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Being at Home on Social Media: Online Place-Making among the Kurds in Turkey and Rural Migrants in China

Being at home on social media: online place-making among the kurds in turkey and rural migrants in China
Elisabetta Costa Xinyuan Wang

Introduction

The role that social media have in the everyday life of migrant and diasporic populations has been documented in a growing corpus of literature in anthropology, media and communication studies and sociology (e.g., Alencar, 2018; Alinejad, 2017; Aouragh, 2011; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Diminescu, 2008; Komito, 2011; Leurs, 2014, 2016; Leurs and Smets, 2018; Madianou and Miller, 2013; Siapera, 2014; Smets, 2018; Trandafoiu, 2013; Wang, 2016). Grounded in two long-term ethnographic fieldworks in two towns in southeast Turkey and southeast China, the chapter examines and compares the uses of social media among members of two diaspora groups. These two studies are part of WhyWePost (Miller et al., 2016), a large-scale comparative-research project on the uses and consequences of social media on people's everyday life in nine different countries around the world. Among the field sites included in the WhyWePost project, the two discussed in this chapter are characterized by the presence of diaspora populations, displaced groups of people who feel a connection with a prior home (Clifford, 1994) and do not fully identify themselves with the physical location they live in as consequences of various forms of migration or displacement.

It has been extensively recorded that people can simultaneously inhabit and belong to different physical or imagined places. Media scholars (Morley, 2000) and anthropologists (among others, see Abu-Lughod, 2005; Bernal, 2006, 2014; Mazzarella, 2004; Spitulnik, 1996) have shown the important role of media and new media technologies in the transformation of our sense of place and in the formation of selfhood, identities or communities. The traditional conceptualization of place as bounded location with corresponding culture was followed by accounts that made sense of the increasing mobility and transformations of persons, objects, images and technologies (e.g., Appadurai, 1996). Many have explored our contemporary world as characterized by movements of people and media, which have disrupted previous boundaries and ideas of localities. David Morley proposed that the mass media work as 'disembedding mechanisms' (2000: 149) enabling people to imaginatively escape from their physical location. Appadurai (1996) argued that mass media provide new imaginative resources to craft the self in a global world. More recently, many scholars studied the role of the internet and digital media in reshaping the relationship between place, culture and selfhood in a mobile world (e.g., Bernal, 2006; 2014; Kraemer, 2016; Witteborn, 2014).

This chapter shows that social media, rather than simply being media that connect two offline locations, can become places in their own right, within which people live, maintain relationships and engage in lived experiences (also see Baym, 2010; Boellstorff, 2008; Miller and Sinanan, 2014). Among two populations who don't fully identify themselves with the location where they actually live, practices of online place-making have turned social media into places of belonging of different scale (Morley, 2000; Ahmed, 1999), which resemble the ideal home or homeland.¹ The inhabitants of the field-sites in Turkey and China both engage in practices of online place-making to take control of their own environment and restore a sense of identity, attachment and belonging (Franklin 1990; Tucker 1994).

The Field-site in Southeast Turkey

Mardin is a medium-sized town in southeast Turkey, inhabited mostly by Sunni Kurds, Arabs and Turks, with a small minority of Christian Syrians and Armenians. The 15-month ethnographic research was carried out in the neighborhood called New City (Yenişehir), which has a population of around 40,000 inhabitants. Unlike the old city, which is inhabited mostly by Arabs and Christian Syrians, the New City is populated by a large number of Kurds who have been moving into town from nearby areas since the end of the 1990s. The New City is a fast-developing area, and its more advanced and modern services, schools, shops and houses attract new inhabitants from all around the province of Mardin. The ethnographic data presented in this chapter focuses

on the uses of social media by young Kurds who were born in the New City or moved there with their family during the last two decades.

Kurdish migration to large cities in Turkey and abroad has been a long-term process that significantly increased during the 1980s and 1990s, when the Turkish state implemented a politics of displacement that forced many Kurds to run away from their villages. Since the foundation of the Republic in 1923, the state has implemented policies of assimilation aimed at producing a homogenous nation, built on the denial of religious and ethnic differences. State discourses have denied the existence of the Kurds, who have been labeled 'mountain Turks'; and expressions of Kurdish identity, such as language and music, have been strictly forbidden (Van Bruinessen, 1998). Different rebel groups tried to resist the Turkish assimilation projects, and in mid 1980s the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) started an armed insurgency against the Turkish army and authorities. The conflict between the Turkish State and the PKK is still continuing at the time of writing, after few short periods of ceasefire. State policies of forced displacement, but also economic migration and ongoing processes of urbanization, have scattered the Kurdish population across Turkey, contributing to their assimilation into Turkish society.

