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Platformization of the Unlikely Creative Class: Kuaishou and Chinese Digital Cultural Production

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Abstract

This article studies the platformization of cultural production in China through the specific lens of *Kuaishou*, an *algorithm*-based video-sharing platform targeting second- and third-tier cities as well as the countryside. It enables the forming of an “unlikely” creative class in contemporary China. Kuaishou’s platform business fits into the Party State’s socio-economic agenda of “Internet+” and “Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation,” and is also folded into the state’s demand for cultural censorship and social stability. As we will show, this state-commerce relationship largely shapes Kuaishou’s interface and its affordances as encoded in its algorithm. Nevertheless, Kuaishou enables the diverse, often marginalized, Chinese living outside the urban centers of the country to become “unlikely” creative workers, who have become self-employed creative, digital entrepreneurs. For these “grassroots individuals,” creativity, life, and individuality are constantly mobilized and calculated according to the workings of the platform. This grassroots entrepreneurship, in tandem with the institutional regulation and censorship of the Internet, contributes to the transformation of Chinese economy and the production of social stability and a digital culture permeated with contingency and negotiation.

Keywords

Kuaishou, platformization, China, creative labor, Internet+, algorithm, grassroots entrepreneurship

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)

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 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 a year in payments from his fans and advertisers. And Tian You is not

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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

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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 RMB2,000 (€250) to RMB4,000 (€500); successful ones can earn as much as 1 million (€120,000) per month (Arcbering, 2017; Hernández, 2017).

However, 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 seemed to have come to an end (Chen, 2018).

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, dressed in the latest local and cosmopolitan designer brands. But, as the story of 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 RMB226 billion, constituting 30.3% of China’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (CAC, 2017a, p. 19). More importantly, the convergence of traditional sectors and digital Internet technology has replaced the ICT (information, communication, and technology) manufacturing, telecommunication, and software industries to become the “main engine” of the Chinese digital economy (CAC, 2017a, p. 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 the total economic growth in the broadcast, television, film, and recording industries. According to Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 2), such platformization 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 degree of 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 multi-sided markets” (McIntyre & Srinivasan, 2017; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The platformization 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 marginalized individuals to become self-employed “creative workers.”

In this article, we want to investigate this emerging yet “unlikely” creative class in China, which is part of the rapid platformization of Chinese cultural production, and engage with the aesthetics of the work this class produces. How are these diverse and sometimes marginal groups of individuals and their creativities mobilized and incorporated into the platform creative economy? What kinds of aesthetics and culture are produced on these content platforms? How does platformization 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 article focuses on one particular platform, Kuaishou. Labeled 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 its launch in 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 & Poell, 2018): professional content producers contributing to the platformization of cultural production in China. Before moving to our analysis, we first discuss the Chinese processes of platformization.

This article starts with an introduction to the issue of digital labor, the political economy of the Chinese platform creative economy, and the specific position of Kuaishou in this system. We distance ourselves from viewing digital labor solely in terms of exploitation and precarity. We will then show how the Chinese platform cultural economy distinguishes itself from its Western counterparts in its special state-platform relations, which simultaneously promote and limit platformization. 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 characterizing the Western platform cultural economy, which we will elaborate on below. The following section analyzes the workings of the Kuaishou platform. Using the “walkthrough” method of Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2018, p. 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, we analyze 200 trending videos and the everyday user activities of 20 popular Kuaishou accounts.³ Besides conducting a visual and digital analysis of the videos, we held 14 in-depth interviews with managers from the Kuaishou company, content producers, algorithm engineers, and other professionals, whose work is related to Kuaishou and the Chinese platform creative economy. We argue that the platformization 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.

Digital Labor and the Chinese Platformed Cultural Economy

As a global phenomenon, the platform economy has been extensively criticized for the type of labor it involves. Van Doorn, for example, notes that in the platform economy contracted labor has been replaced by "platform labor," which adopts "a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimize labor's flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation" (van Doorn, 2017, p. 901). In this sense, workers are regarded as complementors or subcontractors, instead of employees, of the platform companies, which are therefore exempted from providing labor 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 labor (Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

Although these arguments provide valuable insights into the new labor conditions in the global platform economy, they tend to overlook 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 platformization. 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 & Poell, 2018, p. 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 labor, 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 utilizing the digital system afforded by the platform, "grassroots" content producers are enabled to develop a digital creative entrepreneurship.

