Schizoid creators
Creative work and subjectivity in the Chinese cultural economies
Lin, J.

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Chapter 5 The unlikely creative class: Kuaishou and Chinese digital cultural production

‘Lonely, I feel alive,
I just wanna touch the sky.
And you, girl please don't cry,
You know I’m your Mr.Right!
Boy, playing guitar,
Girl, loving her star,
And together we sing a song that will take me to your heart!’

(Lonely Hero, 一人我饮酒醉, translated by Jiu Xing, 2016)

Introduction

The above words are uttered by a young man in a black sleeveless T-shirt sitting in front of a computer screen; Tian You is his name and he calls himself an MC.\(^1\) In a recorded live-streaming video, he expresses his anger at the prevalence of discrimination, the unequal distribution of wealth and social inequality in the form of Hanmai\(^2\) (喊麦), a Chinese rap-like performance that has been popular on the

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\(^1\) In rapper culture, MC stands for ‘Microphone Controller’ or ‘Master of Ceremonies’; the abbreviation is often used as a title for skilled rappers. Tianyou chose this title to identify himself as a Chinese rapper.

\(^2\) Hanmai literally means ‘shouting with a microphone’. Chinese online rappers like Tianyou
internet since 2014. Thanks to live streaming platforms like YY and Kuaishou (快手), its particular combination of coarse narration and rhythmical music is now celebrated by millions of young Chinese. Not long ago, Li Tianyou, which is Tian You’s real name, was a scrawny high-school dropout struggling to make a living in a small, dreary industrial city in north-eastern China. Since 2014, he has been one of the best-known Chinese ‘internet celebrities’, commanding a fan base of over 35 million people for his live streaming shows on Kuaishou and earning more than 1.8 million euros a year in payments from his fans and advertisers. And Tian You is not alone. Enabled by emerging Chinese digital platforms, thousands of young Chinese like him are posting images, short videos and making live streaming shows to flaunt their creative talents while also hoping to earn a lot of money. Most of them are uneducated young Chinese from small cities and rural areas. They earn an average monthly income ranging from 2,000 RMB (250 euros) to 4,000 RMB (500 euros); successful ones can earn as much as one million (120,000 euros) per month (Arcbering 2017 Jan. 20; Hernández 2017 Sept. 15).

But this new form of creative business is not without risks. The ranting style of performance and its enormous popularity with massive online fan bases have also troubled the Chinese authorities. In early 2018, Tian You was accused by China Central Television, the central television network controlled by the state, of talking about pornography and drugs during his live streaming. Shortly after, Tian You and some other top-ranked live streamers were banned by all Chinese platforms and their performing careers seem to have come to an end (Chen, 2018 Feb. 13).

When thinking about the ‘creative class’ (Florida 2002) one tends to imagine an urban elite, an educated group of predominantly young people who work in the cultural industries and gather in hipster bars with their Macbooks, dressed in the latest local and cosmopolitan designer brands. But, as the story of created and popularised this form. They shout out rhythmical lyrics, usually rephrased in classical Chinese, combined with popular online slang, to high beat music.
Tian You shows, the emerging digital and platform economy also offers opportunities for lower educated, more marginal people to participate as producers in the Chinese creative economies. According to the White Paper on Chinese Digital Economy 2016 released by the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the national administrative bureau in charge of the Chinese internet communication sector, China’s digital economic aggregate in 2016 reached 226 billion RMB, constituting 30.3% of China’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (CAC 2017a, 19). More importantly, the convergence of traditional sectors and digital internet technology has replaced ICT manufacturing, telecommunication and software industries to become the ‘main engine’ of the Chinese digital economy (2017a, 24). Various digital platforms such as Taobao and Wechat have played a crucial role in such convergence processes, forming the so-called platform economy. In the media and cultural sectors, digital convergence has contributed 45.4% of total economic growth in the broadcast, television, film and recording industries. According to Nieborg and Poell (2018, 2), such platformisation marks ‘the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operations of the cultural industries’. Data-based digital/internet technologies afford platforms like Kuaishou a high connectivity that allows them to mediate between various actors, including content producers, end-users and advertisers, and to incorporate them into the platform-dominated network system of ‘the multisided markets’ (McIntyre and Srinivasan 2017; Nieborg and Poell 2018). The platformisation of cultural production blurs the boundaries between traditional media forms and gives rise to an exponential growth of user generated content production. The multi-sided network system not only enables traditional media companies to expand their content business, but also, as Tian You’s story shows, produces opportunities for marginalised individuals to become self-employed ‘creative workers’.

In this chapter, we³ want to investigate this emerging yet ‘unlikely’ creative class in China, which is part of the rapid platformisation of Chinese cultural

³ This chapter was co-authored with Jeroen de Kloet.
production, and engage with the aesthetics of their work this class produces. How are these diverse and sometimes marginal groups of individuals and their creativities mobilised and incorporated into the platform creative economy? What kinds of aesthetics and culture are produced on these content platforms? How does platformisation relate to the Chinese state’s governance of culture, economy and society? And what are the differences and similarities between Chinese platformed cultural production and its counterpart in ‘the west’? To address these questions, the chapter focuses on one particular platform, Kuaishou. Labelled by Chinese mainstream media as ‘revitalising Chinese rural culture’ (Liu 2017), the app attracts hundreds of millions of Chinese from the countryside and the second and third tier cities. Since 2012, it has become one of the most popular video-sharing platforms in China, allowing its users not only to watch, make and distribute various genres of short videos, but also to become ‘complementors’ of the platform (Nieborg and Poell 2018): professional content producers contributing to the platformisation of cultural production in China.

