5. Social media, politics and gender

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Social media, politics and gender

The previous chapter focused upon social relationships seen through the lens of social media. Throughout that chapter, however, it was clear how far such relationships may also involve issues of power that have to be negotiated and are often exposed through being posted online, for example in the relationships of parents to children, in-laws and other family members. The focus in this chapter is directed more clearly towards this issue of power, exploring two of the most important regimes within which issues of power predominate. The first part will concentrate on the political sphere, which as will become clear may start with questions about state power but is actually mostly about power relationships between those present on the field site. This is followed by a consideration of gender, which will emerge as one of the most dynamic fields of power in contemporary life: both migration to factories and migration to online have had an impact on this.

These two fields of 'gender' and 'politics' both stood out from the mass of field work, but in quite contrasting ways. In the case of gender, it was because of its ubiquitous presence on social media; in the case of politics because of its conspicuous absence. For most people whose knowledge of China comes mainly from news reporting in the West this will come as no surprise, and it may be assumed that there is quite a simple explanation. Political content would be subject to censorship, whereas most gender issues would not. As we have seen for almost every topic covered in this book, however, an ethnographic account provides very different and often unexpected insights into the nature of Chinese social media. Often this means starting by questioning what terms such as 'politics' mean in this very different context. Similarly we shall see that once again there are quite specific issues regarding this particular 'floating' population. Gender relations may not only be different from other parts of China, but an ethnography can reveal how they may have

radically changed even in comparison to a previous decade. This is really the primary aim of this chapter.

The two topics also work together as will become evident, since exploration of the political field quickly descends from issues of formal politics to the sphere of more personal relations that could be termed micro-politics – a term that applies equally well to the issues of gender as found through the role of social media in peoples' daily lives.[1]

Topics such as gender and politics also stand out because we have many preconceptions around them, and often want evidence to fit with a particular stance or concern. However, the task of ethnography is to try and resist the temptation to make evidence fit such preconceptions or interests. Instead we will first try to examine in some detail how both gender and politics actually circulate on social media, and then to explain these in terms of the wider ethnographic evidence – the actual concerns and relationships of this particular group of people.

Part A: Social media and politics

Politics is one of the least common genres of posting on social media among rural migrants, as shown in Chapter 3. On the other hand, a proliferation of studies claim digital media to be a potentially powerful tool for spreading democracy, encouraging political participation, carrying forward social justice and empowering civil society.[2] So what does the political silence on social media among ordinary Chinese tell us?

To date studies on Chinese politics in the digital age have tended to concentrate on Chinese online censorship[3] and on political participation online among political elites and activists.[4] Rarely has equal attention been given to the majority of the population – the ordinary people (especially non-political activists), including a massive working-class population. 'What is ordinary people's attitude to politics?' and 'How do ordinary Chinese people experience, perceive and talk about politics offline and online?' are still questions requiring answers.

The discussion will start with an examination of Chinese online censorship. From there discussion proceeds through four case studies, intended to show how factory owners, local middle-class citizens, ordinary rural migrants and rural migrants with a high level of education all occupy their respective place in the political spectrum. The discussion will focus on the political attitudes and consequential social media behaviour of these four different local social groups. By considering these different situations and perspectives, we reach a better position to

discuss the role social media plays in ordinary Chinese people's political lives, and to explore the relationship between political engagement on social media and the governance of the Chinese party-state.

Internet censorship in China

In the 2014 report of World Press Freedom Index,[5] China (PRC) was categorised as a country with a 'very serious' situation of press freedom, the worst ranking on the scale. From nationwide and multi-level media monitoring systems to the Great Firewalls, from Google's withdrawal from mainland China to the jailing of dissident journalists, bloggers and activists, it has been widely known that the Chinese party-state has long kept a very pervasive and tight rein on both traditional and new media.[6]

Generally speaking, censorship in China is implemented in a 'three-layer-filtering' system that includes at least three types of approaches simultaneously: Great Firewall, keyword blocking and manual censoring (Fig. 5.1).

The first filter is so-called the 'Great Firewall', which blocks off certain websites and social media services (such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) from mainland China. The second filter is 'keyword blocking', which automatically prevents people from publishing content containing banned keywords or phrases online. Given the nature of the Chinese language, however (different characters can have the same pronunciation, and many characters look similar), people can easily replace those banned characters with alternatives, either possessing similar sound (homophones) or similar shape (homographs).[7] The third filter is thus the last line of defence, in which 'improper' information that slipped through the cracks of the previous two filters will be censored manually. Given the huge amount of information online, the labour invested in 'manual censoring' is remarkable: it includes 20,000–50,000 internet police (*wang jing*) and internet monitors (*wang guan*) nationwide, around 250,000–300,000 '50-cent party members'[8] (*wu mao dang*), and up to 1,000 in-house censors hired by each individual website for the sake of 'self-censorship'.[9]

Having said this, as a recent piece of research from Harvard on Chinese censorship pointed out, criticism of authority will not necessarily be censored: the real goal of censorship is to reduce the possibility of collective action by clipping social ties, regardless of the nature of the collective movement is (whether against, in support of or completely neutral about the authority in question).[10] That is to say, it is possible for individuals to

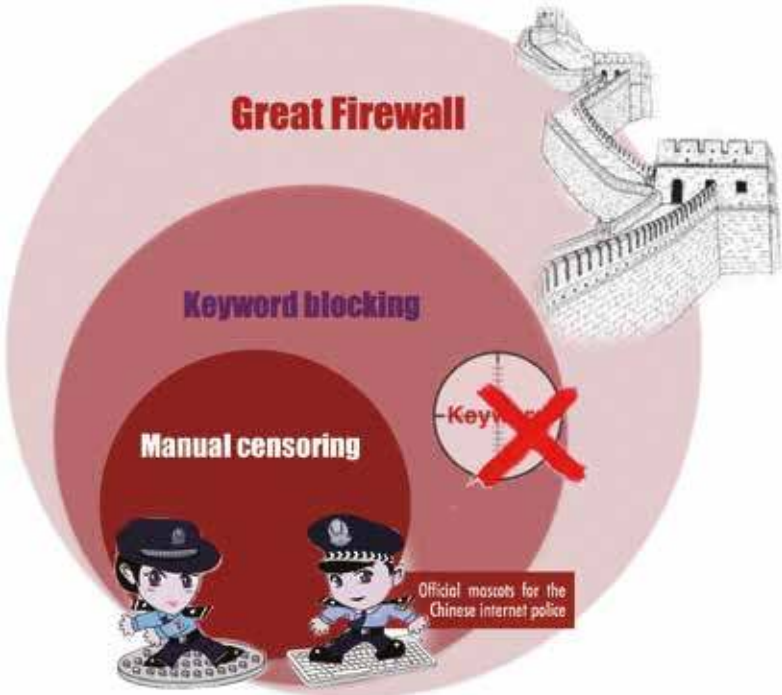

Fig. 5.1 Internet censorship in China

express their political opinions freely as long as such free speech will not lead to any potential collective action. From this view, Chinese people may be said to be 'individually free but collectively in chains'.[11]

