

Relational platform entrepreneurs: Live commerce and the 818 Jiazu

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Abstract

This paper explores the emerging platform entrepreneurship through an observational case study of one of the most prominent Kuaishou influencers, Xin Youzhi, and his 818 jiazu. Jiazus are influencer communities on Kuaishou, a Chinese livestreaming and e-commerce platform. Examining platform entrepreneurs through a relational lens, we illustrate the organisation and operation of the 818 jiazu and its interaction with the followers, the Kuaishou platform and the Chinese state. Identifying relations of mutuality, autonomy and domination, we find that 818 jiazu's rise and fall manifest the relationality and contingency of entrepreneurial labours in the Chinese platform economy. We argue that Kuaishou jiazu can be understood as relational entrepreneurs who need new sociotechnical skills to navigate various relationships with the platform, users and state regulations. Our study contributes to understanding the organisation and practices of livestreamers by foregrounding the entrepreneurial agency of the influencer community.

Keywords

Kuaishou, digital labour, digital entrepreneurs, China, Jiazu, relational, performative labour, platform governance, relational labour

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Introduction¹

By the first quarter of 2021, Kuaishou, a Chinese user-generated livestreaming and e-commerce platform, has 300 million daily active users.¹ Kuaishou started as a short video sharing app featuring amateur videos of everyday life in rural China in 2011 (Li, 2020; Tan, Wang, Wangzhu, Xu, & Zhu, 2020). Kuaishou’s distinct aesthetics quickly appealed to China’s rural populations with lower socioeconomic status, a vast yet under-developed market at that time (Hallanan, 2020). Such a user base cultivated Kuaishou’s earliest rural influencers that later gave rise to the Kuaishou jiazus (家族). Jiazu, meaning ‘family’ in Chinese, emerged as an association between the established influencers and lesser known ones through apprenticeship, kinship and business connections. Each jiazu consists of one master (core influencer) and several apprentices (less established influencers) that attract millions of followers. Dozens of jiazus emerged around 2017 and competed for prominence and profit. As of 2021, the six mega jiazus on Kuaishou altogether covered more than 600 million followers (Figure 1). This paper examines jiazu’s entrepreneurial activities as Kuaishou’s main profit shifted from virtual gifts (i.e., virtual tokens that can be converted to real money) to live commerce sales (i.e., promoting products on digital platforms through livestreaming).

The function of a Kuaishou jiazu resembles a combination of celebrity incubators and family enterprises. The masters recruit, train and support the apprentices, maintaining a loosely hierarchical network of master-apprenticeship. For example, the 818 jiazu is led by the master Xin Youzhi (Xin), a 30-year-old self-made billionaire with 95.6 million followers. Together with his top apprentices, the 818 jiazu is followed by 290 million Kuaishou users. As a successful and charismatic influencer, Xin has reportedly sold over 15 billion yuan (\$ 2.3 million) worth of goods during one live commerce livestreaming session (Xinhua, 2020). In 2019, the 818 jiazu alone contributed to 22% of Kuaishou’s live commerce gross merchandise value (Orient Securities, 2021). The entrepreneurial impact of Kuaishou jiazus is hard to ignore when businesses are increasingly conducted on and through digital platforms.

Kuaishou jiazu deserves a closer examination as current scholarly attention on this type of community is still scarce. First, existing research has investigated Kuaishou’s cultural production of young people (Li, Tan, & Yang, 2019; Zhou & Liu, 2021) and rural users (Lin & de Kloet, 2019)