As we will introduce in the following section, this chapter studies Kuaishou and the ‘unlikely creative class’ it enables from three conceptual angles: that of the political economy, that of the digital system, and that of the individual agency. Our focus is on the production of creator subjectivities in China’s platformed creative economy. By taking into account the vibrant interaction among the state, the platform and the various individual creators, this chapter serves as a case study to shed light upon the specificities of the platformisation of cultural production in the context of contemporary China.

The platformisation of cultural production in China

As a global phenomenon, the platform economy has been extensively criticised for the type of labour it involves. Van Doorn, for example, notes that in the platform economy contracted labour has been replaced by ‘platform labour’, which adopts ‘a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimise labor’s flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation’ (van
Doorn 2017, 901). In this sense, workers are regarded as complementors or subcontractors, instead of employees, of the platform companies, which are therefore exempted from providing labour protection. Critical political economists have also attacked content-based platforms for deliberately inviting users to become ‘prosumers’ and thus contributing to the exploitation of free, creative labour (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2010).

Although these arguments provide valuable insights into the new labour conditions in the global platform economy, what they tend to overlook are the active agency or personal practices of digital/platform creators. The ‘multi-sided markets’ of platform businesses suggest a more complicated relationship among different actors in the operation of platformisation than terms like ‘prosumption’ and ‘exploitation’ can capture. The networked mode of cultural production indicates that ‘the costs of the production and consumption of goods and services’ will affect other complementors of the platform such as content producers and advertisers, and vice versa (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 4). As the word ‘complementor’ implies, the commercial relationship between platform companies and complementors is not only exploitative, but also collaborative and symbiotic. The long-term financial success of digital platforms is thus not simply based on the exploitation of platform labour, but is contingent upon commercial collaboration between platform companies, content producers and other complementors. In the case of Kuaishou, as we will show in the following sections, by actively utilising the digital system afforded by the platform, ‘grassroots’ content producers are enabled to develop a digital entrepreneurship: the diverse content creators actively develop and monetise their creativity and individuality to establish a new form of career and lifestyle – a digital creative business that can not only bring back financial benefits but also social mobility (e.g. from ‘migrant worker’ to ‘urban creative class’). The critiques of ‘prosumption’ cited above may lose sight of the active interactions and the symbiotic relations between the platform companies and their various complementors. To achieve a more grounded and balanced understanding of digital creative subjectivity on platforms like Kuaishou, we need to look at the everyday
experiences of various individual creators – their motivations, struggles and strategies – and locate these experiences in relation to the networked system of the Chinese digital cultural economy.

In this networked system and the development of the platform economy, the Chinese State is a crucial agent. As Yu Hong (2017a, 10-13) illustrates, the Chinese government has pledged to place information and communication at the centre of the national economic restructuring plan, using information, communications and technology (ICT) as industries and infrastructures to transform traditional industrial sectors. However, as Tian You’s experience shows, the state not only wants to ‘profit’ from information and culture, but also to control and shape it. As the previous chapters also reiterated, the Chinese state always expects that the commercialisation of culture and creativity to conform to its ideological control and work towards maintaining social and political stability. With regard to Kuaishou, therefore, we need to begin by asking how this platform’s cultural economy is governed by the Chinese state. How does state governance affect the working experience of the various content creators active on the Kuaishou platform? To address these questions, this chapter will explore the role of the state in the governance of the platform creative economy, as well as the vibrant interactions between the state, commercial actors and the vast number of individual creators on Kuaishou.

The digital economy is also always based on a sociotechnical infrastructure, which includes digital hardware and software, the algorithmic system and even the data centre and the labour regime (Rossiter 2017). Following Brian Larkin (2013: 329), infrastructures are not only a group of things that move and support other things, but also the relations between things and the system that these things operate to create grounds for other objects. Infrastructures ‘encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real’ (Larkin 2013: 333). In this sense, to study labour on digital platforms also entails probing the ways in which a digital system as an infrastructure becomes entangled with other political economic factors in the
subjectification of the diverse individuals acting on the platforms. The software system of online content platforms, just as Rossiter (2016, 4) shows in his study of logistic media, might also set up ‘new protocols and standards that can shape social, economic, and cross-institutional relations within and beyond’ the media/cultural industries. Algorithms, for example, through the computational calculation of massive amounts of data collected from the public, are becoming crucial engines of platformed cultural production. Their use generates a ‘new knowledge logic’, which replaces the traditional ‘editorial logic’ and promises to offer information and knowledge that is ‘free from human error, bias, or manipulation’ and solutions that ‘we cannot merely rely on, but must believe in’ (Gillespie 2014, 192). Taking these digital technologies as non-human agents, how does the algorithmic system affect the production of culture and subjectivity within the platformed cultural economy? In the context of China, how does such an ‘autonomous’ algorithmic system interact with other actors such as capital and state power, which, as noticed above, always seeks to profit from and shape culture and creativity?