Most Kurds living in Mardin arrived from nearby villages and towns in the same province and have a large number of relatives dispersed around Turkey and abroad. Although located in the Kurdish region of Turkey, Mardin has been culturally and economically dominated by the Arab population, which has been allied to the central Turkish authorities. Mardin is a contested town (Biner, 2007), and at the time of my research, most of its Kurdish inhabitants did not fully identify themselves with the identity of the city and the culturally dominant Arab population. Everyday contacts between Kurds, Arabs and Syrians are frequent, but each ethnic group tends to privilege relationships with members of the same group.

Within this context, the maintenance of good relationships with a high number of relatives spread around the country constitutes an important form of Kurdish assertion and resistance to assimilation. In Mardin, many young Kurds use social media to be in touch with extended family members, maintain weak and strong kin ties and meet unknown relatives. This constellation of online kin relationships has created the feeling of being a member of the same lineage and of the same Kurdish community. Previous research showed that media and communication technologies have played a significant role in processes of political-identity construction among Kurds (among others, see Hassanpour, 2003; Mahmud, 2016; Sheyholislami, 2011; Smets and Sengul, 2016). Newspapers, television, radio and the internet have contributed to community-building processes among the Kurdish population in the diaspora and in Turkey. The maintenance of kin ties on Facebook is a new form of connectivity across distances that complements these previous experiences of mediated communities. Yet rather than being a simple replication of older forms of communication, Facebook has made possible new mediated types of belonging that take shape through the reconstitution of traditional kin networks.

Homeland, Place-making and Kin Relationships

For us Kurds, Facebook is a weapon against assimilation! Look at my brother! Most of his friends on Facebook are relatives living all around Turkey. During the '90s life was so terrible here that most of our relatives had to escape from the villages and from Kızıltepe to somewhere else in Turkey. And Facebook is now the only way we have to remain in touch with them. Social media allows us to continue our bond with them and thus exist as Kurds. (Costa, 2016 : 89)

Young Kurds from Mardin often have a few-hundred relatives as Facebook friends. They can be uncles, aunts, great-uncles, great-aunts, nephews, nieces and first, second and third cousins (Costa, 2016) who live in Kurdish villages, towns and cities in Turkey or abroad. Social media users maintain weak ties with them: being present as Facebook friends within the same online space is in itself a way to build and sustain the relationship; it promotes people's sense of belonging to the extended family and provides a sense of togetherness. The architecture of Facebook engenders the feeling of being together in the same place (Pink et al., 2015). Kurds in Mardin love looking at other people's profiles, photos and updates. Posting photos, individual portraits and checking in at restaurants and tourist destinations can be seen as a form of indirect communication with distant relatives. Everybody knows that photos, updates and comments are carefully observed and patrolled by relatives, and they often lead to offline comments, gossip and rumors. Many of

my research participants spend hours scrolling down their relatives' Facebook news feeds and commenting about their life with their sister, brother or parents. Watching relatives' Facebook walls on a smartphone is both an individual and a collective activity, which can take place at home in the evening after dinner with a small group of family members. People seem to crave information about relatives living far away, and Facebook perfectly fulfills these desires. 'Liking' photos is considered an obligation and takes place frequently to show affection towards relatives. Individual portraits often received up to a few hundred 'likes', and people are seriously upset if the 'likes' don't reach a high number. Congratulating relatives for their posted profile photos or everyday achievements is also common and does not require much effort. Another activity that creates connections and obligations is playing Facebook games, like Candy Crush Saga. Facebook is also used by young Kurds to meet new relatives they have never met face-to-face. Many young male Kurds told me that they had been contacted by unknown relatives from western Turkey. They received a friend request, they chatted with them and, in few cases, they met face-to-face.