This Harvard research is a large-scale quantitative analysis of Chinese censorship. However, the data informing this research was all collected from public media platforms to which researchers have easy access, such as Weibo and other BBS online forums. As for private media platforms, neither QQ nor WeChat, the two dominant social media platforms, were covered by this research. The reason, as Chapter 2 noted, is because the privacy settings on these two social media platforms are much stricter than on public digital media platforms. It is impossible to gain access to content on personal social media profiles unless the researchers themselves become online 'friends' of millions of individuals, which is also impossible. Given that both public digital media platforms and personal social media profiles are subject to the same censorship mechanism, the Harvard research throws light on our understanding of the censorship of personal QQ and WeChat. In

the light of such a report the responsibility of the ethnography, with its access to hundreds of personal social media profiles of ordinary Chinese people, is to provide a more detailed and nuanced picture that simply cannot be achieved from merely quantitative analysis.

The living experience of politics – offline and online

The section above is clearly significant in addressing one of the most common questions, namely 'What do ordinary Chinese people think about internet censorship and how do they deal with it?' Yet the problem is that both question and answer tie the issue of politics almost entirely to the question of censorship. What if the majority of ordinary Chinese people are not particularly engaged with issues of censorship, nor feel that they have any particular experience of internet censorship on their social media profiles? The section that follows is very different because it is derived not from questions posed by outsiders, but is rather an attempt to engage with the practices encountered through the ethnography. This leads to a much broader interpretation of politics, in which issues of censorship are not particularly prevalent.

'Be in love with the government, but don't marry it'

Family-run businesses constitute the mainstream business model in GoodPath. More than 90 per cent of factory owners were formerly local peasants, and more than one-third of them have no education above middle school. Factory owners often attribute their success to the opportunities of 'doing development/industrialisation' (*gao kai fa*) led by the state party and local government, and regarded themselves as the group of people who 'got rich first' (*xian fu qi lai de*).[12] During this time China started to introduce the market economy and struggled to throw off the shackles of Maoist egalitarianism.[13] Mr Lee, the factory owner in GoodPath, who was born in a neighbouring village and became a billionaire in his early forties by opening three massive factories, once said gratefully: 'It's thanks to Deng: otherwise I would be just a peasant, farming all day long.'

It is commonplace that local factory owners see the policies established by Deng, which were friendly to private enterprise, as the main reason why they escaped from rural life to become those who 'got rich

first'. As stakeholders, factory owners usually hold a very cautious political attitude; as Mr Lee said: 'You'd better just focus on business, don't touch politics at all.' However, this concept of 'don't touch politics' is really about not having an overt political stance; it in no way detracts from the practical problems that make constant dealing with the government a necessity. Keeping a good relationship with local government was essential for factories. In practice, this meant keeping a good personal relationship (*guanxi*) with local government officials, as social structure in China 'rests largely on fluid, personal-centred social networks, rather than on fixed social institutions'.[14]

There was very limited political content on factory owners' social media profiles. One of very few politics-related postings on a factory owner's WeChat read: 'Be in love with the government, but don't marry it.' Mr Zhu, a factory owner visiting from a nearby town and the source of this post on WeChat, further explained:

> We [factory owners] should always show love for them [local officials] so that they won't make trouble for our factories, but we should be cautious about making a commitment to any specific official, just in case things change.

By showing the love, Mr Zhu meant maintaining a *guanxi* with local officials. *Guanxi* can be used as instrumental tool to gain potential benefits, but not all the social connections will lead to a *guanxi,* since this needs maintenance and investment.[15] The common practice was to engage with local officials through various leisure activities, for which it would be necessary to pay. Previously, the most common one would be to have elaborate dinners together. Since the middle of 2013, however, people in GoodPath had also become sensitive to the strong impact of the nationwide 'combating corruption' campaign,[16] so dining in public with officials was avoided. As Mr Zhu explained:

> These officials had become very cautious about public appearances, since if anybody takes photographs of them having a meal with us in restaurants and uploads them to the internet, they will be in trouble. But, you know, there is always an alternative way of keeping good *guanxi* with them.

It is true that there are alternative ways of keeping a *guanxi* with officials. The way Mr Zhu dealt with a local official is through WeChat. Mr Zhu's niece was the high school classmate of the daughter of the

deputy director of the local police authority. During the Chinese New Year in 2014, the WeChat red envelope game[17] was popular among students in his niece's class. Knowing that, Mr Zhu transferred money to his niece's bank account and asked her to send several WeChat red envelopes containing 2,000 RMB in cash in total (around US $340) online to the deputy director's daughter. '2,000 RMB is nothing to me, just a small gift. But it is enough to make a teenager very happy, and parents always want to see their children happy, you know,' Mr Zhu explained.

Even though 2,000 RMB is almost a month's salary for a factory worker, this amount of money is definitely 'a small gift' in the owner's eyes compared to potential penalties his factory would face if it had problems with the police. In this case, *guanxi* ties up the exchange between money and power and is officially regarded as bribery.[18] However, ordinary Chinese people do not necessarily regard it as such, since 'gift exchange' is so essential and pervasive in the daily practice of *guanxi*.[19] As we will see in Chapter 6, such a concept of doing *guanxi* through gift exchange has also been widely applied to the relationship between people and deities. More importantly, here social media is definitely not the place to express political opinions. Instead, it is an efficient tool to maintain a good *guanxi* with government officials.