With this conceptual framework in mind, this chapter studies Kuaishou and its digital content creators by engaging with the larger political economy of the Kuaishou platform, its digital operation system and the individual creative labour that provides its content. It starts with an introduction to the political economy of the Chinese platform creative economy and the specific position of Kuaishou in this system. This shows the Chinese platform cultural economy distinguishes itself from its western counterparts in its special state-platform relations, which simultaneously promote and limit platformisation. The close link with the state is seen to constitute a third dimension of contingency, in addition to ‘platform dependence’ and ‘contingent commodities’, identified by Nieborg and Poell (2018) as the forms of contingency characterising the western platform cultural economy, which we will elaborate on below. The following section analyses the workings of the Kuaishou platform. Using the ‘walkthrough’ method of Light et al. (2016, 882), ‘a way of engaging directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their
experiences’, we examine how the contingent platform business induced by the complicated state-commerce relationship is encoded in the algorithms of Kuaishou. Finally, to probe the characteristics of this unlikely creative class and the specific aesthetics they produce on the platform, we analyse 200 trending videos and the everyday user activities of 20 popular Kuaishou accounts. For the selection of videos and accounts, we adopted three methods. First of all, to minimise any personal preference, we set up a new account and downloaded the first 20 videos listed under the ‘trending’ tab for 7 days. The second collection of videos was selected from the first 20 accounts on the ranking list of ‘the most popular live streamers on Kuaishou’, provided by xiaohulu.com, a third-party start-up company offering data analysis and operation services for content producers on major Chinese content platforms. The final selection of videos consisted of the 10 most viewed videos on Kuaishou in August 2018, on the basis of data provided by ‘short video factory’, another third-party company publishing business reports on Chinese short video platforms. Besides conducting a visual and digital analysis of the videos, we held 14 in-depth interviews with managers from the Kuaishou company, content producers on Kuaishou and other Chinese content platforms, algorithm engineers, and other professionals whose work is related to Kuaishou and the Chinese platform creative economy. We argue that the platformisation of cultural production in China accommodates the state’s ‘entrepreneurial solutionism’, while also producing a digital creative entrepreneurship among Chinese ‘grassroots individuals’ and a dynamic digital culture permeated with contingency and negotiation.

Kuaishou and the Chinese platformed cultural economy

In 2015, in his annual speech at the Chinese national congress, Prime Minister Li Keqiang announced China’s ‘Internet+’ agenda. This is a new national development strategy that aims at boosting and restructuring the national economy through the upgrading of digital infrastructure and technological innovation (cf. The State Council 2015a). ‘Internet+’ is the continuation of the state’s economic restructuring plan, which aims to replace the unsustainable ‘export-driven’, ‘investment-
dependent’ model with a ‘consumption-based’ and ‘innovation-driven’ economy. The new policy agenda puts the ‘internet’ at the centre, aiming to integrate network connectivity and the ‘disruptive business and managerial model’ (of decentralised, private, post-Fordist corporate management) with a wide range of traditional sectors, from manufacturing, agriculture, energy, finance and transportation to public services and education (The State Council 2015a; Hong 2017b). Moreover, the ‘Internet+’ strategy pledges to propel a new digital economy that can foster and benefit small start-ups, entrepreneurship and innovation. As such, it dovetails with another policy agenda championed by the state government under the name ‘Boosting Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’ (大众创业万众创新 dazhong chuangxin, wanzhong chuanye) (The State Council 2015b). The latter policy seeks to mobilise the creativity and innovative power of grassroots individuals for national economic growth. ‘Internet+’ complements the ‘Mass Entrepreneurship’ strategy in the sense that the prosperous digital economy provides opportunities for grassroots individuals to find employment and become entrepreneurs. According to Premier Li Keqiang,

Internet+ not only produces new economic driving power, but will also creates the largest platform for the sharing economy, which stages ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’ and will deeply affect our economy, society and everyday life. It provides opportunities for not only techno elites and entrepreneurs, but also millions of caogen (草根 grassroots individuals) to exploit their talent and to realise their special value. (Li 2018)

In practice, as the official statistics cited earlier indicate, the state agenda of ‘Internet+’ and ‘Mass Entrepreneurship’ has greatly contributed to the surging platformed creative economy in China. Kuaishou, together with its competitors such as Toutiao and Douyin,4 enables both traditional media companies and Chinese ‘grassroots individuals’ to establish and expand their content business.5

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4 All are private companies receiving financial investment from Chinese Internet giants such
Launched in 2012, Kuaishou is an algorithm-based video and live streaming platform that allows registered users to create and post all kinds of short videos online. These videos show activities ranging from cooking, body building, skills training and applying make-up to micro fiction films. The remarkably diverse content made by millions of online users is computed and pushed to targeted viewers by Kuaishou’s algorithm recommendation system. This algorithm system, as Gillespie (2014) suggests, replaces the role of traditional editors in the selection and distribution of content, providing a seemingly more ‘objective’ model based on the AI computation of user data rather than on editors’ ‘subjective’ preferences.6

The most important distinguishing characteristic of Kuaishou is that the majority of its users consist of rural or third and fourth tiered city based, uneducated young Chinese (Huo 2016). As we will show, Kuaishou enabled this group to become an ‘unlikely creative class’. They actively perform their vernacular creativity (Burgess 2006) through self-taught skills, using cheap make-up and amateur photographic devices. In addition, they use the digital system of Kuaishou to monetise their creative production through advertising and e-commerce. At first sight, Kuaishou’s platform content business and its ‘unlikely creative class’ thus seem to fit comfortably with the state’s expectation of ‘mass entrepreneurship’. However, the challenge for Kuaishou is that its user-generated content has to be in line with the Chinese authorities’ expectations of ‘what kind of stories should be told’. This is especially challenging because the stakes are high:

as Baidu, Tencent and Alibaba. The headquarters of the Kuaishou company are located in Beijing and receive investment from Baidu, Tencent and several other venture capital firms.