Kuaishou Jiazu	Key live streamers (non exhaustive)	Number of followers (in the millions)	Kuaishou Jiazu	Key live streamers (non exhaustive)	Number of followers (in the millions)	Kuaishou Jiazu	Key live streamers (non exhaustive)	Number of followers (in the millions)
辛巴家族 (辛巴) 	辛有志 辛巴 (Xin Youzhi Xinba 818), ID: 188888880	95.6	散打哥 	散打哥 (Sandage), ID: sanda027	51.1	二丫家族 	二丫的 (Erde), ID: er7777	44.2
	魏瑞琪 (Mao Meimei), ID: maomei527	45.9		小沈亮 (Xiaoshentong), ID: Xiaoshentong	27.1		驴帽平头 (Lvmao Pingrong), ID: pingrong777	24.7
	董董 (Dandao), ID: danhenzidao	42.2		五福(Wufu), ID: bw55555	14.8		丫蛋美儿 (Yidan Shuang), ID: 51545544	10.5
	初瑞雪 (Chu Ruixue), ID: chubaoobao	31.3		户外发 (Huwafat), ID: huwafat001	10.6		丫蛋阿宇 (Yidan Ayu), ID: ayu521888	10
	时大漂亮 (Shidapailiang), ID: 5519908888	24.2		真真姐 (Zhenzhenjie), ID: zhenzhen027	9.9		丫蛋小群 (Yidan Xiaopang), ID: xiaopang77777	8.6
	陈小姐 (Chen Xiaohou), ID: 140673020	20.2		晨轩 (Chenxuan), ID: X_19999	6.4		朝朝 (Chang), ID: 344212678	6.8
赵罗罗 (Zhao Minghe), ID: zhaominghe01	18.1	高龙 (GaoLong), ID: 608555005	4.8	王大雷(Wang Dana), ID: wangdana	5.4			
魏凯, ID: Lugu0912	11.2	TTT	Total number of followers of the jiazu (millions)	124.7	Total number of followers of the jiazu (millions)	110.2		
张二嫂家族 Zhangersao Jiazu	张二嫂 (Zhangersao), ID: 25666666	34.5	716 家族 716 Jiazu	小伊伊 (Xiaoyiyi), ID: xiaoyiyi	38.1	方丈家族 Fangzhang Jiazu	FZ 方丈 (FZ Fangzhang), ID: fangzhang	31.4
胡娟 (Huan), ID: huan0888888	10.4	兮妹儿 (Ximei), ID: 227811072	6.3	李强亮 (Li Shuang), ID: lishuang	8			
胡仔 (Huza), ID: 835	9.3	金牌志虎 (Jinpai Zhihu), ID: Zh66666668	5.6	郭天亮 (Guotiantong), ID: guotiantong6566	6.3			
吴老二 (Wulaoer), ID: 96573877	5.9	魏英 (Weiyang), ID: jinying099	4.3	小杜美儿 (Xiaodumei), ID: dianhuangma	5.2			
魏儿 (Weier), ID: 96572777	4.6	魏儿 (Weier), ID: yan65666	4.4	Total number of followers of the jiazu (millions)	50.9			
Total number of followers of the jiazu (millions)	64.7	Total number of followers of the jiazu (millions)	58.7	Total number of followers of the jiazu (millions)	58.7			

Figure 1. Six mega jiazus and major apprentices based on Wang and Lu (2020) with the numbers of followers summarised by authors in November 2021.

through a lens of rural-urban dichotomy (e.g., Liu, 2020). However, Kuaishou has become more reliant on live commerce revenue since 2019. In 2020, Kuaishou's live commerce revenue reached 3.7 billion RMB, 13.3 times that of 2019, and further increased by 598% in the first quarter of 2021 (Kuaishou, 2020; 2021). With Kuaishou's primary profit model shifting from virtual gifts to live commerce, the urban-rural discrepancy in Kuaishou's content production has become arguably less central to its current business positioning. More entrepreneurial actors and practices are worth being examined. Further, since Kuaishou became a live commerce platform, commercial activities have been openly encouraged instead of being initially controlled or prohibited (see Lin & de Kloet, 2019). The emergence of jiazu as a powerful live commerce player in 2018 echoed Kuaishou's overtly commercial orientation. The success of Kuaishou jiazu has propelled us to rethink their entrepreneurial labour and drives. In this paper, we regard Kuaishou jiazu as a type of platform entrepreneurs whose organisational existence and entrepreneurial labour are mediated through the platform of Kuaishou under the governance of the Chinese state. Specifically, we address two research questions: How are Kuaishou jiazu's entrepreneurial practices enacted? How can we comprehend the agency, success and failures of Kuaishou entrepreneurs?

This paper seeks to offer a grounded examination of Kuaishou jiazu through 'relational and institutional embeddedness' of entrepreneurial networks (Avgerou & Li, 2013, p. 329). We understand Kuaishou jiazu as an emerging network of platform entrepreneurs whose economic activities are conducted by carefully navigating through different relationships. These include formulating interpersonal ties with other entrepreneurs and business partners, engaging in a 'quasi-symbiotic' relationship with Kuaishou and manoeuvring the state regulations. Through a relational approach, our exploration of Kuaishou jiazu supports an open inquiry into the multiple manifestations of platform entrepreneurship rather than offering a critique on platform-labour relations. Not seeing Kuaishou jiazu as purely precarious or empowered, we avoid confining platform entrepreneurship to 'the dialectic of exploitation versus empowerment' (Zhou & Liu, 2021, p. 322). In this way, the relational approach situates platform entrepreneurial agency at the intersection of the users, platform and state with a social-cultural emphasis.

The following section first positions Kuaishou influencers as platform entrepreneurs and elucidates our relational approach. Then, our findings are structured to present three sets of relationships: between Xin and the 818 jiazu, Kuaishou and the 818 jiazu, and the Chinese state and Kuaishou. Finally, we discuss how to successfully navigate platform capitalism and state governance. We argue Kuaishou jiazu can be understood as platform entrepreneurs through unpacking various relationships among the platform, users and state regulations. Foregrounding the entrepreneurial agency of the influencer community, our study contributes to the organisational knowledge of Chinese platform studies.