Besides keeping *guanxi* with the government, the way in which factory owners managed their factories showed some genuine understanding of the national policy of avoiding the threat of collective actions to 'maintain stability' (*weiwen*).[20] The recruitment principle of local factory workers is to 'avoid recruiting factory workers from the same village or from the same family' because it is much easier to manage factory workers who are not connected. Incidents in the past had involved a whole group of factory workers quitting their jobs together; the factory consequently lost the labour for a whole assembly line overnight and was unable to deliver orders on time.

This principle was always difficult to follow, however, as relatives and fellow villagers provide the essential network in rural migrants' job-hunting. Ensuring that factory workers are not connected is thus always a big headache for employers. As one explained:

> I asked my people in charge of recruiting new workers to observe them [rural migrants] first. If they are lively (*huo po*), we are not going to take them. People who are sociable are not suitable material for factory work; they can easily be distracted, get bored about things, become discontented about things, and in the worst case they will arouse dissatisfaction (*tiao shi*) in others.

This suggests that the local governance of factory workers by their employers is closely aligned to the very same principle of Chinese internet censorship. Both aim to remove the potential for collective action. It has been commonly anticipated that as China experiences increasing economic growth, private entrepreneurs will begin to claim their political rights and thus promote the process of democratisation.[21] However, the findings among factory owners do not support this optimistic view. Chinese entrepreneurs turn out to be the least politically active, generally supporting the party-state[22] and wanting to keep the status quo.[23] Factory owners represent the very few local residents who actually own the majority of local wealth. Beneath that level exists a much wider spectrum of local residents, who, despite not managing to become super rich still see themselves as living relatively prosperous (*xiaokang*) lives. The political attitude of this local middle class, explored in the next section, represents the mainstream of local residents in GoodPath.

Politics as a football game

Mr Huang is a typical local middle-class resident, now in his late forties. He was born and grew up in GoodPath and now owns a grocery shop. In his shop, under the transparent table mat of the cashier's desk, Mr Huang kept his newspaper clippings. One of them is an entire newspaper of photographs of the top leadership of Chinese Communist Party. To Mr Huang's surprise, his cat always chooses to sit right on the portrait photo of Chairman Xi. He wryly observes that '40 years ago, I would probably have been put in jail just because somebody saw my cat sitting on the face of the great leader'. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, a colleague of his uncle was prosecuted, charged with despising the great leader, Chairman Mao, as he had used a newspaper featuring an image of Mao to make insoles. Mr Huang ended his insoles story with a robust, confident statement: 'So we are both lucky you know, that we live in such a peaceful and reasonable age, and China is so powerful in the world.' Clearly he was content with the status quo and full of national pride.

On his Qzone, Mr Huang's favourite political topics were the rise of China and some historical anecdotes of political struggles – reflecting his oft-repeated view that 'men should care more about big affairs of state (*guojia dashi*) and leave those insignificant household trivia to women'. However, none of his political interests were in the sphere of local politics. The unwritten rule shared by people was that local political issues should appear only in offline situations rather than on social media. On

social media, Mr Huang is a typical example of 'passive political participation'. To be able to talk about politics, including making innocent jokes about politicians, seems to be an important and necessary social skill for local middle-aged men, helping them to appear smart and masculine in front of their peers. For this purpose, social media was mainly used to 'watch' politics, in the way that football fans watch a match, rather than to 'do' politics. Similarly, when people watch a football match very few would question the basic rules of the game. On the contrary: the premise of fully enjoying the game is a sophisticated knowledge of all the rules and the ability to follow them. Like Mr Huang, many local middle-class men have a reasonable knowledge of the rules of 'playing' politics in China, but it is highly unlikely that they would challenge them. The parallel between following sport and politics is even closer, since both have become important components of contemporary Chinese ideas of masculinity. Local middle-aged men use social media to make fun of politics and to make innocent jokes; they gossip about politicians with their male friends in quite a similar fashion to the way in which they joke and talk about watching football.[24]

Both factory owners and the local middle class support the status quo, and their social media behaviour seems to be consistent with this attitude. In the next section, the situation is found to be different among rural migrants. The very concept of 'rural migrant' is itself a direct product of political developments in post-Communist China. This population is also one of the most vulnerable social groups, facing all kinds of social problems in the face of the rural–urban divide and pervasive social discrimination.[25] However, on their social media profiles there were very few references to politics, especially local political issue of immediate concern.

'I have no interests in politics, but being a Communist Party member is so useful'

After several sleepless nights Makang, a factory migrant worker in his thirties, decided to stay at the factory for another six months even though his disabled father and three-year-old son, who had remained behind, desperately needed him to come back. The main reason for his decision was a 'probationary Communist Party member' certificate which he had not yet received from the factory party branch. If he chose to quit his job at that moment, all his previous efforts would be in vain: the village party branch would not recognise the political screening undertaken at

the factory party branch unless he had already obtained a 'probationary Communist Party member' certificate.

To join the Chinese Communist Party involves an extremely rigorous and long screening process lasting at least three years. Applicants first need to attend study sessions, make a sustained effort to join party activities, submit self-assessment reports regularly and subject themselves to monitoring by the party branch on a daily basis (each applicant is assigned two Party liaison members, who monitor and assess the applicant's political loyalty, work performance and social relationships). Two years of monitoring is followed by a closed-door evaluation, in which an applicant's political background, as well as that of his or her parents and other important kin, is examined. If the candidate passes the evaluation, he or she will become a 'probationary Communist Party member', who will be under closer monitoring by the Party branch for another year before finally being accepted as a formal member.[26]

'I have no interest in politics at all, but being a Party member is so useful,' Makang explained. The Communist Party membership is viewed as a scarce political resource that in practice can be turned into economic benefits.[27] The situation is more obvious in villages, since in China direct democratic elections only take place at village level.[28] In villages local Communist Party members enjoy more political rights than ordinary villagers, meaning they enjoy not only higher social status, but also better welfare and some 'grey' income. For instance, if a village wants to sell collectively owned farmland to developers, only local Communist Party members have the right to vote on the decision. As mentioned previously, naturally those who can vote become the target of developers to make *guanxi*. To join the Party has become extremely difficult in villages. Current Party members always try to keep the balance of political power among various big families in a village, thus the allocation of the Party membership is in most cases pre-decided. For most villagers, like Makang, who do not come from a big family with political influence, one of the alternative ways to join the Party was through the factory outside the village.

Now it is not difficult to understand why Makang decided to make such a huge effort to join the Party. For him, such an active and direct political participation was perceived as nothing to do with politics. The pursuit of Party membership was more like purchasing an insurance to provide some of the security that he had not yet experienced in 'floating' life.