5 The notion of ‘grassroots individuals’ (草根 caogen) resonates with the often used term ‘common people’ (老百姓 laobaixin). While we use these terms because of their prevalence in Chinese discourses, we place them in parentheses to show our awareness that they are highly problematic, obscure rather than clarify, and produce a binary division between the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’ that ignores further stratifications and more subtle class differences.

6 The technical and algorithmic elements of Kuaishou will be further discussed in the following section.
‘Internet+’ is not just about ‘restructuring the economy’, but also about restructuring culture and society. The Chinese authorities have been eager to promote a carefully curated national imagery to wield ‘soft power’ on the global stage on the one hand, while expecting a conforming culture that ensures social stability and national unity on the other. As Wanning Sun (2009, 66) highlights, this means that there is a double agenda: to ‘globally present [China] as a player whose values, ethics, and sensibilities are compatible with ... its international counterparts’, while domestically ‘avoid[ing] ‘chaos’ at all cost, including heavy-handed censorship, in order to ensure social stability and national unity’. This double agenda also applies to Chinese digital platforms. The platformed cultural production system puts users at the centre of production, endowing content producers with more autonomy. Yet, as long as these platforms operate domestically, they are not immune to censorship or the state’s demand for a compliant culture. According to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), all types of content providers should ‘abide by the law, adhere to the correct values, and help disseminate socialist core values and cultivate a positive and healthy on-line culture’ (CAC 2017b). As the central supervisory entity for the Chinese internet communication sectors, the CAC is a very powerful government agency under the leadership of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, headed by the Communist Party General Secretary, the Chinese president Xi Jinping. Founded in 2014, the CAC has promulgated 15 policy documents on the regulation of a variety of online content production services, from social media, including Wechat and Weibo, to search engines, mobile applications (APP), and on-line news production. Apart from demanding that all content production and distribution adhere to the law and official ideology, these documents also specify regulations on employee management and user registration, as well as punitive measures for any breaches of these regulations. According to the requirements, platform companies are fully responsible for all content circulated and will be ‘interviewed’ (约谈 yuetan) – the code word for this in China is being invited for tea – when any of it violates the law or regulations. For example, in April 2018, Kuaishou and Toutiao were both ‘invited for tea’ by the CAC for ‘ignorance of the law and disseminating programs that are against social
moral values’ (Liu 2018). The CAC required the two companies to effect a ‘comprehensive rectification’. As a result, their websites and apps shut down thousands of user accounts, including Tian You’s, for posting ‘unhealthy content’ and set up special official accounts for disseminating ‘positive and healthy values’.

Thus, under the policy agenda of ‘Internet+’ and ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’, the state’s aspiration to economic restructuring drives but also shapes the platformisation of Chinese cultural production. The state-corporate relationship is largely complicated due to the state’s dual concern with economic restructuring and cultural regulation and social stability. This state-commerce relationship renders cultural production on Kuaishou platform acutely contingent and, we argue, distinguishes the platformisation of cultural production in contemporary China from that in the west and constitutes a third dimension to what Nieborg and Poell (2018, 2) summarise as the two aspects of the ‘contingency’ of platform cultural production: ‘platform dependency’ and ‘contingent commodities’. The former refers to the dominant power of only a few platforms, such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft (GAFAM) in the west and Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (BAT) in China, which ‘allow[s] content developers to systematically track and profile the activities and preferences of billions of users’ (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 2). The latter refers to how cultural commodities on digital platforms are contingent in the sense that ‘they are malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation’ (Nieborg and Poell 2018, 2). The power of the state, at least in the case of China, engenders a third dimension of contingency that constantly shapes the practice of cultural production on Chinese digital platforms. But how is this contingency further translated in the digital setting and governance of Kuaishou? How does Kuaishou’s digital system also affect the networked relation between the state, the corporate and the various individual users, and what kind of subjectivity and culture are produced within this intricate network? The following two sections will address these questions.
Walking through Kuaishou: Algorithmic and digital governance

According to the three algorithm engineers and computer scientists interviewed, the algorithmic recommendation system of Chinese platforms has four basic components: content analysis, user analysis, evaluation and security auditing. The first two use computation models to analyse and classify various content and user data. Based on this datafication, diverse content is tagged and distributed automatically among users who are predicted by the algorithm as target groups. The evaluation component fixes and optimises the recommendation system based on the feedback from its previous operation. Finally, the security auditing component checks, filters and censors all kinds of online content, including that provided by content producers and interactive content such as end-user comments. Through artificial-intellectual (AI) machine learning, the auditing system will achieve increasing accuracy. This is only a simplistic summary of the algorithm recommendation system. The technical components are very complicated and require enormous financial investment. For security auditing systems in particular, AI is not yet safe enough, meaning that Chinese platform companies often hire manual teams for online censorship. The state’s requirement of a ‘positive’, ‘healthy’ internet culture thus increases the operational costs for these platforms. For instance, one of Kuaishou’s human resource managers told us that it recently recruited 3,000 new employees in branches in Harbin, Chengdu, Yancheng, Tianjin and Wuhan to conduct manual censorship and online surveillance.