In the development of the platform economy, the Chinese state is a crucial agent. As Yu Hong (2017a, pp. 10-13)

illustrates, the Chinese government has pledged to place information and communication at the center of the national economic restructuring plan, using 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 so as to maintain 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 platform content creators?

In 2015, 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 (The State Council, 2015b). "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 center, aiming to integrate network connectivity and the "disruptive business and managerial model" (of decentralized, private, post-Fordist corporate management) with a wide range of traditional sectors, from manufacturing, agriculture, energy, finance, and transportation to public services and education (Hong, 2017b; The State Council, 2015b). 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 "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" (大众创业万众创新 *dazhong chuangxin, wanzhong chuangye*) (The State Council, 2015a). The latter policy seeks to mobilize 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 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

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 artificial-intellectual (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,” actively performing their vernacular creativity (Burgess, 2006) through self-taught skills. In addition, they use the digital system of Kuaishou to monetize their creative production through advertising and e-commerce. At first sight, Kuaishou’s platform content business and its “unlikely creative class” 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 authorities’ expectations of “what kind of stories should be told.” This is especially challenging because the stakes are high: “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 (2010, p. 66) highlights, this refers to 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 applies to Chinese digital platforms. The platformed cultural production system puts users at the center 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 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 powerful government agency under the leadership of the Central

Cyberspace Affairs Commission, headed directly by the Chinese president Xi Jinping. Founded in 2014, the CAC has promulgated over 15 policy documents on the regulation of a variety of online content production services, from social media to search engines, mobile applications (APP), and online 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* *yuetao*)—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 of economic restructuring drives but also shapes the platformization 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 Kuaishou’s content production acutely contingent and, we argue, distinguishes the platformization of cultural production in contemporary China from that in the West and constitutes a third dimension to what Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 2) summarize as the “contingency” of platform cultural production. According to Nieborg and Poell (2018), this contingency is consisted of “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.” The latter refers to how platforms’ content commodities are made continually “malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 2). The power of the state, in the case of China, engenders a third dimension of contingency that constantly shapes the practice of cultural production on Chinese platforms. But how is this contingency further translated in the digital affordances of Kuaishou? How does this networked platform governance affect the creator subjectivity and culture produced on the platform? The following two sections will address these questions.

Walking Through Kuaishou: Algorithmic and Digital Governance

Under the algorithmic logic, Kuaishou forges an ostensibly decentralizing 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 online traffic through the creative content as possible. According to the online archives of the Kuaishou webpage⁷ and its update records in Apple's app store, Kuaishou has described itself through slogans like "something interesting" and "record the world, record you" (2016–2018). On its webpage, three sentences 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

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 traveling, at home, with pets or babies, and so on. 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 1). By promising an interesting, real, individualized 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 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 RMB37.9 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 (Zhiyuan 2018) that, apart from the one-off service fee of RMB5,600, advertisers pay RMB0.2 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 authorized to live stream on the platform. Streamers interact with their