None of the topics discussed above had ever appeared on Makang's Qzone. Here there are very few reference to politics; over a whole year, there are only five postings about politics out of 59. The

five postings consist of two 'anti-Japan' posts, one 'anti-corruption', one about the social inequality suffered by rural migrants and one about the rise of China as an economic and political power.[29] Posts were consistently on the national or even international level; even though some specific local events did appear, all of them referred to events in other parts of China. The pattern of MaKang's political postings on social media is typical among rural migrants: local political matters, which have most immediate concerns to people, have hardly any visibility on social media.

Furthermore, on rural migrants' social media, postings about the leadership of China were usually very positive. The positive image of Chinese leadership on public internet arena is the result of political propaganda,[30] but the equally positive impressions on personal social media indicate the fact that many people appear to believe it. For example Yan Mei, a migrant worker, commented 'In China the high officials (*da guan*) of the leadership are very good; only local officials (*xiao guan*) are not good'. She also gave a well-known anecdote of the previous premier Wen Jiabao as an example: in 2003, Premier Wen pledged to help migrant workers expedite payment of unpaid wages during his surprise inspection tour after an ordinary rural migrant woman had made a complaint to him about the the wages owed to her husband by a local construction company.[31] The extensive administrative and fiscal decentralisation that China has experienced since 1980 benefited economic development remarkably. However, such decentralisation also led to the situation in which regional bureaucrats are supposed to take full responsibility when problems occur, and so become the target of complaints.[32]

However, such complaints about regional officials are rarely vented on social media. The same Yan Mei who said that 'only local officials are not good' was involved in a demolition dispute. Her family spent three months discreetly approaching various individuals who may have some *guanxi* (social relations) in the local government to help them to remedy their situation, rather than airing their grievances publicly on social media. People are clearly aware of the negative consequences that online exposure of local issues could potentially provoke. A family member of Yan Mei described the position, which also accounts for the political apathy of most rural migrants who see themselves as insignificant individuals in political life:

> You want to solve the problem, rather than make it into a bigger one. Online is for those who want to make big news, or those who

> had no other choice left . . . for our powerless ordinary people, to 'play politics' (*wan zhengzhi*) is meaningless and dangerous: you have no chance of winning unless you are super lucky.

For most workers joining the Communist Party is not really a likely option. Indeed, their relationship to politics of any kind is fairly tenuous. This is partly because as a 'floating' population that does not expect to remain in this particular area indefinitely, they assume they have little at stake in relation to local politics itself – even though political decisions may in effect have a considerable impact upon them.[33] They also assume that no one of any importance would have any real interest in what they think or say. But equally, much as they might wish to be engaged in anything political, they would not have considered social media as an appropriate place for such activities – the very idea of social media is for them so closely related to everyday communication, and also to everyday fantasy, that it would not occur to them that politics should feature there.

Not everybody took an indifferent attitude towards politics, however, and a few did appear politically active. 'Phoenix man' Da Fei, discussed below, represents this minority group.

The 'phoenix man' and his political life

'Around 99 per cent of the people who work on the assembly lines are rural migrants, and only one per cent of the people who sit in the offices are rural migrants.' The seemingly exaggerated situation described by a senior factory manager actually seemed to be consistent with ethnographic observation. The situation arises partly from the fact that local people do not want to take on heavy labour on assembly lines, while the poor educational qualifications of most rural migrants prevent them from gaining more advanced office jobs. But it is also partly due to the management model of local factories, in which factory owners tend to hire relatives and local people, rather than rural migrants, as officials and managers.[34] Given such a rigid rural–urban divide at the workplace, Da Fei, a young man from a rural background with a university education, almost achieved a miracle by becoming a senior manager. The term 'phoenix man' (*fenghuang nan*), from the traditional saying 'a phoenix soars out of a chicken coop' (*jiwo li feichu fenghuang*), is used to refer to this type of rural male – one who came from a humble beginning, but made his way through school and managed to rise to an urban life.[35]

'Phoenix man' Da Fei was also one of the few who constantly showed his strong dissatisfaction with politics, both online and offline. In the factory his main job was to increase efficiency by reducing cost – a task that proved almost impossible in the face of pervasive nepotism. Firstly, most of the senior managers were relatives of the factory owner, and all tended to protect their own interests rather than work with Da Fei to cut costs. Moreover, nepotism existed from top to bottom: everybody tried to put their relatives or fellow villagers into 'juicy' positions, expecting that this would be reciprocated in the future. Da Fei was turned down when he tried to get real information concerning scrap rates from the assembly line, for example, because the worker in charge of reporting the scrap rate was the son-in-law of a section manager; the section manager's family in turn was dealing with the steel recycling business, which benefits from a suspect scrap rate for steel products in the factory. As a result, after a year all Da Fei's efforts proved to be in vain: his only achievement had been to offend all the managers and their relatives in the factory. As a result he became the most unwanted person everywhere, offline and online.

When Da Fei joined the factory, he was added to the WeChat group of all the senior managers. Initially Da Fei was welcomed as he brought interesting news to the group. Gradually he felt the collective hostility against him, as nobody responded to his messages in a group chat at all. The tension became white-hot when a senior manager (a relative of the factory owner) wrote on the WeChat group: 'Why do we need an "outsider" to sort out the family business?' Two days later Da Fei found that he had been removed from the chat group. This WeChat event was the last straw: it made Da Fei quit. Two weeks later he also left GoodPath.

Da Fei's frustrating political struggle offline extended to his Qzone. Here political postings account for the majority. 'The internet is the only weapon we have to push for democracy; online the people's voice will be heard by the world!' he once said proudly. A typical political posting on his Qzone read:

> Those at the top of the power hierarchy always stand high above, enjoying their privileges and welfare, never affected by the situations of economic development. However, ordinary people have to live a tough life. For those who live at the bottom of society, except being submissive to oppression, what else can they do? What a pathetic country.

Like this one, most criticism about corruption, nepotism or the political system on his QQ expressed strong negative personal opinions. However, none of them were censored, which seems to reinforce the argument that the Chinese censorship system does in fact allow people to release very negative emotions and criticism online as long as there is no possibility of these causing collective action.