Under the algorithmic logic, Kuaishou forges an ostensibly decentralising and democratic system for content production and selection. In principle, everyone is treated equally by the algorithmic machine, whether they are a movie star or a migrant worker. The key for content production is to obtain as much on-line traffic through the creative content as possible. According to the online archives of the Kuaishou webpage and its update records in Apple’s app store, Kuaishou has

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7 See https://www.kuaishou.com/
described itself through slogans like ‘something interesting’ (2015) and ‘record the world, record you’ (2016-2018). On Kuaishou’s webpage, three sentences under appear under this new slogan:

‘discover a real but interesting world’

‘be loyal to the self while not feeling lonely’

‘the same town with the same mood’

Figure 5.1 Vision of Kuaishou (screenshot from Kuaishou’s official website, August 2018)
Such lines conjure up ideas of worlding, of the self, and of locality, thus grounding the contents offered in the everyday realities of China. The images shared on the webpage and in the app store further strengthen that sense of everydayness: ordinary young Chinese are captured on everyday occasions, while travelling, at home with pets or babies, etc. Keywords like ‘real’, ‘self’, ‘interesting’ and ‘same’, together with the photos, are indicative of the vision of Kuaishou: to invite ‘grassroots individuals’ to discover and share the interesting moments in their own and others’ ‘real’ everyday lives (Figure 5.1). By promising an interesting, real, individualised but not lonely online community, Kuaishou absorbs users’ creativity into its platform economy.

Kuaishou is a free app and its revenue sources consist mainly of in-app advertising and a gifting economy through live streaming. As a typical content platform that connects multi-sided markets, Kuaishou offers two ways for in-app advertising. The first one is called ‘fans headline’ (粉丝头条 fensi toutiao), which allows content producers to promote their video content on the platform. According to the app’s description, by paying 37.9 RMB a posted video can gain an increase of 10,000 views from end-users. Producers can simply click on the ‘fans headline’ button under the settings menu of the app interface. Another form of advertising is offered to third-party companies or brands that intend to buy advertising space on the interface. Commercials are mixed with user-generated videos and fed to targeted viewers by the algorithm. Kuaishou has not publicly specified the cost of its advertising space, but a new media agency discloses (Qirui 2017) that, apart from the one-off service fee of 5,600 RMB, advertisers pay 0.2 RMB for each click.8 Another important revenue source comes from the gifting economy in Kuaishou’s live streaming service. Only a select group of users are authorised to live streaming on the platform. Streamers interact with their fans during the streaming and fans will use kuaibi (快币), a virtual currency specific to Kuaishou, to buy virtual gifts and

8 Kuaishou does not sell advertising space for financial or medical products, or for other social media platforms.
send them to their favourite streamers. 1 RMB can buy 10 _kuaiyi_ and the price of each virtual gift varies from 1 to 188 _kuaiyi_. According to the platform’s regulations, after deducting 20% for tax, half of the remaining income from gifting goes to the platform company while streamers usually get less than 40%. Clearly, Kuaishou’s business model is largely dependent on how much data and data traffic the platform can collect from users. The more popular its contents are, the higher financial returns the platform and its complementors can achieve.

Kuaishou has a very simple interface. One can use email or another digital account such as Wechat, Weibo, Facebook or Google for registration.⁹ There are three tabs on the main interface: ‘following’ (关注 _guanzhu_), ‘trending’ (发现 _faxian_) and ‘nearby’ (同城 _tongcheng_) (Figure 5.2). The default tab is ‘trending’, which lists all the videos selected and pushed by the recommendation algorithm. There is no category selection button under the tap and videos that appear here seem to be randomly selected. After using the app for a while, the streaming list will be updated and fed with new contents that are further calculated by the algorithm. Most of these videos are indeed ‘trending’: the majority of them have obtained at least hundreds of likes and most of them were posted that day. The fifth video is usually some product advertisement. The number of videos and their genres will increase as the app is used over time. Under the ‘following’ tab, content is listed in chronological order from the accounts followed by the user. The recommendation algorithm is not applied here, since the user’s preferences are quite clear. For content producers this tab provides a window to interact directly and continuously with their target audience. The ‘nearby’ tab arranges videos based on the geo-locational distance between video makers and end-users. The platform gives priority in this tab to accounts that have bought ‘fans headline’ services and accounts that are live streaming. By adding a geo-locational feature to the streaming system, the

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⁹ It is quite ironic that a China-based platform includes both Facebook and Google in its registration interface; this underlines how censorship of both is anything but clear-cut or univocal.
platform takes the opportunity of exploiting users’ off-line real-life social networks, which might create more user engagement.

To post content on Kuaishou, users do not need to change to a different account. By simply clicking on the camera icon above the interface (Figure 5.2), they can upload and post a short video up to 57 seconds long. Users can use smartphones to capture real-time moments and edit them with background music or animation effects provided by the app. They can also use the app to publicise pre-made, more professional content. As with other Chinese internet service providers, a mobile phone number is needed for verification. Before they can be streamed, all videos uploaded to the database will be analysed by the algorithmic system.
Verified ‘legal’ content will then be pushed to a small group of end-users for the first-round feeding – including geographically nearby users, subscribers and those predicted by the AI system as ‘potentially interested users’. After the first 24 hours, the system will evaluate the content based on the feedback of user interactive data and decide whether the content is worthy of a second or third round push. If one buys the ‘fans headline’ service, the posted video will receive the purchased amount of data traffic. As the platform’s most valuable asset, the data traffic generated by the content will bring subscriptions, high interactivity and subsequent advertising opportunities for the account holder. If their account remains highly active for weeks, achieves a large amount of subscriptions and has no history of violating the user regulations of the platform, content producers can contact the customer service for authorisation of a live streaming function. According to the platform’s regulations, there are three standards for the evaluation of such an application: the account should have a high interactivity, including continuous uploading of original content with a large number of followers and on-line interactions; the account adds to the positive image of the platform and does not have any record of violating the regulations; and users should link their account to a mobile phone number to eliminate the risk of being hacked. In 2017 and early 2018, Kuaishou stirred discussion among the public and was ‘interviewed’ by the CAC due to some online hosts’ ‘vulgar’ and ‘unhealthy’ behaviours during live streaming. As a result, the platform has become more cautious in regulating the live streaming service. The ambiguous rhetoric of the regulations gives it ample leeway and power to control and manage the live streaming service in accordance with its own interests and those of the state.