Networks of relatives can be of different size, but the most frequent connections are between youth and middle-aged groups of the same sex (Costa, 2016). Facebook is used to maintain a large number of weak ties, which have a low cost of engagement (Naaman et al., 2010). Yet, at the same time, it is common to exchange greetings and take part in short conversations in private chats or closed groups with a lower number of relatives, such as first cousins, uncles and aunts. People create closed groups whose size varies between ten and a few dozen members. Here relatives can post job advertisements, ask for hospitality, organize dinners, share interesting pieces of journalistic news or engage in short conversations. Alternatively, people engage in one-to-one conversations with relatives living far away who rarely met face-to-face.

Umut is a 29-year-old married Kurdish man who lives in the New-City. His family moved there in the late 1990s, after leaving the village during the clashes between the Turkish state and the PKK. Umut has around 300 relatives as Facebook friends: 200 are peers of the same sex, and around 100 are women or older relatives. He regularly chats and plays games with around 15 of them, who are male first cousins and young paternal uncles, who grew up with him in the village and then in Mardin. He also speaks with them on the phone and on Skype, and he sometimes meets them face-to-face. He does not have regular conversations with the remaining 285 relatives, but he uses Facebook to be updated and discover more about their lives. He 'likes' the images they post online, reads the updates and carefully observes what they share. He rarely writes comments or chats with them. One day he proudly showed me the picture of a female second cousin who lives in Germany and is particularly beautiful. He showed me the photo of her competing at a local beauty pageant, and he listed all the information he had acquired through Facebook about her: she is not married but has a boyfriend, she is a student at university and she likes cycling and swimming. He has never met her face-to-face, but through Facebook he was able to follow her life and know a lot more about it. As he said:

Before Facebook I was in touch with many of my distant relatives on MSN. We were chatting in the evening. Now we do not do it anymore because we can simply watch each other's Facebook profiles and discover a lot in this way. We chat less now but we know more about each other's life.

Umut has met the majority of his 300 relatives face-to-face at least once in his life. Around 50 of his relatives he has never met in-person. Approximately 100 relatives live in western Turkey, 50 in his native village, many others in Diyarbakir or Europe and only a few dozen in Mardin. Facebook is the only place where he could discover more about their life, and they could discover more about him. Interactions between them were rare outside of social media and were mostly mediated by Umut's fathers and uncles.

Umut considers himself a Kurd who has been assimilated to the Turkish and urban Arab life-style of the city of Mardin. He does not speak fluent Kurdish and very rarely goes back to his native village, where a few-thousand relatives still live. Moreover, he works as a public employee in a state office in a nearby town, and he does not rely on any family business to pay the bills. His kinship network does not play an important role in his everyday life, nor has it helped him find a job. He believes that traditional tribal leaders and alliances have lost authority. This perception comes with a sense of nostalgia for happy earlier times that have been wiped out by urbanization and modernization. Yet, at the same time, Umut is quite proud of his modern and urban lifestyle and claimed that he would never go back to live in his native village. Umut does not write Kurdish online. He is not particularly active in politics, either, but has clear views on the Kurdish issue and votes for the Kurdish party. Self-censorship and state control have prevented him from using social media to share any

political posts. He does not even share Kurdish music or other forms of Kurdish art. Yet, like many other young Kurds living in Mardin, Umüt maintains online relationships with a considerably high number of members of the extended family. These few hundred relatives are often same-sex peers who, together with their siblings of the other sex and their older relatives (not connected to the internet), might compose a whole lineage and tribe.

Kurds, with the exception of the poor peasants, have been traditionally organized into tribes that vary in size from a few thousand to more than a hundred thousand. Despite migration, state policies of assimilation and population resettlement, traditional kinship organizations continue to maintain their significance. They have adapted to the social and political transformations of the last decades, showing an extraordinary resilience (Belge, 2011; Van Bruinessen, 1992, 2002; Yalcin-Heckmann, 1991). For young Kurds in Mardin, traditional tribes and lineages are experienced through the uses of Facebook and WhatsApp. The reproduction of kin ties on social media provides them with a sense of belonging to the traditional lineage and Kurdish community, which is under threat from the effects of displacement, political violence and assimilation. As eloquently argued by Cihan, 'Social media are a tool against assimilation'.