Kuaishou influencers as platform entrepreneurs: A relational approach

The content making and sharing activities of Kuaishou users and influencers have been examined as forms of digital labour and cultural production. With the burgeoning of the Chinese digital economy, many studies on Chinese digital labour examined the labour politics in electronic factories and IT companies (e.g., Qiu, 2010). Since the mid-2010s, scholars have taken an interest in understanding how platforms mediate labour conditions, such as the increasingly prevailing ride-hailing and food-delivery platforms (Chen, 2018; Sun & Chen, 2021). The 'platform-mediated' workers experience different problems than digital factory workers, including a lack of official employment contract, occupational insurance, union representation and income stability (Sun & Chen, 2021). The platform-mediated labour is usually considered fragmented and precarious (Lee, 2016; Qiu, 2016;

Moore & Joyce, 2020). This line of literature extends a Marxist critique of alienation and exploitation, arguing that the platform users are variously manipulated and capitalised by the platforms (e.g., Raun, 2018; van Doorn, 2017). Some scholars identify Kuaishou users as unlikely creative workers who contribute to the transformation of the Chinese economy and digital culture (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). Others consider the Kuaishou content creators as performing ‘playbour’ – individually and collaboratively offering free labour to the platform in the disguise of playing and having fun (Zhou & Liu, 2021).

However, the activities conducted by Kuaishou jiazu can be interpreted as more than content producing but a type of grassroots platform entrepreneurship. The figure of an entrepreneur has been associated with a desire for wealth and success (Duffy, 2017; Marwick, 2017) and a willingness to take risks in exchange for profit (Dewhurst, 2017). The rise of the peer-to-peer network and digital platforms offered unprecedented opportunities for individual entrepreneurs, such as lowered market entrance, closer connections to potential buyers and a chance to build networked membership (Chandna & Salimath, 2018). With this opportunity, the boundary between an employee who provides creative labour and a self-branded entrepreneur on live commerce platforms has become increasingly blurred (Cunningham et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2019). Especially with live commerce platforms, entrepreneurs become ordinary people who can innovate and create value through online trading (Wang & Kim, 2018). For example, the Chinese e-commerce platform Taobao gave rise to the Taobao village in more than 80% of the provinces in rural China, with an increasing number of households engaging in entrepreneurial innovation and forming rural e-commerce clusters (Mei, Mao, Lu, & Chu, 2020). The rural e-commerce clusters were found to stimulate entrepreneurial enthusiasm, increase risk-taking and foster a business environment through the local provision and governmental support (Mei et al., 2020). Lin & de Kloet (2019, p. 10) aptly identify the cultural producers on Kuaishou as grassroots digital entrepreneurs who have ‘transcended the passive digital labour and prosumer models’ as they ‘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’. Similarly, Kuaishou jiazu can be examined as platform entrepreneurs who utilise digital platforms to produce, promote and trade tangible and intangible goods.

Entrepreneurs are conventionally considered innovators who transform the structure by creating new ways of doing things. Entrepreneurship tends to be associated with elements of ‘ability, motivation, opportunity, institutions, and process skill’ (McMullen, Ingram, & Adams, 2020, p. 1199). However, the burgeoning platform entrepreneurship has not been considered a robust mode of production. For example, Lin et al. (2019) have examined how disabled people re-invent themselves as entrepreneurial subjects with the help of the internet, while facing all kinds of business hardship and uncertainty. Barratt et al. (2020, p. 1656) considered the entrepreneurial agency of Australian app-based food-delivery workers as ‘low-level’, for it is oriented towards gaining profit rather than challenging platform-business models. So far, there has been no published academic research on Kuaishou jiazu. Lin and de Kloet (2019) rightly pointed out that platforms support multi-sided and multi-scalar markets that accommodate complicated relationships. The long-term success of platforms is not simply based on exploiting platform labour but ‘is contingent upon commercial collaboration between platform companies, content producers and other complementors’ (p.3). Therefore, when we started to explore 818 jiazu’s entrepreneurial practices, we sought to avoid the preoccupation that reduces the Kuaishou entrepreneurs to a binary of empowered innovators versus exploited precariat. Instead, we focus on examining the various relationships that support (or undermine) the Kuaishou entrepreneurs.

Baym (2015) used the term ‘relational labour’ to describe how content producers increasingly build and maintain relationships with the audiences on social media. Following Baym (2015), Lin

and de Kloet (2019) believed Kuaishou content producers engaged in ‘relational labour’ through ongoing communications and relationship building to converse livestreaming sessions to paid work. Sun and Chen (2021, p.19) further coined ‘contingent agency’ to describe how Chinese food-delivery workers carve out spaces for economic gains at the individual and small-scale collective levels’ by wrestling with the platform algorithms and instrumentalising social relations, such as installing bots to bypass platform regulations and befriending restaurants for faster orders. Such investigations provide a glimpse into platform entrepreneurship as a site of constant negotiation. Though inspired, we cannot directly apply this concept because we believe that platform entrepreneurial activities need to be examined under a more complex frame. First, the extent of Kuaishou entrepreneurial activities, such as promoting commodities, establishing self-owned brands, incubating influencers and building logistical networks, exceeds the remit of content production. Kuaishou entrepreneurs are involved in more complicated and multilateral industrial negotiations, which can reshuffle the user-platform relationship. Additionally, since many ‘professional’ Kuaishou entrepreneurs started as ‘amateurs’ and ‘apprentices’, the relative distinction implied in Baym’s (2015) work between the producer and audience does not apply to the fluid boundaries between the master, general jiazou members and their fervent followers. Merely examining one set of producer-audience relations is insufficient to capture this complexity.

