trees along the roads. The small trees and roads of equal width, with road signs marked in arabic numerals, combine with the identical factories to give the whole area a bland uniformity.

These factories are massive. Each plant covers around 8,000 m^2, and holds 700–1,000 factory workers. Even in daytime there is no

Fig. 1.7 Scene from the assembly line in a factory plant

natural light inside the factory plants, and the air is full of incessant loud machine noise and the pungent smell of paint. Steel is one of the main raw materials. Every day hundreds of rolls of steel plate are shipped to the factory, where usually one worker works with one machine to cut the original material into various shapes. The logic of the assembly line is 'humankind as a part of the machine', and the noise and the relentless assembly line certainly deprives people of any possibility of conversation. There is only limited automation here: labour remains cheaper than a fully-automated production line. Following the pre-set machine pace, a factory worker repeats his or her action roughly 2,000 times per day.

Jing, a 19-year-old factory worker on an assembly line, told me the trick of 'not missing one punch' is to 'forget yourself'. 'If you think things, your hands will slow down and you can't follow the machine,' she explained. Yet it is important to recognise that these factory workers do have options. After working at the factory for three months Jing got fed up. She then left her job and found a new one as a shop assistant in an accessories shop on the high street.

Labour work in a factory is divided into assembly line and heavy manual labour. Women are always welcomed as factory workers, since they are regarded dexterous, attentive and obedient. Compared to manual heavy labour, assembly line work is relatively light and dominated by women. Given the mechanisation taking place in the factories, more and more heavy manual labour will be replaced by the assembly line. As

a result young women can find a job easily in GoodPath, whereas young men find it more difficult to get a job, especially if they do not want to do the heavy manual labour. In the factories Jing earned 3,500 RMB (US $583) per month if she worked ten hours a day, 29 days a month. On the high street, by contrast, her month salary is 2,500RMB (around US $417).

> They (factory managers) like young women to work on the assembly line, you know; they thought we were obedient (*ting hua*) and attentive (*zi xi*). Young women are the best. Men are nothing compared to us. But it's so tiring working in the factories. I prefer to work here even though I earn less.

Jing is typical of a new generation of rural migrants. She dropped out of middle school after a big row with close friends at school. At that time all she wanted was to see the outside world, to escape. School was boring, and she felt lonely since her parents and all her relatives had left the villages to work in factories. Jing did not think twice before joining them. The older generation shared the common Chinese aspirations based on achievement through education and hard work, but Jing's generation pride themselves on 'playing it cool', and the motivation driving migration is more about a chance to see the world.[64] The new generation change jobs more often than the old generation, and are more selective about jobs.[65]

The end of the tour

We have looked around GoodPath, and what we have seen in the town centre has set the context for exploring social media usage in later chapters. As a result of this tour it should be clear why it would be quite misleading to imagine this book as simply situated in 'China'. Rather, we should start with a very open mind as to who these people might be, and not make assumptions about their values or concerns.

As we shall see, this 'new generation' of rural migrants is very different from its parents: they are motivated more by interest and have stronger aspirations to 'see the outside world'. This very particular population has emerged as working adults alongside the rise of new media and social media in China. So this book is not about how a given population takes up and appropriates this new media. It rather considers a situation in which a population that never previously existed assumes its new form very much

under the influence of the capacities they find in smartphones and social media. Social media in turn can only be appreciated if we understand the very dynamic context within which it is being formed.

A final note on methodology

This book is based on a 15-month period of ethnography in GoodPath. In undetaking our tour of GoodPath you have experienced something of doing field work with me and seen how I gained data and insights – by walking around, listening to what people say, observing what people do and being a participant in their daily lives.[66] In anthropology we call this method of data collection in ethnography 'participant observation'.[67] So what is special about 'participant observation'? As the anthropologist Margaret Mead rightly pointed out, there are actually several layers of self-representations in a person's social life. 'What people *say*, what people *do* and what *they say they do* are entirely different things,' she observed. In many cases, simply doing questionnaires or interviews (that is, collecting what people *say*, or what people *say* they *do*), is quite different from observing what they actually *do*. Self-expectations, social norms and taboos may prevent people from saying what they really do and think in daily life, or sometimes people simply fail to express themselves articulately. Thus it is essential to observe what people do in their daily lives over a relatively long period of time. Another reason why long-term field work is so important is that it enables the researcher to become 'taken for granted' in the landscape and even to become friends with his or her informants. Nobody will behave naturally if they are aware of 'being watched', so effective observation only really starts at this point. In my case, several times people came back to me after knowing me for six months or more and admitted that stories they had told me when we had first met had not been true, because they had not really known me at the time.'

There were also some specific and local issues. At first a key problem was the suspicion of factory owners that researchers can be undercover journalists. I encountered such hostility on the first day when I was taking photographs of a factory building. The security guard dashed out and urged me to leave: 'Our boss said no journalists!' It took people no time to spot me as somebody 'unusual' – somebody who was not a rural migrant looking for a factory job.