In Mardin, young Kurds have molded Facebook as a place to connect with extended family, relatives and kin dispersed around Turkey and abroad, to resist assimilation and face the disruption created by forced displacement. On Facebook they have recreated traditional kinship systems and constructed a Kurdish world that in many aspects resembles the ideal homeland.

Meanwhile, in the field site in industrial China, rural migrants experience QQ, the Chinese social media, as a place where they have better control of their social life and visualize themselves as modern citizens with self-respect. The place crafted on QQ in many aspects resembles the ideal home, which provides the sentimental sense and feeling of being at home.

The Field Site in Industrial China

The context of the field site in industrial China is what is widely regarded as the largest migration in human history: in 2015, the number of Chinese peasants who had left their hometowns to work in factories and cities had risen to 277.47 million (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016). Such massive rural-to-urban migration has only been possible during economic reform, with heavy demand for cheap labor and with the relaxing of controls on domestic migration through the household registration system (hukou). The hukou policy divides Chinese into rural and urban residents and allocates social welfare, health care, education, etc. according to their places of origin and not their places of residence. Half a century ago, when the hukou policy was strictly carried out, rural people were not allowed to live and work in urban areas. However, even though rural people are now allowed to work in urban areas, under the hukou system they are still registered as rural residents in their respective home villages, and, compared with urban residents, who were born in cities, they have limited access to medical services, education and other social welfare support (Yan, 2008). 'Floating population' (liudong renkou) is the term used to describe the movement pattern of rural migrant workers as they 'float' around for temporary jobs in factories, building sites and, in the service sector, the likes of restaurants. It is difficult for them to settle down and establish a home in the cities where they work. Moreover, researchers have noted that rural migrants are regarded as scapegoats for all kinds of social problems in cities, and they suffer various forms of social discrimination and exclusion (Jacka, 2006; Pun, 1999).

GoodPath is a small factory town in southeast China where the author conducted 15 months of fieldwork, which entailed daily interaction with more than 150 key informants, 500 hours of in-depth interviews and analysis of more than 4,000 social media posts. The town used to be a cluster of villages, but a decade of industrialization has turned the majority of the farmland into a massive industrial area, with more than 60 factories and 200 companies. Rural migrants account for two thirds of the current resident population. Like many other Chinese 'urban villages', newly developed in the process of rapid industrialization and urbanization (Hao et al., 2013), economic and social development in GoodPath is unbalanced: crime rates have shot up and living conditions deteriorated, with local people blaming rural migrant workers for all the troubles. The social separation between the local residents and the migrant workers is obvious. Seventy-two percent of rural migrants reported that they had no communication with local people apart from functional relationships, such as 'shop owner/customer', 'landlord/tenant' and 'factory manager/factory worker'.

Tens of thousands of migrant workers live in GoodPath, but almost none of them regard the place where they live as a home. Referring to the small humble room which he shares with three other young migrant workers, Tong Hua, a 23-year-old forklift driver, claimed 'It is just where I sleep during the night... of course it's not a home. I never feel it like home'. At that time, Tong Hua had spent more than two and half years living in this room (which was long compared to his peers) but it still meant little in his eyes. The living quarters in GoodPath mainly serve to provide 'infrastructure for labors rather than offering places in which human beings can maintain social relationships and feel security and emotional belonging' (Murphy, 2009: 1).

Very few of the young migrant workers regret their decision to leave their home even though they feel frustrated about their current living situations. For instance, Zhi Lan, a 21-year-old waitress in a small local restaurant, said:

talking of home, I don't think I have one here. You see, I am almost homeless currently... but that is the cost you pay if you don't want to be stuck in a hopeless village. In my home village, I can live in a bigger place, but that is meaningless... Nothing happens in the village, being alive is just waiting for death, I was bored to death.

Lu Qiang, a 19-year-old factory worker, believed that to suffer the feeling of 'homelessness' in the process of a 'floating life' is necessary to become an independent modern person. He saw himself as a brave young man who can create a better life in the future and win others' respect, saying:

No matter what you do, jianguo shimian (seen the world) is very important. If you have the experience, then others, including your parents, will respect you. If you always stay at home, people will think that you are still a kid, knowing nothing. Otherwise, they will look down upon you.