The algorithmic system and its immense database remain largely invisible to content producers and Kuaishou holds a powerful position in its platform system, similar to that of Instagram. The company never discloses any technical details of its algorithms to users. In addition, content producers only have very limited access to interactive data, such as the number of followers, comments and likes, through the app’s user interface. They can check their followers’ public homepage but
detailed user data such as demographic and behaviour information is not available. Apart from restrictions on illegal or malicious content that violates Chinese law, the Kuaishou user agreement also prohibits users from any unauthorised commercial activities such as selling products or private advertisements. By posting any content on the platform, users automatically grant the Kuaishou company ‘a world-wide, royalty-free, non-exclusive, sub-licensable and perpetual (unless withdrawn expressly by you) license, to use the content uploaded (including but not limited to copy, publish, release, as well as adapt, reproduce, translate, transmit, perform and display in original form or other forms)’ (Kuai 2018). This user agreement patently panders to the company’s commercial interests and the Chinese state’s requirement of a conforming and ‘positive’ culture. Any violation of it would lead to punishments such as changing and deleting posted content or suspending and terminating the user’s ability to use Kuaishou.

At a time when the state government is tightening its control over the cultural and media sectors, Kuaishou and other platforms will also reinforce their management of online content, as the case of Tian You shows. This underlines the unequal relationship between content producers and the platform company. Content producers have to meticulously manage their creative production to ensure the accumulation of online data traffic without breaching the platform’s regulations. The governance of digital platforms thus creates a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity among content producers. In the face of this, many content producers feel obliged to post some sentences on their homepage expressing their appreciation of Kuaishou, such as ‘thank you Kuaishou for providing such a wonderful platform’, ‘I support Kuaishou for transmitting positive value’, etc. (Figure 5.3).

Our analysis so far shows that the algorithm-based system of Kuaishou epitomises the platform contingency caused by the special state-platform relationship, which, as the previous section indicated, distinguishes the Chinese platformisation of cultural production from that in the west. As a result, platform governance is subject to state regulatory power, which both promotes and circumscribes the platformed cultural production. The algorithmic machine allows
the Kuaishou platform to achieve a maximal incorporation of creativity from ‘grassroots individuals,’ but state-platform contingency also sets limits to the automation of platform governance, for example in requiring manual censorship.

For individual creators on Kuaishou, the algorithmic system and its immense database remain largely invisible. The question we engage with in the following section concerns the makers and the contents they produce. How do they deal with state-platform contingency and the need to navigate the tightrope between censorship and creativity, between production and commodification, between subjectivity and being subjected?

Unlikely makers, unlikely aesthetics?

Wang Qian grew up in the countryside of Dazhou, Sichuan, a province in west China. At the age of 15, after graduating from middle school, he followed his relatives and went to Shenzhen, becoming a factory worker. In 2016, inspired by the stories of people making money through Kuaishou, he quit his job at the factory and decided to make videos on Kuaishou. Using the name ‘brother Qian’ (谦哥 qiange), he performs and teaches magic tricks in videos and live streams on Kuaishou. Wearing a stylish hat and facial make-up, Wang Qian looks and performs like a professional magician in his videos. Yet he never received any magic training and all his skills were learned from the internet. After two years, his account had over 1 million subscriptions. This large fan base allows him to sell and advertise magic props through the platform. As Wang Qian disclosed in our interview, the digital business enabled by Kuaishou generates an average sale of 70,000 RMB per month. Deducting production costs and salaries for his assistants, Wang’s monthly income can reach 50,000 RMB (6,000 euros). Compared to his job at the factory, his new job has not only multiplied his earnings, but has also changed his appearance and identity: he seems to have gotten rid of the stigmatising label of ‘migrant worker’ to become part of the affluent, fashionable and popular ‘online celebrity’ (网红 wang hong) class. Through Kuaishou, then, Wang has jumped from the ‘sweat shop’ in Shenzhen into the urban creative class.
Wang Qian’s experience is not uncommon on Kuaishou. In Li et al.’s (2019, 13) study of the use of Kuaishou among a group of rural students, the video-sharing app is seen to allow these low-income rural youths a way to ‘express their resistance against education’ through the circulation and production of the ‘shehui ren’ (社会人, society man) subculture. As it did for Wang Qian, Kuaishou promises these rural youths an upward socio-economic mobility through capitalising on their memories and creativity in the production of the ‘shehui ren’ subculture.