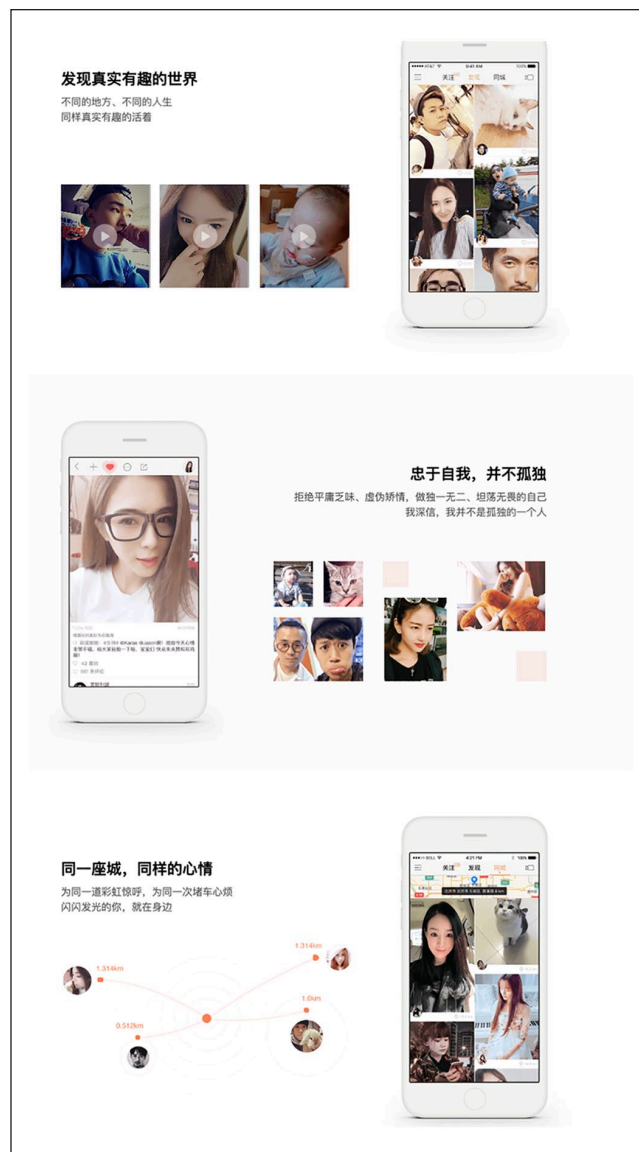


Figure 1. Vision of Kuaishou (screenshot from Kuaishou's official website, August 2018).

fans during the show and fans use *kuaibi* (快币), a virtual currency on Kuaishou, to buy and send virtual gifts to their favorite streamers. An amount of RMB1 can buy 10 *kuaibi* and the price of a virtual gift varies from 1 to 188 *kuaibi*. According to the platform's regulations, after deducting 20% for tax, the platform company earns half of the gifting income while streamers only obtain 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 simple interface. One can use email or social media 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*),



Figure 2. Screenshot of Kuaishou interface (August 2018).

and “nearby” (同城 *tongcheng*) (Figure 2). The default tab is “trending,” which lists videos selected and pushed by the recommendation algorithm. There is no category selection button under the tap and videos appearing 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 “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 geolocal 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 geolocal feature to the streaming system, the platform takes the opportunity of exploiting users’ offline 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 2), they can upload and post a short video up to 57 s long. Users can use smart phones 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 publicize 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 analyzed by the algorithmic system. 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 analyze 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 optimizes 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 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.

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 hr, 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 authorization 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 online 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" behaviors 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 behavior information are not available. Apart from restrictions on illegal or malicious content that violates Chinese law, the Kuaishou user agreement also prohibits users from any unauthorized 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). (Kuaishou 2018)

This user agreement patently panders to the company's commercial interests and to the Chinese state's requirement of a conforming and "positive" culture. Any violation 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. This underlines the unequal relationship between creators and the platform company. Content producers have