The reason for highlighting Da Fei's story in this section is not just that he was one of the very few political activists in GoodPath who continued to fight nepotism and to criticise all sorts of social problems online: more importantly, Da Fei's story throws light on a key finding – that in the political lives of ordinary people, the really crucial and effective censorship does not come from the far-reaching party-state, but from one's personal relationships. Internet censorship did not prevent Da Fei from expressing himself online; it was the entire management team that struck the fatal blow by removing him from the WeChat group. This suggests that from an ethnographic perspective we gain little from using highly generalised terms and concepts such as democracy. Instead we need to understand the particular arenas of power and control that operate mainly through social consensus locally in places such as GoodPath. In effect the mass population voted against Da Fei. The issue was not one of democracy, however, but of local and personal feelings and local hierarchies and groups. So overall the abstraction of political discourse is far less important than the everyday practice of local culture.

Furthermore, Da Fei's claim that 'on social media the people's voice will be heard by the world' seems to be over-optimistic. Certainly he was absolutely right about the possibilities allowed by social media, which theoretically empower everybody to make their content available to the world. However in the age of Web 2.0, the information flow works differently – 'the power is no longer in the hands of those who control the channels of distribution; the power is now in the hands of those who control the limited resource of attention'.[36] Social media studies on public-facing social media platforms, such as blogs, Twitter and Chinese Weibo (microblog), have pointed out that in practice only a tiny percentage of social media users have influence in terms of information diffusion. The spreadability of the majority of social media profiles is very limited.[37] The deficiency of information spreadability is even more pronounced on relatively closed social media platforms such as QQ and WeChat.

Furthermore, we might expect that with social media people would share information beyond their previous groups. However, a

comparison of the sharing of 145 social media profiles of factory workers and 55 profiles of middle-class Chinese in Shanghai produces evidence to suggest that they do not. Over a period of four months only one out of 6,000 articles (0.03 per cent) was found to have been shared in both groups, though 5.1 per cent of articles are shared within the factory workers group and 1.6 per cent within the Shanghai group. In the case of rural migrants, the possibility of the same information being shared within the social group with similar social economic status is 170 times higher than the possibility of it being shared across groups with different socio-economic statuses. So while most academic debates are concerned with the problems of sharing information from the West into China, for all intents and purposes one also has to acknowledge the limitations of information flow between two different social groups within China.

Conclusion

In terms of the technological functions of Chinese social media there is simply no reason why Chinese social media cannot work as BBM did in the London riots (2011) or as Facebook and Twitter did in the Arab Spring (2011). The degree to which social media assumes a political function is totally determined by the people who use it, rather than by the affordance of the technology. The key point is that the majority of Chinese people use social media differently – or to be precise, they use it in ways that make sense within a Chinese context.

The main finding has been the wide diversity in the way that the various meanings of 'politics' are interwoven with social media across the four different social groups used here to represented the population of this ordinary factory town. The case studies started from the co-operating and pragmatic political attitude held by most local factory owners and concluded with the critical attitude displayed by a few 'phoenix men'. In between are local, middle-class residents, especially men, who view politics as a form of entertainment, and ordinary rural migrates who either appear totally indifferent to political participation, regarding themselves as insignificant people who are unable to change anything, or see coping with politics as a survival skill. What they view as real politics can be totally unseen, and the 'seen' politics can have nothing to do with real politics. The ethnography also shows that formal government internet censorship does not influence

the online political expression of ordinary Chinese; the way Chinese people do *guanxi* does.

In a way all of this conclusion is pre-empted if we are sufficiently sensitive to the key Chinese term, which in this case is *guanxi*. Because although we translate *guanxi* as a practice of social relations, as noted in Chapter 1, it is equally regarded as integral to political relations in China. From their perspective, ordinary Chinese people join 'politics' through *guanxi,* rather than through any direct relationship to a political institution. Even in the case of factory owners, we have seen how they deal with local government issues mainly through developing and maintaining personal relationships with local officials. For ordinary people, not in any case likely to engage with formal politics, 'politics' is perceived and practised almost entirely as *guanxi*.[38] The key point of this regarding the book as a whole, however, is that instead of looking to see where people post politics on social media, we need to recognise that social media is now integral to *guanxi*. It almost therefore makes no sense to ask what is, or is not, political on social media.

It has probably not escaped notice that every example in this section was male. As mentioned above, in some ways more overtly political expression may be regarded as masculine, in the same way that a keen interest in football might be. Yet that also tells us something important about the politics of gender, to which we now turn.[39]

Part B: The impact of social media on gender

For anthropologists, gender is never just a biological given. It refers to the social norms pertaining to gender identities as men and women, and the types of relations that exist between them – largely social and cultural constructs.[40] These expectations and social relations are aligned in turn with people's other relationships. So when we think of social media and its attendant technologies, for example, we recognise that these also have gendered associations familiar from stereotypes, such as the concept of the nerd or the geek.

In GoodPath an integral part of social media was deeply involved in many aspects of gender relations. People gossiped on social media, where they spent a lot of time patrolling and speculating there, and they shared and commented upon memes or articles online. Both women and men, young and old, joined the 'debate' about what makes a good woman or a good man.

The good women of China[41]

After dinner, a group of women in their forties sat in a circle, chatting. They were gossiping about a young woman, the girlfriend of one of the women's sons.

> She is definitely pretty ... but the problem is she is not *anfen* at all. I saw her mingling with different guys several times; you'd better warn your son to look out...

'*Anfen*' refers to the ideal situation of a well-behaved woman who knows (and adheres to) what she should and should not do in a family situation and in public. In Chinese the word '*an*' means to be content, while '*fen*' refers to one's social role and fate. Thus together *anfen* means to be content with one's given lot, to know its boundaries and never to go beyond them or even think about it.[42] Based on Confucianism, the traditional Chinese family was organised around a rigid hierarchy of age, generation and gender, where elder men held the say within a family and young women were the least significant.[43] In such a context to be a good young women is not only to accept an inferior social status, but also to feel content about it. Any challenge to such a situation would be regarded as *bu anfen* (not *anfen*) – a very negative description of a young woman, indicating her failure to meet the requirement of submission and to perform an appropriate social role.