Lu Qiang had dropped out of middle school and left his village three years previously in order to see the world. Since then, he had been to a couple of factory towns in coastal China. The majority of migrant workers in GoodPath were born in the 1990s. For the young generation, as Lu Qiang said, 'seeing the world' is valued as one of the criteria necessary to gain a higher social status among peers. As some of them put it, 'to graduate from the university called "society" is equally, if not more important, than the graduation from the school'.

Many young migrant workers agreed with Zhi Lan and Lu Qiang that the feeling of 'homelessness' during migration is painful but somehow not unexpected. Meanwhile, they don't feel at home in their rural homelands, as rural life is widely regarded as backward and boring, and they don't want to be associated with 'rural' in the search for a better life in urban areas. Migrant workers, especially the young generation, show a strong desire to embrace urban life and gain an urban identity as well as autonomy in the rural-to-urban migration. Migration is no longer a purely economic activity: it has become an essential 'rite of passage' for rural youth through which they gain full membership of their communities and wider society (also see Fang, 2011).

Feeling at Home in a 'Floating Life'

The ethnography in GoodPath would not have been complete had the author not entered the alternative living space of the migrant workers: the online world. During fieldwork, the most popular digital application among migrant workers was QQ. Facebook is not available in mainland China, and the only Chinese who use Facebook are those who either have overseas experience or the possibility of circumventing the Great Firewall. QQ offers a whole package of digital solutions, including group chat, video call, social media (Qzone), microblog (Tencent Weibo), email, online games, online music and online shopping (QQ shop). For many in China, QQ is the starting point for their digital life, even though nowadays it has been overtaken by the smartphone-based application WeChat.

Unlike Facebook, whose theme colors are blue and white, Qzone allows users to apply hundreds of personal webpage models, background pictures and music as well as decorative elements. None of the hundreds of Qzones the author visited during her research were identical. The customization of digital space contributes to a 'humanized' relationship between users and online spaces (Hjorth, 2005). One illuminating example on QQ is the 'check-in' (qian dao) service. Unlike on Facebook, where a check-in service allows users to mark their current physical locations online, the check-in service on QQ refers to checking into QQ's online space,

no matter where users may be in the offline world.

The idea of social media as one of the places where people lead their daily life is widely held and embedded in social interaction. From time to time people invite their friends to visit their Qzone, saying 'come and leave your footprints in my place' (lai wo kong jian cai cai). 'Leave footprints' refers to making a comment or a 'like'. For example, two women who worked together on the same assembly line would make very long strings of banners on each other's Qzone after work, even though they saw each other 10 hours a day, 29 days a month at work. 'My Qzone is like my home, I welcome people to come to visit me there and get to know me', said 18-year-old Xiao Li. She paid an extra fee to buy digital decoration elements to make her online home an eye-pleasing place where people who visit would know her taste. Offline, Xiao Li lived in a room without a window, which used to be a warehouse. Except for a bed, the small room had neither furniture nor any decoration, and Xiao Li was reluctant to receive guests in this room – the complete opposite of her welcoming attitude to her home online.

Furthermore, for many young migrant workers, social media in and of itself means privacy. Such a view was held by CiCi, a 17-year-old hairdresser's apprentice. In the collective dormitory where CiCi lived, she had almost no private space. Four young women slept together in two king-size beds. Everyone's personal belongings could be seen at a glance. As she recalled: 'At night, everyone was talking on the phone... there seemed to be no secret at all because you can always hear each other and see each other'. In order to have some privacy, CiCi started to text more on QQ, rather than speaking on the phone to her then boyfriend. Like CiCi, the majority of migrant workers in GoodPath have never owned a private space hidden from everyone else's view. In such a context, social media actually offers a place where people carve out their private space, which provides the feeling of being at home.

CiCi once had a couple of family members on her QQ, but she deleted all of them since once one of them frowned upon her outspoken postings. As she explained, 'I am totally free on my QQ. People who can see my profile are my friends and would agree with what I do online: as for those pedantic idiots, they can't view my QQ... That's my privacy, isn't it?'. CiCi is not alone: many of her peers see social media as the place where they feel free to explore the possibilities of life without worrying about the surveillance from their wider family.²

Unlike the situation in Turkey, where social media is used to maintain and extend the wider kinship, it was unusual to see people interact with family members on QQ: the majority of contacts were friends that people had got to know during their migration journeys – or even strangers. In addition, family members and village peers were usually regarded as one's association with the rural, which most young migrant workers want to get rid of in pursuit of becoming urban. QQ reflects people's aspiration for urban life and was regarded as their own home. Most migrant workers cared little about the decoration of their offline dormitory, but they made a huge effort to decorate their online home, from choosing the background music to the theme color and layout of the profiles.