We propose to understand the platformisation of entrepreneurship at the intersection of the user community (influencers and followers), platform and state governance by foregrounding the entrepreneurial agency and honouring the platform specificity. As digital platforms intermediate the flows of goods, money and communities, the state can be simultaneously the regulator and participant. Therefore, issues of Chinese platformisation are complex negotiations among the platform, user communities and state (Zhao, 2019). Since both the platform and the user community need to align with the state’s political agenda (Chen, Kaye, & Zeng, 2021), the state can influence the platforms’ business model, shut down user accounts, and shape the career paths of high-profile influencers. However, neither the government nor the corporates are monolithic and static entities, which means that interactions between the state, platforms and users would variably involve conflicts, compromises and collusion (Zhao, 2019). Consequently, our relational approach examines a tripartite relationship and prioritises an exploration of Kuaishou entrepreneurs. We unfold how the 818 jiazou formulates and navigates through different relationships, including how the entrepreneurs engage with each other, negotiate with the Kuaishou company and respond to state interferences. A tripartite model of analysis supports our inquiry that focuses on the changing trajectory of jiazou’s emergence, organisations and practices.

A relational approach that emphasises unfolding the real-existing user-platform-state relations takes inspiration from the analytical troupe of critical media industry studies that highlight the everyday agency of cultural workers, clashes of business culture and state strategies (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009). Our analytical categories echo Dheeriyā’s (2009) multifactor framework that analyses online entrepreneurship through the characteristics of individuals starting the venture, the technology in use, the environment in which the venture operates and the process by which the venture is governed. It further aligns with (De Kloet et al., 2019) proposal to study the platformisation of Chinese society through a nexus of three parties: infrastructure, governance and practice. To further examine how platforms intermediate the relationships manifested through entrepreneurial activities, we utilise Schüßler, Attwood-Charles., Kirchner, & Schor (2021, p. 1226) reconceptualisation of ‘platforms as a multi-faceted relational structure’. For Schüßler et al. (2021), platforms broker users’ economic exchanges of content, goods or services through three canonical social relationships: mutuality, autonomy and domination. Mutuality manifests through the practices of sharing and reciprocity as different actors share a commitment to each other. Autonomy

is the mechanism that attracts platform earners to conduct business and pursue interest on the platforms freely and independently. Domination functions as power exercise and control exerted on platform users through manual or algorithmic means. In this article, we refer to relational entrepreneurs as those who manage their entrepreneurial activities by establishing relations with multiple parties. We will demonstrate how platform entrepreneurs navigate through changes in such relationships as the platforms and the broader environment transform.

A relational approach can be helpful to analyse the increasingly blurred roles of live commerce livestreamers as simultaneously labours and entrepreneurs, for it seeks to offer a profile of a specific group rather than critiquing neoliberalism. It helps us to explore ‘what platform entrepreneurs do in different contexts’ than normatively answering ‘whether platform entrepreneurs are exploited or empowered’. The approach pays special attention to the ‘softer’ qualities, such as the performative entrepreneurship and sociocultural ecology of the Chinese platforms. This approach further echoes the ‘de-westernising’ call for platform studies by paying attention to platform specificities (Davis & Xiao, 2021) and addressing the historical origins and logic of specific platforms.

Methods

To examine Kuaishou entrepreneurs at the intersection of the users, platform and state regulations, we examined the case study of the 818 jiazu with observational fieldwork. Case studies are in-depth studies of a group or culture that illustrate the diversity and reveal the complexities of social life (Yin, 2003). Case studies investigate one or more organisations in detail to provide informed analysis in real-life contexts (Yin, 2003). In this paper, we focus on the case of Xin and the 818 jiazu. Xin was a high school dropout born in 1990 in a village of northeast China and a migrant worker-turned-businessman before joining Kuaishou in 2016. Xin branded his fans group with the code ‘818’² and started leading, recruiting and training apprentices under the umbrella of ‘818 jiazu’. So far, the 818 jiazu remained the most influential jiazu on Kuaishou. Both the Xin and the 818 jiazu are significant to understanding the Kuaishou entrepreneurs.

Our fieldwork incorporated observation and document analysis of publicly available information. First, we immersed ourselves as researchers and Kuaishou users into the community of the 818 jiazu to understand its history, evolution, composition and dynamics. We followed Xin and several of his star pupils intensively for 6 months on Kuaishou (October 2019 to April 2020, and periodically after Xin’s suspension and re-emergence), watched all of Xin’s livestreaming sessions during this period, amounting to 80 hours³ and conducted observational fieldwork that accumulated over 150 hours. We studied how Xin emerged and established his e-commerce empire. We observed the relationship between Xin and the 818 jiazu and mapped their activities against the development of the Kuaishou platform. This has resulted in observational notes and relationship maps, covering Xin’s entrepreneurial practices and strategies, Xin’s personal relationship network, the internal and external organisations of the 818 jiazu and a broader map of the six mega jiazus’ relationships.