In GoodPath flirting with the opposite sex in public was considered damaging to a young woman's reputation, whereas it was acceptable if men did so. Also young women were not supposed to take the initiative (*zhudong*) in romantic relationships, as courting was seen as a man's job. Nowadays, even though virginity is no longer regarded as the most important virtue of young women,[44] and premarital sex no longer regarded as a very shameful thing for women, a frequent change of partners still provokes raised eyebrows. Young women in a romantic relationship for more than a year are supposed to get married – having a public relationship without getting married is considered strange. Young people are 'supposed' to get married and have their first child no later than the age of 25. A married couple without a child was also regarded as strange, inviting speculation that there was 'something wrong' and subjecting them to gossip. It is very common to see older people ask young couples whether they are married or whether they have any plans for having a child. To conclude, the mainstream ideas of gender in GoodPath are in many ways still conservative.

Fig. 5.2 A typical anti-*anfen* meme posted by young factory workers

However, the situation is not the same on social media. Partly because the older generation, who holds the idea that *anfen* is essential to be a good woman, have not yet become active users of social media, young people have enjoyed a greater say online. On social media the association of *anfen* is something totally different. Fig. 5.2 shows a popular meme among young factory workers, both female and male. The text embedded on the image reads: 'Youth: a heart which is not *anfen*.'

As discussed in Chapter 3, some anti-mainstream (*FZL*)[45] memes demonstrated rebellious gestures and were very popular among young people. On this meme, *anfen* equates with the non-adventurous – something to be disregarded by young people, who should do something modern and cool instead. More importantly, when young people embrace the general urban idea of being adventurous, they also accept a gender claim that young women should not be *anfen*. Other postings on social media also demonstrated a trend that the pursuit of gender equality has become 'mainstream' among young women online:

> I feel regret that I got married before reading these wise suggestions ['chicken soup for the soul' articles about love and relationships].[46] When my family arranged things [marriage] for me, I was too young to understand what love is.

So declared Yueling Hu, a 21-year-old factory worker, who got married when she was only 19 (Fig. 5.3). Her husband is also a factory migrant

worker from the same village. What made Yueling feel regret was the following: compared to those ideal husbands depicted on the posts she shared on Qzone, her husband appeared to know nothing about romantic love. At the end of the field work, Yueling 'disappeared'. Her husband confirmed that she had been arguing for a divorce for a while, and when she was turned down by him, she ran away from home, leaving her three-year-old son (Fig. 5.3). For many young female rural migrants those posts were the first time ideas of marriage and romantic relationships were publicly discussed, along with a focus on gender equality and the pursuit of happiness. Some young female migrants even reported that they felt very shocked when for the first time they read from friends sharing on QQ about what a marriage should be, and the proper way that a man should treat his wife.

During the 15 months of field work, as far as the researcher knows, six migrant young women left their husbands or had an affair, mainly because they finally realised their marriages were not what they wanted. Even though married men secretly had some affairs, or in most cases purchased sex,[47] none of them divorced their wives for the same reasons as the women mentioned. Among the six women, five, including Yueling, were married to fellow villagers at a very early age, before they experienced rural-to-urban migration; four[48] of them also shared a large number of postings about romantic love and ideal marriages on their Qzones.[49]

However, to put things into perspective, the number of women who make a significant change in their gender relations remains small. In practice, the situation is more mixed and complicated. It is always difficult to determine whether social media is merely a place that is reflecting wider changes in society or if it is in and by itself a liberating and empowering tool for young women seeking to escape from the oppressive gender norms of the offline world. The argument that digital media provide opportunities for people to be able to perform and create identities freely online has also been emphasised by feminist internet scholars.[50] Also, as Chapter 4 has already shown, public displays of intimacy are more acceptable on social media than offline, and many young people see social media as the only place where they can be romantic. Thus from this perspective social media, as a relatively liberating place, strikes a balance with the offline situation where mainstream social norms remain conservative. For these reasons it seems clear that social media is not merely a reflection of other changes, but has emerged as a factor and a force within them.

On the other hand, it is difficult to ignore the strong continuity of gender images of femininity between offline and online. For example, as mentioned in Chapter 3, cute and sweet images were very popular on

social media, especially among young women. Among such images the gesture of *sajiao* is an important strategy.[51] In Chinese to be *jiao* is to be delicate, dependent and vulnerable; to *sajiao* means 'to deliberately act like a spoiled child in front of someone because of the awareness of the other person's affection'.[52] Unlike what is often the case in the West, a Chinese woman who deliberately presents herself as dependent and vulnerable, emphasising her weakness and helplessness in order to get her way, is not criticised, since this has no negative connotations. In a way *sajiao* is actually a highly manipulative way in which young women can survive and succeed in a patriarchal society; to some extent it reflects an indirect shift of power in the dominant gender power structure.[53] The common gestures of *sajiao* involve pouting with big puppy eyes or covering half of one's face to show shyness and vulnerability. The images of *sajiao* on social media visually connect the expressions from a small animal to little girls and then to young women (Fig. 5.4).

Such behaviour can seem to pay dividends in the offline world, as Xiao Ying, a 19-year-old factory worker, observed. 'People always say that a woman who knows how to *sajiao* will enjoy a good life . . . I agree, men take that . . . those who *sajiao* in front of the section manager even gets a smaller workload.' On Xiao Ying's Qzone there are many photos of little girls and young women, as well as some selfies of herself, all in *sajiao* poses. Like Xiao Ying, many young women smartly spot the fact that gender differences are not only a source of women's oppression, but also a source of power if applied well. For this reason the traditional gender norms of a woman, in which she appears vulnerable and inferior, were actually strengthened and reinforced on social media.

When young women became mothers, their social media profiles witnessed a clear image shift, manifested in a great many beautiful food images shared from the internet (Fig. 5.5). In many societies, including China, married women are stereotyped as the primary care-givers.[54] Cooking seems in addition to be universally associated with motherhood,[55] and in China it is believed that one of the core criteria of being a 'good mother' is to cook well.[56]

Furthermore, among all the food images, photographs of soup seem to be dominant. The emphasis on images of soup among young mothers online is not a coincidence. In Chinese cuisine soup is valued as one of the most nutritious dishes.[57] The cooking of soup usually takes a long period of time, patience, delicate heat control and a fair knowledge of ingredients. As such it makes a natural analogy to caring for children, also always considered time-consuming and requiring a good deal of patience, understanding and an ability to control the 'heat' in the

Fig. 5.3 Portrait of Yueling and her son. (A partial image of a traditional Chinese painting 'Marriage Battle', 145 × 75 cm; painter: Xinyuan Wang)

relationship. Thus the frequent sharing of soup photos, the way in which young mothers craft an ideal motherhood online, actually reinforces pre-existing dominant ideals of femininity.