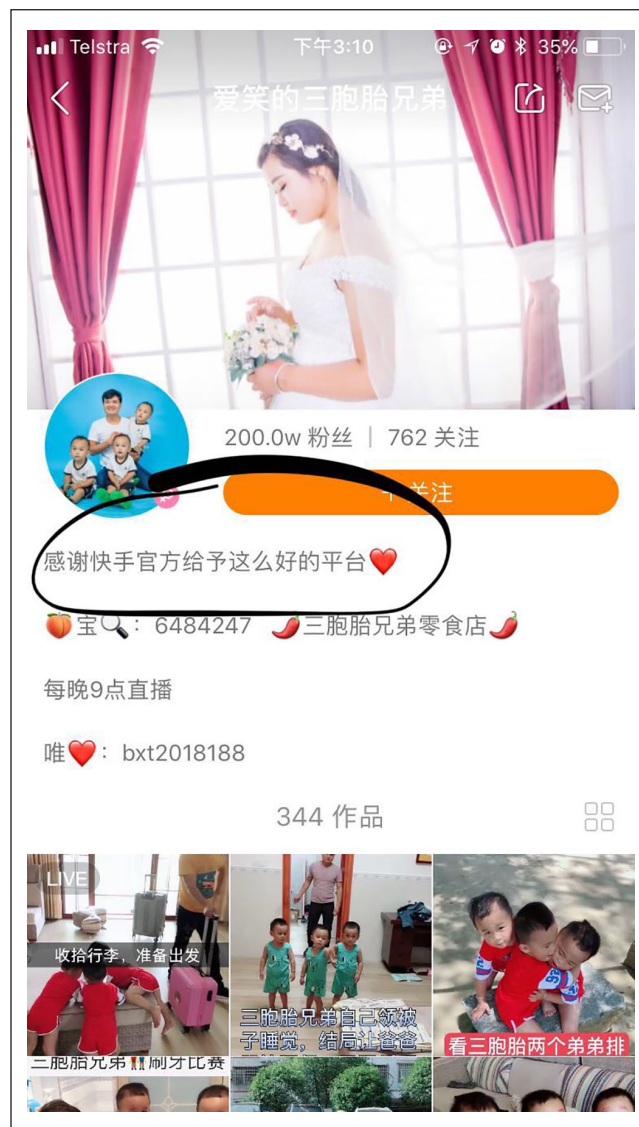


Figure 3. Screenshot of one user's homepage (August 2018).

to meticulously manage their creativity to ensure the accumulation of online data traffic without breaching the platform's regulations. The governance of digital platforms creates a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity among content producers. In the face of this, many content creators 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," and so on (Figure 3).

Our analysis so far shows that the algorithm-based system of Kuaishou epitomizes the platform contingency caused by the special state–platform relationship, which, as indicated earlier, distinguishes the Chinese platformization of cultural production from that in the West. As a result, platform governance is subject to state regulatory power, both promoting

and circumscribing the platformed cultural production. The algorithmic machine allows Kuaishou 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. But how do creators then deal with this 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. After graduating from middle school at the age of 15, 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 become a Kuaishou creator. Naming himself as “brother Qian” (*qiange* 谦哥), he performs and teaches magic tricks through short video and live streaming. Wearing a stylish hat and facial make-up, Wang Qian performs like a professional magician on Kuaishou through his self-taught skills learned from the Internet. After 2 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, his digital business generates an average sale of RMB70,000 per month. Deducting production costs and salaries for his assistants, Wang’s monthly income can reach RMB50,000 (€6,000). Compared to his previous factory work, the new job has not only multiplied earnings, but has also changed his appearance and identity: he seems to have got rid of the stigmatizing label of “migrant worker” and become part of the affluent, fashionable, and popular “online celebrities” (*wanghong* 网红). Through Kuaishou, 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, p. 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 capitalizing 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. Most Kuaishou users are from the urban lower social class and young people from rural society, enabled by Kuaishou 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, the platform embraces 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 nor spectacular . . . but are part of a range of mundane, intensely social practices. (Edensor, Leslie, Millington, & Rantisi, 2009, p. 10; see also Burgess, 2006)

To further explicate this vernacular aesthetics circulated on Kuaishou, we selected and analyzed 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, p. 12). It is precisely its “very improvisatory ephemerality,” its “very popularity,” and “its effects” on everyday life, according to Berlant (1997, p. 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, and so on;
2. Country life: fishing, hunting, crafts, vernacular landscape, and so on;
3. Creative skills: singing, magic, dancing, fitness, professional skills, and so on;
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, making 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 color, or behavior. 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, the model has her appearance drastically changed, with fairer skin and slimmer face. Her new look (Figure 4) is still not comparable to that of professional models in television advertisements, yet similar videos are quite popular on Kuaishou and within a few

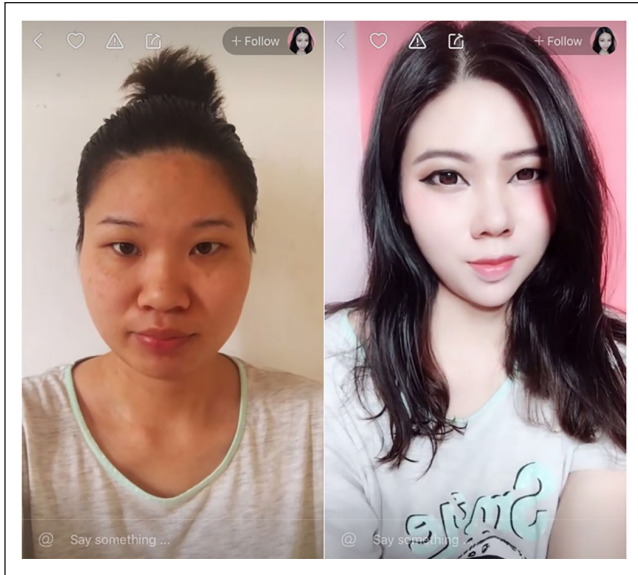


Figure 4. Before and after using the makeups (screenshot of one selected video, August 2018).