Further, we examined Kuaishou’s media stories and official reports, including the two corporate social responsibility reports (2018 and 2019), Kuaishou’s website and 20 high-quality news articles from major Chinese media outlets regarding Kuaishou and the 818 jiazu. We also collected several state campaigns on Kuaishou’s regulations, including the ‘positive energy’ (2012), ‘clear online space’ (2016–2018, resumed in 2020) and cyberspace ‘rectification measures’ (2018). These documents assisted us to triangulate Kuaishou’s transformation as a business platform and to understand the rise and fall of Kuaishou entrepreneurs during such transformations. This observational approach allows us to utilise openly available data and directly access platform entrepreneurial activities. Since observational research can measure the objective constructs in a social

scenario (Lee & Broderick, 2007), we use it to analyse Kuaishou entrepreneurs' relational construct and measure dynamic forces of mutuality, autonomy and domination.

We collected data from October 2019 to November 2021, a prolonged period suitable for mapping, unfolding and evaluating complex relationships. This time coincided with the transitioning of Kuaishou's profit model from a virtual gift economy to e-commerce functionalities and services (Zhou & Liu, 2021). Xin and the 818 jiazu have secured the position of being the most influential e-commerce jiazu on Kuaishou, despite Xin's several suspensions by Kuaishou. Data analysis was conducted by collating jiazu members' observational and document analysis notes, categorising them into three sets of relationships and further understanding their changes. In our case, since Kuaishou entrepreneurs are our research focus, how Xin and the 818 jiazu act and react to the platform and the state regulations will guide the presentation of our findings.

Findings

Our findings frame Kuaishou entrepreneurship as collaborating and maintaining various relationships beyond the exploiter-labour dichotomy. Jiazu and Kuaishou profit from each other in quasi-symbiosis. Through constant bargaining, negotiation and subversion, the 818 jiazu engages with the platform and the institutional governance at large.

Xin: From internet influencer to e-commerce entrepreneur

Xin rose from obscurity to prominence in 2018 thanks to the virtual gift economy of Kuaishou's livestreaming business and his wife, Chu Ruixue⁴, who was an established businesswoman on WeChat, the most popular Chinese social media platform (Peng & Wang, 2021). Gift economy refers to a business model where audience purchases virtual gifts (animated digital tokens) with real money to tip the livestreamers. The patron's profile would be ranked on a list, enticing patrons to spend more in order to 'hang on the rank' (guabang). The profit is then split between Kuaishou and livestreamers. Zhou and Liu (2021) observed that virtual gifts not only satisfy the fans' psychological needs but also are used as a strategy for aspiring, upstart influencers to gain visibility quickly. In 2017, with only 300 thousand fans, Xin gifted Chu Ruixue (2 million fans) with a conspicuous amount of wealth. The couple then showered spectacular gifts for other established livestreamers, notably two million yuan (\$300,000) for Qitiandao (then 40 million followers). Through virtual gifting, the couple gradually built the fanbase for 818 jiazu (Figures 2 and 3).

Reports about Xin's initial years on Kuaishou and our close observation of his livestreaming sessions jointly draw the chronic history of Xin's entrepreneurship. Xin's rise as a Kuaishou superstar was concurrent with Kuaishou's expanding revenue model towards live commerce. When Kuaishou began to test its live commerce function, most influencers still relied on entertainment performance and short video production. Xin has quickly embraced live commerce and accumulated millions of followers scouring for bargains. The providers of commodities, such as brand companies and factories, became new actors of the Kuaishou e-commerce ecology (Figure 4). Brands and factories enjoy exposing their commodities to a large audience and are willing to collaborate with popular influencers by offering special deals and coupons in their livestreaming sessions. Enabling bulk purchases, Xin began to leverage high discounts from brands and manufacturers. Xin established a sustainable cycle from fans to sales to more fans: a large fanbase led to more substantial bargaining power over brands and factories for lower priced goods in his livestreaming sessions, which in turn, attracted even more fans and purchases. In this way, numerous

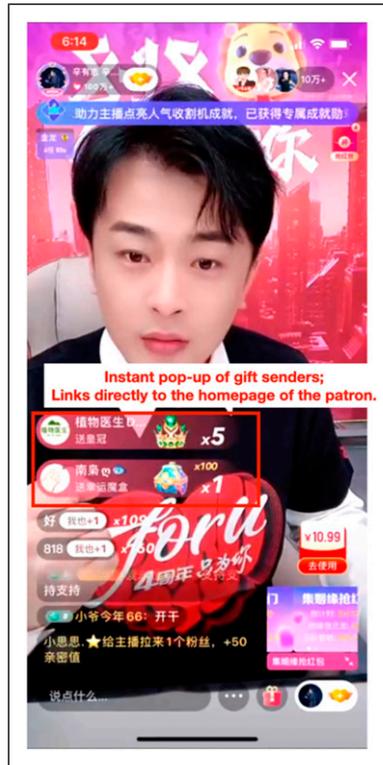


Figure 2. Xin during livestreaming.

brands had to compete to be featured by Xin by paying large sums of ‘deposits’ before the livestreaming sessions on top of the sales commission.⁵