Men: From opposition to feminisation

On the other hand, men appeared less keen on the fact that more and more women were beginning to seek a more equal pattern of gender relations, especially when they found their girlfriends or wives to be

Fig. 5.4 Typical images of *sajiao* on social media

among them. Some became nostalgic like Fuqiang, a 31-year-old factory worker:

> Things have changed a lot nowadays; it's impossible to have a woman who is happy to cook for you and wash clothes for you without nagging you to buy expensive items for her. Women are much more demanding these days.

Fuqiang witnessed how his once *anfen* wife had become more and more difficult to control.

He always advised his fellow workers to be careful about their partners' use of QQ, as in his eyes QQ was largely responsible for the bad

Fig. 5.5 Typical images of food on social media.
The text reads: 'How do you keep your children healthy? Young women, when you are 25, or just older than 22, you will be "upgraded" to being a mother. As a young mother, there are so many things to learn . . . However, there is nothing more important than taking care of your children and making sure that they are healthy. An experienced mother shares several recipes with you here . . .'

influence on women. Dong Jing was one of Fuqiang's colleagues who was getting worried because of this advice.

In 2013 Chinese lunar New Year, 23-year-old Dong Jing went back to his home village in the mountain area of the province of Guizhou[58] to undergo several blind dates arranged by his family. Fortunately for him, one girl's family selected him.[59] Given that Dong Jing only had two weeks' leave in the village before he went back to the factory, the engagement ceremony took place immediately after the two families made a deal. Three months later Dong Jing went back to his village to get married after having seen his bride only twice. According to Dong Jing, the main job he did is to 'sow human seeds'.

On Dong Jing's Qzone there were some very early postings (memes) about love, indicating how much he was looking for romantic love. Since he got engaged those postings have disappeared, seeming to bring a close to his previous fantasy about a girl he had met two years ago in a factory where he once worked. Just before he wanted to take a further step, however, he discovered that a section manager in the same factory was his rival. Unlike Dong Jing, the section manager had his own office room with an air conditioner. Furthermore, he had a local *hukou* (household registration). To cap it all, the section manager was a Communist Party member, which entitled him to enjoy better social benefits (*fuli*) than non party members . . . Compared to all that, Dong Jing had nothing to offer. It was after that frustrating experience of having to give up this girl that Dong Jing finally accepted the idea of an arranged marriage, encouraged by his parents' nagging to get married as soon as possible.

Like Dong Jing, more than half of the rural migrant young people in GoodPath ended up with marriages arranged by their families,[60] even though some of them had various experiences of romantic love before. Marriage indicates a re-allocation of resource between the two families united by the marriage.[61] It has long been recorded in anthropology that in traditional societies marriage is not a personal affair between two individuals; it rather involves two kin groups and thus constitutes a community event.[62] People tend to regard arranged marriages as more 'reliable' than free love in terms of compatible family background, financial capability and lifestyle. For young rural migrants it is not very easy to have a long-term relationship in their 'floating' lives, and even more difficult to find a partner who also meets the family's expectations. For young men the family's approval and support is essential, since the bride price (*cai li*)[63] required by the bride's side is normally way beyond an individual's financial capability. In Dong Jing's case his family had to borrow from a number of relatives to provide at least 80,000 RMB (around US $13,300) in advance. This amount of money was only the average according to the local standard, even though it represented about 8–10 years' worth of savings for the young couple, both of whom worked in a factory.[64]

Dong Jing's new wife was shy, nice and four years younger than him; she had never been outside her village and had dropped out of school in order to help with housework at home. All those features made her an obedient (*anfen*) and virtuous (*xian hui*) woman – a good woman and a perfect wife in fellow villagers' eyes. After they got married Dong Jing gave his wife a brand-new iPhone4, which cost him two months

wages. At that time nobody owned such a high-end (*gao dang*) smartphone in their village. The first-ever iPhone arrived as if it had a halo, and won a lot of 'face' (*mianzi*) for the bride and her family. Nowadays the couple mainly keep contact on QQ via smartphones, which cost nothing after pre-paid data packages.

However, one thing had been bothering Dong Jing, especially after his colleague Fuqiang's warning of the bad influence that QQ exerts on women. One day his newly married wife shared an article with beautiful photographs of 'top honeymoon destinations worldwide' on her QQ profile with a comment that read:

> My husband has never taken me anywhere, let alone to those honeymoon places. What I have is *zuo yuezi* ['sitting the month', meaning confinement in childbirth] . . .[65]

When he read this Dong Jing's first reaction was 'From where did she get all this urbanite nonsense of honeymoons?' To express his disapproval and dissatisfaction he intentionally ignored the posting by not commenting on it. Making no response is quite unusual, since he always commented on his new wife's QQ postings – not only because such action showed his affection for her in public, but also because it marked his position as 'the husband', and so hopefully warned off other male contacts on his wife's QQ:

> I hope she will get the message . . . I mean a honeymoon is something for foreigners or rich urban people. If she is not *anfen*, and always dreams about something I can't give her, she won't be happy.

Dong Jing's case was typical among rural migrant men whose attitude towards gender relations seemed to be ambivalent. On the one hand young men, just like young women, appear to show a great passion for Western-style romantic love, which unfortunately often has to compromise with traditional expectations in the end. However, once they entered married life men expected their wives to behave in accordance with the traditional social norms of *anfen* which they had both previously opposed. The reason for this contradiction is that even though traditional social norms constrain romantic love, they are in favour of a superior male position in a marriage. Dong Jing's story also indicates a situation encountered by many rural migrant women once they have entered married life. Many are placed under huge social pressure to revert to a conservative gender role, even though before marriage they

may have defied convention and been women who are not *anfen*. In practice, different couples had various problems and solutions, but most lived in continual tension between modern and traditional ideas of gender relations in a marriage.