A friend suggested that I should work on relationships (*gao guanxi*), rather than regulations to gain access to factories. 'The smaller the place

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is, the more important the social relations (*guanxi*) become.' Just as she said, *guanxi* opened factory doors for me. After several twists and turns of social networking, I managed to get an introduction to a factory owner by his family friend, a previous student of a family member of mine. Thanks to that, my presence was finally no longer seen as an unpredictable threat. A temporary factory ID card that allowed me to visit the factory plant without extra permission was issued, and a room in the factory where I could stay during my research was allocated to me. Before even entering the factory, I had learnt one of the most important lessons about my field site: in most cases, the local society is based on personal social relationships. I could therefore understand the strategy of migrant workers making a living in a strange place better, as so much of it depended on their personal social networks.

Being a friendly and trusted outsider turned out to be most rewarding thing. People shared their opinions freely with me without worrying that I would judge them, and confessed their secrets to me without worrying such secrets would be revealed.[68] Having said this, it was a constant struggle to try to explain to people that an anthropologist, a word they had never heard, was not a journalist who has a channel to report local problems, nor a philanthropist who has resources to help them, nor an official who has the power to improve conditions. Even though some turned their back on me after their requests for money or a job from me were turned down, in most cases relationships between me and local people were built on an emotional, rather than an instrumental basis.

Curiously, my situation as an outsider seemed to draw a parallel when it comes to the role of 'strangers' on social media in migrant workers' daily lives. As we will examine further in Chapter 4, among migrant workers, friendships with strangers established and maintained but remaining only on QQ, have become an important part of their social lives. Unlike offline relationships, which are usually constrained to fixed social roles and mixed with various practical needs, online relationships were viewed as 'purer' relationships based on feelings and emotions.

In order to cover the diversity of local people, I applied various methods (Fig. 1.8). For instance, I often had several different breakfasts on the same morning in various breakfast booths in order to chat with 'strangers' who shared the same table with me. I visited all the shops on the high street one by one to do interviews and questionnaires, and paid a regular visit to waiting halls of different banks, clinics and train or bus stations to observe and chat with people. I also helped at a local mobile phone shop, giving me access to the first-hand material of the local mobile phone market and the opportunity to get to know a lot of

Fig. 1.8 (a) Wang driving a forklift truck at a factory; (b) Wang eating one of several breakfasts that she had in one morning at local breakfast booths as part of a plan to get to know more people; (c) Wang conducting a survey of workers from a temporary bed made of protective netting on a building site. (Three small paintings from a traditional Chinese painting booklet 'Field Note', 31.5 × 384 cm; painter: Xinyuan Wang)

customers. On top of this, to avoid unnecessary suspicion, balance in different social networks had to be carefully maintained. Few factory workers knew I had a good relationship with their bosses, and factory owners and senior managers did not know that I was very close to their workers.

In terms of quantitative data, questionnaires[69] were conducted online and offline. The problem in practice was unwillingness and inability to complete a questionnaire. For most people a formal academic questionnaire was challenging and even intimidating, given the limited education they had received.[70] Thus questionnaires were usually finished under my explanation in colloquial language. In general research inquiries were integrated in casual chatting both online and offline, situations in which real thoughts were more likely to be revealed.

Naturally an ethnography about social media was also conducted through social media. First of all, thousands of postings on social

media profiles are vivid, original records of people's thoughts and living experiences. For this reason Chapter 3 is devoted to a discussion and analysis of the actual postings we find on personal social media profiles. This is not just a place of observation, however: it is also one of engagement. In GoodPath social life usually took place in noisy and public environments such as restaurants or open-air markets. There are very few places which allow for relatively private, 'one-to-one' talks. Social media thus became the place I talked with people privately about personal feelings and problems. Furthermore, social media helped me to overcome the communicative problem caused by the high mobility of migrant workers. In 2014, after the Chinese New Year break, almost one-third of the factory workers I had got to know did not come back to GoodPath. A few women got married and stayed in their home villages, but most of the workers simply got a new job in a different factory town or city. In the factory where I stayed, half of the factory workers were newly recruited. In such a situation, social media became almost the only way in which I could retain contact with former factory worker friends.

In addition to the ethnography in GoodPath, in July 2014 I spent one month in Shanghai – the closest metropolis, a few hours from GoodPath by train. I went there to conduct surveys and in-depth interviews among the urban Chinese. The trip to Shanghai was actually inspired by people in GoodPath. In the late stages of my research, the powerful longing to become urban and modern among migrant workers, clearly reflected in their social media postings, prompted me to have a look at the way in which urban Chinese use social media. In many ways the use of social media among this 'control group' in Shanghai[71] presented a contrast with rural migrant usage of social media, which helped to resolve other questions – such as whether certain uses of social media are better explained in terms of the specific population or the social media platform, or both. As a last note, I also applied my artistic skills to record the field work. All of the traditional Chinese paintings included in this book and translations of the calligraphy can be found at the 'visual ethnography' website (http://www.visualethnographyxy.co.uk).