Xin’s entrepreneurship also manifested in establishing new and unconventional pathways to conduct live commerce on Kuaishou, unrestricted to the immediately available options. Unsatisfied with showcasing goods from others, Xin launched his own brand, ‘Xin Xuan’ (Xin’s selection). Xin Xuan has promised to offer world-class products at affordable prices through direct cooperation with the manufacturing factories of leading international brands. For example, ‘Zuzu cosmetics’ was a product line led by Xin’s wife, Chu Ruixue. Furthermore, Xin established a system called ‘Xin Xuan Bang’ (Xin’s selection helper), which offered an e-commerce service chain to other influencers: goods selection, price negotiation, logistics and goods transportation, and after-sale services on behalf of influencers. With such a ‘supply chain’ system, Xin Xuan Bang was released as a smartphone application (app), allowing Xin to control the supply chain crucial to the live commerce industry. In this way, Xin’s profile matches with the risk-taking entrepreneurs who desire wealth and success (Dewhurst, 2017).

We observed that Xin repeatedly told his followers that he was ‘just a businessperson’, a philanthropist billionaire from a humble beginning. We echo the observation of many scholars on the prevalence of ‘affective’ or ‘emotional’ labour in the creative and cultural industry, through which social relations and emotional attachments between the influencers and audience are mediated and commodified (Sun, 2020; Wang, 2020; Zou, 2018). However, we find that Xin’s entrepreneurial style can be better framed as performing ‘qinghuai’ (情怀, literally translated as feelings

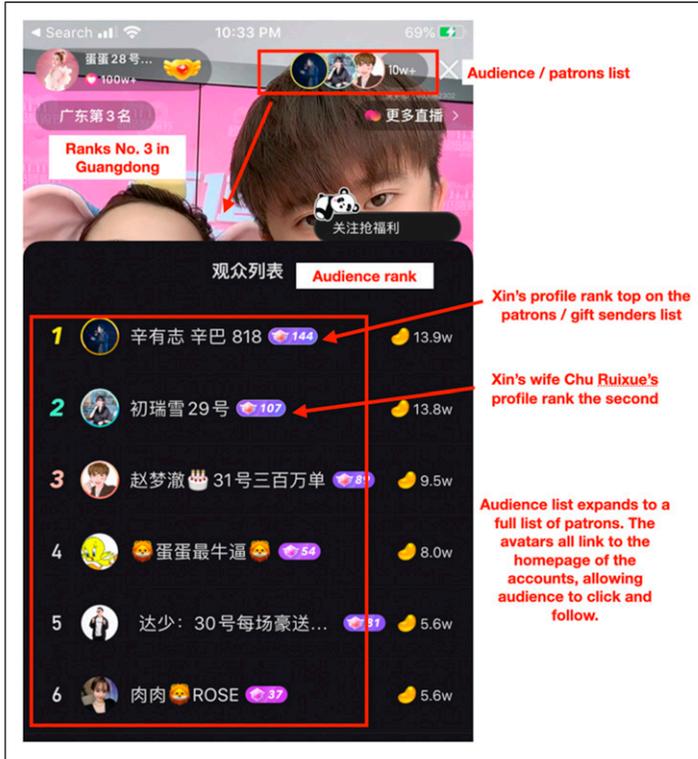


Figure 3. Gift sender rank.

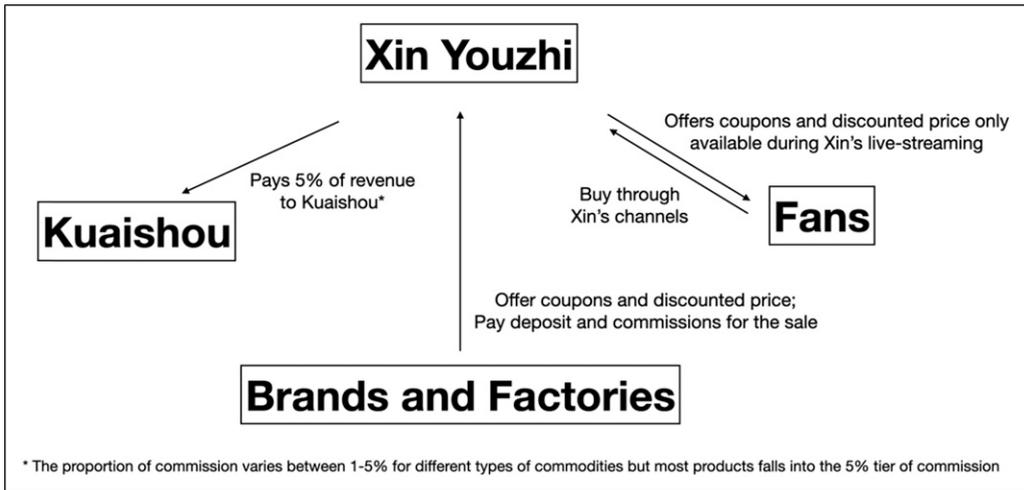


Figure 4. Relationship between Xin, Kuaishou, brands and fans in live commerce ecology.

from the bosom), a moral manifestation of selflessness, camaraderie and balance, which [Xiao, Tan, Leong, & Tan \(2021\)](#) consider instrumental to successful digital entrepreneurs in China. Such a strategy portrays Xin not only as a more relatable figure to the follower communities but also as a committed and benevolent role model to the state. As we will show later, the endorsement from the state and public officials has been crucial in safeguarding Xin's career, differentiating Xin from Qitiandao, who was later imprisoned due to financial fraud.