The digital images posted on social media profiles are not that much different from posters pasted on bedroom walls in the pre-digital age. Collecting fancy photos of perceived modern lifestyles (such as luxury goods, beautiful holiday destinations, fast cars, etc.) from the internet and reposting them on social media profiles is one of the most common social media activities of young migrant workers. 19-year-old Lily's management of her Qzone is representative. Almost all her spare time was devoted to her QQ, either chatting with friends, viewing others' posts or posting and decorating her own Qzone. After a day's work on the assembly line, following the machine's fixed pace, moving more than 20,000 times a day, Lily would sit in her dormitory with her eyes glued to the screen of her smartphone, posting a series of beach-holiday photos which she had just downloaded. The pains in her back and legs, the hot temperature due to a lack of air conditioning, and the primitive living conditions all seemed to be gone when she immersed herself in QQ. The 'fantasy' photographs on social media do not reflect people's offline life but spoke to what they dreamed about in a more eloquent way than text. The feeling of 'be at home online' was so strong that Lily once remarked, 'Life outside the smartphone is unbearable!'. By smartphone Lily meant QQ, which she gained access to through her smartphone, and at that time she mainly used her smartphone for accessing social media. Such a remark articulated how young migrant workers on social media feel that they gain a better control of their identity and surroundings.

Young migrant workers visualize an ideal life online, even when they do not experience it offline. The migrants in GoodPath had traveled all the way from inland villages to coastal urban areas in order to see the world and to achieve the transformation from peasant to citizen, but it seemed that they were able to achieve this transformation far more efficiently in their migration from offline to online (Wang, 2016).

Conclusion

The very mobility of today's society has forced people worldwide to inhabit different places at the same time and constantly engage in place-making activities. Social media can be seen as a new type of place where migrants and members of diasporic groups live, build relationships and create new forms of human sociality. On social media people interact with others in specific online bounded spheres (Miller and Slater, 2000) and create new worlds for human sociality (Boellstorff, 2008). Social media, like places, are constellations of encounters and experiences (Hinkson, 2017), the result of people's interactions (Abu-Lughod, 1997), and they come together out of diffuse phenomena (Pink, 2008). Kurds and Chinese migrants craft or embellish their social media accounts to take control of their environment and relationships and to restore a sense of belonging in the face of the disruptions created by migration and displacement. These practices of online place-making contribute to creating the feeling of being at home or in the homeland, which compensates for their sense of powerlessness and homelessness in offline life. Furthermore, Kurds and Chinese migrants experience two radically different types of digital dwelling: the Kurds in Turkey compensate for decades of displacement and assimilation through the online reproduction of traditional kin ties that in many ways resemble the ideal Kurdish homeland. By contrast, Chinese migrants create an ideal home where they can affirm and express their desired modern identity, deliberately excluding traditional kin ties. In both cases, though, social media have contributed to transforming the relationships that migrants and members of diaspora groups have with the places they inhabit. The online fills the gaps of the offline and gives people a renewed sense of control over their life and their social relationships. These findings develop previous research on digital diaspora, which have showed how migrants can use the internet to escape into new online places (among others, see Brinkerhoff, 2009). Our in-depth long-term ethnographies highlight how practices of place-making on social media are entangled with the complexity and minutiae of people's everyday lives, which simultaneously take place in physical and digital locations.

Notes

[1](#) Also see Philip Tabor's definition, 'A house identified with the self is called a 'home', a country identified with the self is called a "homeland"', as cited in Morley (2000).

[2](#) In the fieldwork, it was rare to see people concerned about surveillance by the state. What people posted on social media had very little to do with politics, and even if it did, the censorship in China allows criticism as long as it doesn't lead to collective action (King et al., 2013). Therefore, in daily life, what people cared most about was surveillance within their personal network. Young people were eager to find a social space free from the moral judgment and social expectation of the older generation.

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