Its massive popularity among the Chinese rural population, and the produced culture and aesthetics, significantly distinguish Kuaishou from other Chinese and western social media platforms. Kuaishou targets users from the urban lower social class and young people from rural society, enabling them to ‘record the world and themselves’. According to a manager from Kuaishou, the company has never tried to sign or promote any particular ‘online celebrity’. Instead, Kuaishou seems to embrace an aesthetics of the vernacular, which can be described as foregrounding ‘the un-hip, the un-cool, and possibly the downright square, [it] embraces those marginal and non-glamorous creative practices excluded from arts- and culture-based regeneration. Vernacular forms of creativity are neither extraordinary not spectacular (…) but are part of a range of mundane, intensely social practices’ (Edensor et al. 2009, 10, see also Burgess 2006).

To further explicate this vernacular aesthetics circulated on Kuaishou, we selected and analysed 200 trending videos and the everyday user activities of 20 popular Kuaishou accounts. These selected short videos constitute what Lauren Berlant has called a ‘silly archive’, which may be ‘the silliest, most banal, and ... of erratic logic’ in the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens (Berlant 1997, 12). It is precisely its ‘very improvisatory ephemerality’, its ‘very popularity’ and ‘its effects’ on everyday life, according to Berlant (1997, 12) that makes such a silly archive worthy of serious reading.

In our selection of videos, we observed five recurring genres of content:
1. Everyday life: cooking, cosmetics, pets, family life, etc.

2. Country life: fishing, hunting, crafts, vernacular landscape, etc.

3. Creative skills: singing, magic, dancing, fitness, professional skills, etc.

4. Fiction micro film

5. ‘Positive value content’ mostly produced by official sponsored accounts

For the first four genres, the idea of ‘grassrootsness’ is crucial; it is performed to add ‘authenticity’ to the videos, to make them look more real and closer to the audience’s own life. For Wang Qian, behind his polished appearance in the videos, such grassrootsness is demonstrated by his accent and his way of performing magic. Unlike professional magicians, he shows only forms of magic that he learned from the internet. More than that, he also unveils and teaches magic to his fans. In one of his videos, he remarks at the end: ‘Come on brothers. With this trick you will find a girlfriend!’

Other video makers also choose to deliberately display their underclass identity, through their accent, dress, skin colour or behaviour. For instance, in a series of videos showing cosmetic skills, the female model has quite dark skin and chubby cheeks, which does not meet the current standard in China for a ‘beautiful girl’. Thanks to the skilful use of cosmetic techniques and the special products used, the model has her appearance drastically changed, with fairer skin and thinner cheeks. Her new look (Figure 5.4) is still not comparable to that of professional models in television advertisements, yet videos like these are quite popular on Kuaishou and within a few hours can easily gain hundreds and thousands of likes from users. The secret to the high popularity of these videos is precisely the ‘grassrootsness’ and ‘authenticity’ they aim to represent: not every ordinary person is born with the beauty of a movie star, yet, by virtue of the ‘right’ make-up and techniques, video makers convince their audience that they, too, can change their imperfect physical appearance. On the homepage of another account named ‘Zhang
Deshuai’, the video maker identifies himself as a ‘country lad’ (农村小伙 nongcun xiaohuo) and posts home-made micro films. These films usually choose shabby villages as a background and tell amusing stories about relationships, family life, friendship, etc. However, in contrast to the rural landscape shown, the cast members in these videos always dress in trendy fashion with a stylish haircut, while the hilarious story lines are not necessarily about ‘country life’. The characters in the films, for example, talk about ‘watching movies’, ‘shopping’, ‘drinking milk tea’ and ‘buying a car’. Thus, while these films choose rurality as their background, in terms of the characters they show and the stories they tell they push the limits of rurality and intentionally parody the trendy life of Chinese urban youth. From Wang Qian’s magic demonstrations and the popular cosmetic videos to these self-made fiction films, the aesthetics of the videos on Kuaishou articulate the imagination of Chinese ‘grassroots individuals’ who are marginalised in mainstream popular culture. It is this imagination from the marginal that fascinates many Kuaishou users, who to some extent experience this grassrootsness and marginalisation in their own everyday lives.

At the same time, as we pointed out in the previous section, content production on Kuaishou is not immune to state surveillance. Since being interviewed by the CAC in April 2018, ‘positive and healthy values’ guide content regulation on the platform. The once very popular ‘crazy videos’, such as those depicting adolescent pregnancy and self-abuse, have been banned and deleted. The platform has also established a new genre of ‘positive-value’ content. Apart from its own official account ‘Kuaishou positive value’ (快手正能量 Kuaishou zheng nengliang), the platform invites government institutions such as public security bureaus to open accounts and post videos on ‘everyday ethical models’, ‘Chinese economic achievements’, ‘the positive image of soldiers and the police’, ‘the official policy and ideology’, etc. The algorithmic system has been set to support the videos uploaded by these accounts, which is why, in August 2018, they featured 7 out of the 10 most viewed videos on Kuaishou (SVF 2018 Aug).
In this regard, content producers on Kuaishou have to meticulously calculate their creativity, to remain in line with the platform’s so-called ‘value orientation’ while also making their content attractive to the online audience. Moreover, for these creative individuals, the platform and its digital affordances not only denote a way of performing creativity but also an effective tool for making money and building a career. Data traffic becomes a crucial asset that every creative producer aspires to accumulate in as high a quantity as possible. To do so, they first need to understand and utilise the various digital affordances of the platforms. They should, for example, update their accounts on an everyday basis. From their profile photo to their user name, everything that can give end-users a sense of what the
account is about needs to be deliberately designed and optimised. To be creative through the digital, one has to know what, how and when to create, and for whom. The constant posting and streaming also requires good time management skills. On Kuaishou, producers normally choose to post their videos in the evening around 8 pm, a time when most high school students, one of the largest user groups on Kuaishou, are at home and have just finished their homework. What Melissa Gregg (2011, 2) identifies as the ‘presence bleed’ – how digital and communication technologies enable ‘work to invade places and times that were once less susceptible to its presence’ – becomes imperative for platform-based creative work. The aim of this intensified and extensified10 (Jarvis and Pratt 2006) work for content producers is to generate profits, which also leads to users’ appropriation of the digital technologies for their own business purposes. Although Kuaishou prohibits unauthorised advertising and commercial activities, video makers can still find their own ways to avoid the platform’s supervision. Some streamers integrate contextual advertisements for third-party merchants in their short video and live streaming performances. For example, someone posts videos of their pets on Kuaishou and lists their Wechat account number on the homepage to sell pet food, using acronyms such as ‘WX’ or icons like ‘V ❤️’ as a substitute for Wechat (微信 weixin) to dodge the platform’s AI monitoring (Figure 5.3).