In four short years, Xin has grown from an upstart Kuaishou influencer to a leading live commerce entrepreneur. Xin's emergence has been intertwined with Kuaishou's various functionalities as a short video livestreaming platform (e.g., virtual gifts, guabang). Xin's thriving as a live commerce entrepreneur tallied Kuaishou's transition and the booming Chinese live commerce ecology.

The 818 Jiazus: An entrepreneurial mixture of mutuality, autonomy and domination

It is necessary to briefly review how jiazus evolved from pan-entertainment 'fraternities' to live commerce conglomerates. When Kuaishou launched the livestreaming function in 2016, a guild system was prevalent on other early livestreaming platforms (see [Zhang et al., 2019](#)). The guilds mediated between influencers and platforms, incubated livestreamers and took a commission from the virtual gift revenue. Kuaishou broke the guild system by directly splitting the profit with livestreamers, which quickly attracted many established livestreamers from other platforms to join the emerging Kuaishou ([Pan, 2021](#)). These livestreamers became the first generation of Kuaishou influencers and started to form their own smaller groups to maximise gains of the gift economy. These groups performed, competed and gossiped to gain traffic and attract virtual gifts. To maximise influence, some groups merged to form one jiazus, led by a few internally elected influencers – mostly dominated by male masters.

Our observation of the organisational structures of jiazus notes that the 818 jiazus has functioned as an entrepreneurial cluster consisting of apprentices and kinship. The apprentices, usually employed under confidential or informal agreements, perform duties ranging from livestreaming to domestic chores for the master. The kinships, spouses, parents and distant relatives often occupy executive roles as shareholders and decision-makers. Similar to the historical development of the gamers' guilds, jiazus have evolved from organic influencer communities to 'hybrid institution[s] of commerce and community' ([Zhang & Fung, 2014](#), p. 43). Moreover, the mixture of professional and nepotistic relationships has contributed to its hierarchy and patriarchy. Jiazus members refer to each other and their followers as 'family members'. During livestreaming sessions, the apprentices compared Xin to their 'father' and staged touching performances, like kowtows and crying, to show their gratitude towards Xin. These exaggerating performances are entrenched in Kuaishou's commercial logic, for they can be translated into viewership and sales by eliciting a sense of participation and belonging for the fans ([Zhang & Fung, 2014](#)). However, the affective labour activities performed by different jiazus members are not necessarily 'equal' due to jiazus's hierarchical and patriarchal organisation. In our observation, 818 jiazus's commercial activities have been consolidated and centralised around the 'father' and 'master' Xin, instead of taking a more decentralised entrepreneurial layout. Xin strategically assigned different subcategories of commodities, such as fast fashion, snacks and cosmetics, to his chosen apprentices. This high level of control allows Xin to monitor the general labour division of the entire jiazus.

From 2019 through to mid-2020, there were two major virtual battles between competing mega jiazus: Xin and Sanda. The battles started when fans argued over whether Xin or Sanda was Kuaishou 'yige' (the most influential figure). The battles involved one jiazus in swarming the

livestreaming sessions of the ‘enemies’ and leaving explicit hate speech and curses. [Zhou and Liu \(2021\)](#) identified some types of virtual battles as a major way of revenue creation between Kuaishou and influencers. Kuaishou allowed two livestreamers to be randomly matched (also known as the PK mode) and compete for virtual gifts. The PK strategy mobilises a sense of solidarity and emotional attachment between ordinary influencers and their followers ([Wang, 2020](#); [Zou, 2018](#)). The PK model appeared to be so effective that it was appropriated by Kuaishou in the form of a week-long ‘sales competition’ in November 2019 to boost its live commerce business. In our observation, mega jiazus performed hostile stunts to convert viewership to virtual gifts revenue only occasionally. More often, the virtual battles acted as a means to unify jiazus, demonstrate collective prowess and achieve solidarity.

However, the sense of patriarchal solidarity among the 818 jiazus might have contributed to its resilience. Xin has been almost omnipresent, even when his Kuaishou account was suspended (April to June 2020, December 2020 to February 2021, September to October 2021). In Xin’s absence, his apprentices frequently reminded the audience of Xin’s return by implicitly referring to Xin as ‘him’ or the ‘master’ or claiming they were the ‘daughters of the King’ and were ‘livestreaming on behalf of the father’. Xin’s several re-emergence can be understood as a combination of jiazus’s collective action and Kuaishou’s reliance on Xin for attracting fans, traffic and live commerce sales. The above accounts show the co-presence of mutuality, autonomy or domination within the 818 jiazus as a diversified community with an internal control mechanism. This observation departs from ([Barratt et al.’s \(2020\)](#)) conception of Australian food-delivery workers’ entrepreneurial agency as a low-level manifestation. Members of the 818 jiazus may be profit-driven and less incentivised to challenge Kuaishou’s business models, yet they present a sense of camaraderie and well-coordinated synergy. As a community of common interest, their collective action influences and complicates Kuaishou’s future operation and decision-making.