Also, as Dong Jing's story shows, there is a great pressure and urgency for rural young men to get married.[66] There are several reasons for this. First, China has the highest male to female sex ratio at birth (SRB) in the world, particularly at (140:100) in poor rural areas, where most rural migrants come from.[67] Second, as was mentioned in Chapter 1, household registration (*hukou*) has always been one of the greatest obstacles to rural migrants settling down in cities. There are two ways for a rural resident to obtain urban *hukou,* one through property investment and the other through marriage. Given the financial capability of rural migrants, the latter is the only viable choice. However, that choice in practice is only available to women. Marriage is a strategy by which rural women in disadvantaged positions achieve social and economic mobility.[68]

In GoodPath all the local marriages between people with rural and urban *hukou* were between rural women and urban men. In Chinese society, like many other societies, the tendency of the marriage market is for women to marry men of higher socio-economic status, especially when there is a shortage of women.[69] All of this reinforces the evidence that getting married at all has become very difficult for rural migrant men. On the other hand, in traditional Chinese society getting married and becoming a parent is crucial to a sense of identity for men.[70] Single rural migrant men all felt the crisis of their situations, and a remarkable number of them felt a profound sense of failure.[71] Meanwhile the social status of rural women, especially young, unmarried rural women, has been enhanced by such a skewed gender imbalance.

Chinese rural migrants as a whole are a disadvantaged group at the bottom of Chinese social stratification. Most gender studies of Chinese rural migrants seem to focus only on females, assuming that females are the disadvantaged of the disadvantaged.[72] It is true that gender inequality is prevalent in Chinese society, and that in rural areas the situation is more severe. However, what some rural migrant men posted on their QQ suggested that the position is not the same as people assumed when we scrutinise the in-group gender discrepancy among Chinese rural migrants.

The previous section has showcased the way in which *sajiao* (vulnerable and cute) images on social media offered a means for young women to strengthen their traditional gender roles. However, on social media *sajiao* is not the exclusive privilege of young women. It has been

Fig. 5.6 A typical *sajiao* posting by a middle-aged male rural migrant

very common to see men apply *sajiao* too. For example, a middle-aged rural migrant man posted a photo of his wound online (Fig. 5.6), saying: 'I cut myself accidentally; I need someone to comfort me and bring me some fruit!'

Such anti-masculine behaviour can be explained by ethnography. First, rural migrant men as a whole have lost the advantage in the marriage market as described above. Second, Chinese men are supposed to take the main, if not full, responsibility for supporting the family. However, such traditional expectations conflicted with the financial situations and personal capabilities of rural migrant men. As a result, in many cases male rural migrants are actually under much greater pressure in daily life, and feel permanently frustrated by the fact it is impossible to meet social expectations. To summarise, it is no exaggeration to say that male rural migrants actually constitute an equally, if not more, disadvantaged group. Compared to offline situations where men are supposed to respect masculine norms that do not include romanticism, weakness and sensitivity, social media provides the relatively free place where rural migrant men can experiment with what they cannot be in their offline lives – for example, as adopting the strategies of a young woman and playing *sajiao* to get their way in society. This is a remarkable turnaround for a society that has always been known as an example of entirely different gender asymmetries.

Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with two key topics where there is considerable debate regarding the possible impact of social media. Does social media reinforce conservatism, facilitating criticism and subsequent change, or is it a vicarious arena in which things are performed that appear to be consequential but – precisely because they are only online – have no significant impact offline? In both cases this chapter has tried to present concrete evidence that allows us to assess these different possibilities. With regard to politics, for example, the evidence supports the point made in the introduction: rather than empowering or encouraging political participation, the use of social media tends to diminish any motivation for turning discontented thoughts into actual political action. In many ways social media rather helps to monitor and channel public opinion (*yulun daoxiang*) and so further legitimate the Chinese party-state.

The focus on gender is in turn important in helping us to reassess social media's role. From the images of soup posted by young mothers to anti-*anfen* memes shared by young women and those seemingly confusing *sajiao* photographs on the profiles of middle-aged men, social media has served to reinforce, disrupt or simply shift gender roles in different situations.

As we have just seen, a significant break with the social norms of femininity and masculinity occurred in GoodPath when people publicly performed unconventional gendered selves on social media. This was complex to analyse, as the same person can behave differently on social media in different phases of life. For example, when young women retreated from anti-*anfen* public life into the private institution of motherhood, their gendered images on social media changed accordingly. So social media in and of itself is a powerful tool, but not necessarily the key transformative factor. In addition, we need to reflect on some of the underlying factors that have had an impact on peoples' conceptions of gender. These include financial capability, the shifting marriage market and the job market. However, it is the overall migration, with its search for an engagement with modernity, that explains most fully why there is also some acceptance of this modern conceptualisation of gender.

This becomes clearer if we compare what happened in GoodPath to the ethnography of our rural China field site.[73] There QQ, the very same social media platform, has been used in a quite different way in terms of gender relations, although the situation with regard to politics is more similar. In that town men and women mainly shared material which

portrayed what they see as traditional family relationships according to Confucianism, including a large number of pictures of children, parents or happy spouses.[74] The way in which people in our two Chinese field sites use social media to express their different ideals of gender relations is the best evidence for showing that social media is *neither* traditional *nor* liberating in and of itself. At the same time this chapter has also shown that we should not take the opposite route and see social media as merely a passive reflection of offline changes. Our evidence points to a middle ground between these two.

This conclusion follows also for politics, where people do use social media to make critical, sometimes angry[75] points about their lives in general, without turning these into specific attacks on local politicians. Yet this is also where we see a difference between the spheres of gender and politics, since social media has not become a significant terrain for imagining an alternative life within an alternative political regime. When it comes to gender and people's more personal lives, however, that is exactly what social media is becoming important for. Already we have seen how in issues of gender both men and women are starting to imagine worlds that were unprecedented in their prior offline lives. But since this refers to a field of relationships that is certainly undergoing change, it is not simply an alternative fantasy world – indeed what emerges quite clearly is that we cannot reduce this to a dualism of online 'fantasy' opposed to offline 'reality'. One of the reasons for this is that creativity, imagination and transcendent other worlds have always been part of everyday life, reflected for instance in realms such as religion. So the conclusions of this chapter with regard to gender will become clearer as we progress to the next chapter, which focuses on precisely these questions.

With respect to this final point, in many ways the evidence and conclusions of this chapter are only completed by the extension represented by Chapter 7. These discussions of gender open up certain key questions about the place of online images within peoples' lives. Do romantic images or images that reflect greater gender equality online drive or merely represent developments offline? To what extent is social media in and of itself a force for change? These are complex issues, and to some extent online images are bound to be involved in all such processes rather than any one of them.