hours can easily gain hundreds and thousands of likes from users. The secret to the high popularity 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 homemade micro films. These films usually choose shabby villages as a background and tell amusing stories about relationships, family life, friendship, and so on. However, in contrast to the rural landscape shown, the cast members in these videos always dress in a trendy fashion with a stylish haircut, while the entertaining story lines are not necessarily about “country life.” The characters in the films often talk about “watching movies,” “shopping,” “drinking milk tea,” and “buying a car.” While choosing rurality as their background, these films also 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 marginalized in mainstream popular culture. It is this imagination from the marginal that fascinates many Kuaishou users, who more or less experience this grassrootsness and marginalization 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,” and so on. 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 (Short Video Factory, 2018).

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 creators, 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 utilize 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 optimized. 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 p.m., 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, p. 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 & 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 unauthorized 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 3).

At the same time, the high interactivity of the digital platform requires content producers not only to strategize 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 local accents. The aim is to add a sense of authenticity to the videos and develop intimacy with the audience. Like the musicians studied by Nancy Baym (2015), Kuaishou streamers are involved in relational labor, involving an “ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships that foster paid work” (Baym, 2018, p. 16). To gain more popularity and subscriptions, one of the relational 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 analyzed, on Kuaishou, a personality is carefully nurtured and maintained through performing “grassroots authenticity.” A frequent discourse that emerges out of these diverse stylizations is that of being “real-life” and “*jiedi qi*” (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 labor process of platformization, “expressing a certain state of body along with a certain mode of thinking” (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 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, p. 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 Dijck, 2014), but they also become crucial production tools and assets for these new, “unlikely” creative subjects on Kuaishou.

Conclusion

This article 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 maximizes the subsumption of individual vernacular creativity in China’s platform creative economy, while also enabling marginalized “grassroots” Chinese to become “unlikely” creative workers.

At the same time, through this production of an “unlikely” creative class, the platformization of cultural production accommodates the Chinese state’s “entrepreneurial solutionism” (Keane & Chen, 2019), 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 labor” and “prosumer” models some critical politic economists have identified (Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 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 monetization, their relational labor through which they create a connection and intimacy with their audiences (Baym, 2018), 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.

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Notes

1. In rapper culture, MC stands for “Microphone Controller” or “Master of Ceremonies,” often used as title for skilled rappers. Tian You chooses this title to identify himself as a Chinese rapper.
2. *Hanmai* literally means “shouting with microphone.” Chinese online rappers like Tian You created and performed it. These self-claimed MCs shout out rhythm lyrics, usually rephrased in classical Chinese with some popular online slangs, in high-beat music.
3. There are three methods we adopted for the selection of videos and accounts. To minimize any personal preference, we first use a new account to download the first 20 videos listed under the “trending” tab for 7 days. The second collection of videos are selected from the first 20 accounts on the ranking list of “the most popular live streamers on Kuaishou,” provided by Xiaohulu.com, an intermediary company offering data analysis and operation service for creators on major Chinese platforms. The final selection of videos is consisted of the 10 mostly viewed videos on Kuaishou in August 2018, data provided by another intermediary company “short video factory.”
4. All of them are private companies and receive financial investment from Chinese Internet giants Baidu, Tencent, and Alibaba. The headquarters of Kuaishou Company is located in Beijing and receives investment from Baidu, Tencent, and several other venture capital firms.
5. The notion of “grassroots individuals” (草根 *caogen*) resonates with the often used “common people” (老百姓 *laobaixin*). While we use the term in quotation marks for its prevalence in Chinese discourses, we are aware that these are highly problematic terms that produce a binary division in society between the people and the elite, ignoring further stratifications and more subtle class differences, and hence our use of quotes when using the term.
6. We will come back to examine the technical and algorithm system of Kuaishou in the following section.
7. See <https://www.Kuaishou.com/>
8. Kuaishou does not sell advertisement of financial, medical products, or other social media platforms.
9. It is quite ironic that a China-based platform includes both Facebook and Google in its registration interface; this shows how the censorship toward both is anything but clear-cut or univocal.
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.

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