At the same time, the high interactivity of the digital platform requires content producers not only to strategise their creativity for business purposes, but also to manage their affects and personality to cultivate intimacy with their target users and audience. On Kuaishou, a phrase that appears frequently in short videos is ‘Come on bro! Double tap 666! Follow me’. The action of double tapping on a video equals a ‘like’ from a viewer and ‘666’ in Mandarin is homophonic to liu (溜), meaning ‘cool’ or ‘awesome’. These words are often spoken in a euphoric tone with

10 According to Jarvis and Pratt (2006), contemporary media and cultural industries give rise to an increasing extensification of work, referring to the distribution or exporting of work across divergent spaces/scales and times.
local accents. The aim is to add a sense of authenticity to the videos and develop intimacy with the audience. To gain more popularity and subscriptions, one of the strategies used by content producers is to set up a special ‘renshe’ (人设, character) - to perform a certain personality - through various creative practices that will affect and create intimacy with viewers, who will later become their followers, or fans. As is exemplified by the above videos analysed, on Kuaishou, a personality is carefully nurtured and maintained through performing ‘grassroots authenticity’. A frequent discourse that emerges out of these diverse stylisations is that of being ‘real-life’ and ‘jiediqi’ (接地气, down to earth), underlining how the personalities created should be relevant, if not identical, to those of the platform’s users.

As a result, on Kuaishou, platformed cultural production is entangled with the production of affects. These affects, such as ‘a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion’, are produced through the labour process of platformisation, ‘expressing a certain state of body along with a certain mode of thinking’ (Hardt and Negri 2004, 108). By exploiting the various digital affordances and ‘renshe’, ‘grassroots’ content producers have, on the one hand, become self-employed creative entrepreneurs for whom creativity, life and individuality are constantly calculated according to the accounting of costs and profits. On the other hand, in the everyday production and management of affect through the digital affordances provided by Kuaishou, these creative individuals also become aspirational creative workers (Duffy 2016, 441) motivated by the platform’s ‘promise of social and economic capital; yet the reward system for these aspirants is highly uneven’. A data-driven economy becomes the common model that drives all the parts becoming complementors of the platform. Data and datafication matters not only for giant corporations and institutions (van Dijk 2014), but they also become crucial production tools and assets for these new, ‘unlikely’ creative subjects on Kuaishou.
Conclusion

This chapter has studied a special group of creative workers – the content creators on the Chinese social media platform Kuaishou, enabled by the emerging Chinese platform creative economy. It first examined the state-platform contingency caused by the complicated relationship between Kuaishou and the state governance of culture and economy, and how such contingency is embedded in the digital algorithmic system of the platform. This third dimension of platform contingency distinguishes the functioning ecology of Chinese media platforms from those in the west. This contingency maximises the subsumption of individual vernacular creativity in China’s platform creative economy, while also enabling marginalised ‘grassroots’ Chinese to become ‘unlikely’ creative workers.

To some extent, Kuaishou creators resemble the independent filmmakers I have studied in Chapter 3 in the sense that Kuaishou and its platform economy provide a channel for these grassroots individuals to de-territorialise from their previous ‘unsatisfactory’ livelihood and lifestyle (as migrant worker, rural residents or uneducated lower social classes) in order to become part of the urban creative class. At the same time, through this production of an ‘unlikely’ creative class, the platformisation of cultural production accommodates the Chinese state’s ‘entrepreneurial solutionism’ (Keane and Chen 2017), which, exemplified by the state’s policy on Internet+ and Mass Entrepreneurship, takes digital technology and entrepreneurship as the solution to China’s social, economic and cultural problems. The platform economy thus provides opportunities for ‘grassroots individuals’ from diverse backgrounds to become creative workers, pandering to the state’s goal of restructuring the economy.

Importantly, this grassroots digital entrepreneurship, has also transcended the passive ‘digital labour’ and ‘prosumer’ models some critical politic economists have identified (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2010). Despite the institutional regulation and censorship of the internet, these grassroots creators actively participate in the Chinese platform creative economy, appropriating the algorithmic
digital system and negotiating with the state/platform governance to achieve their own creative and financial aims. Within their experiences of creation and monetisation, we can find moments of play, if not resistance – moments in which the official narrative of the ‘China Dream’ is juxtaposed to multiple dreams from actors that hardly ever get a face or a voice in Chinese mainstream media. Like the creative workers introduced in the previous chapters, these ‘unlikely’ digital creators are also becoming schizoid in their everyday creative and entrepreneurial practices.