Kuaishou and kuaishou jiazus: from mutuality to domination

Before 2018, 90% of Kuaishou’s revenue came from the gift economy ([Orient Securities, 2021](#)). At this stage, Kuaishou endorsed the formations of jiazus for their immense contributions to soliciting virtual gifts. With the transformation of Kuaishou’s revenue model from virtual gifts to live commerce, jiazus, who were once close allies of Kuaishou, became less relevant as Kuaishou strengthened the collaboration with more professional multichannel networks (MCNs). Restricting jiazus’s development was not because jiazus brought financial loss, but in fear of their monopoly within Kuaishou’s live commerce ecology. With millions of followers, jiazus possess enormous bargaining power over the brands and factories. Faced with constant demands for excessive discounts and shrinking profit margins, the brands would lose the incentive to collaborate with Kuaishou. Similarly, small and upstart live commerce influencers could hardly gain traffic since they could not offer competitive prices. Therefore, many new livestreamers and brands would choose other Chinese live commerce platforms (notably Taobao Live and Douyin) over Kuaishou.

We observed that in 2020, Kuaishou started to ‘de-jiazus’ the platform. Three major measurements are identified. First, Kuaishou suppressed the masters of mega jiazus. For example, Xin’s account was suspended three times between 2020 and 2021. Xin’s Kuaishou account was first suspended (April 2020) for 6 weeks due to group conflicts and hate speech between the 818 jiazus and rival Sanda jiazus. Xin was suspended for a second time (December 2020 to February 2021) because one of his apprentices had sold fake goods during a livestreaming session. Xin’s third suspension (September 2 to October 14 2021) resulted from his direct confrontation with Kuaishou. In a livestreaming session, he shouted out to the Kuaishou management for being unfairly allocated

online traffic by Kuaishou algorithms: ‘Boss, I know you are watching. I’m paying millions for my traffic, but you are intentionally reducing it. Not only me, but all influencers will leave your platform if you keep robbing us like this.’ A Kuaishou influencer relations manager called in via mobile phone to negotiate with him while the conversation went live in front of millions of viewers. Xin was prohibited from livestreaming the next day but returned on October 14 with a compromise from Kuaishou granting 50 million yuan (\$ 7.8 million) of subsidies to sell bargain products for the November shopping season.

Second, Kuaishou released various marketing services and products to assist new influencers in channelling traffic to their online shops, which retrenches the supply chain dominance of jiazus (Kuaishou 2020, 2021). For example, ‘Cili Juxing’ (<https://k.kuaishou.com/official.html#/>) connects influencers to business brands for advertising, and ‘Kuaishou Lianmeng’ (<https://u.kuaishou.com/>) that connects influencers and supply chain for live commerce. During December 2020 and February 2021, when Xin was banned, emerging influencers rose to prominence, notably Yuda-gongzi (28 million followers), an MCN-backed influencer who established himself in the cosmetics sector.

Third, Kuaishou also signed several mainstream superstars, notably Jay Chou and Jackie Chan, to attract users outside jiazus’ circles. In December 2020, Kuaishou started a short film incubator called ‘Xingmang Jihua’ (Asterism Plan) to support professional filmmakers to create polished films for Kuaishou, eclipsing the grassroots videos. Starting in 2021, Kuaishou launched a support scheme, ‘Xinghai Jihua’ (Star Plan), to entice content creators and MCNs. Despite the substantive impact of the 818 jiazus, we found no trace of any of the six mega jiazus in Kuaishou’s official reports, indicating Kuaishou’s intentional obscuration of jiazus in its publicity.

Our findings emphasise the dynamic reciprocity (mutuality) between Kuaishou and the 818 jiazus in Kuaishou’s earlier years of the gift economy, yet gradually shifted to suppression (domination) in Kuaishou’s live commerce era. Echoing Schüßler et al. (2021), Kuaishou has algorithmically restricted Xin’s live commerce traffic and exposure as well as strategically supported 818 jiazus’ opponents. Complementing Rahman and Thelen’s (2019) observation that one distinguishing trait of platforms from other monopolies is their ability to form an alliance and coalition with the users, we find that Kuaishou entrepreneurship is conducted as a balancing act as Kuaishou shifts its strategies between cultivating mutuality and exert domination.

State campaigns and livestreaming regulations: autonomy through domination

In authoritarian regimes like China, state actions directly affect the platforms and the platform entrepreneurs. We have found that Kuaishou and the 818 jiazus constantly test the boundaries of the state regulations and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Following the cyberspace ‘rectification measures’ in April 2018, Kuaishou permanently deleted hundreds of prominent influencer accounts due to ‘vulgar contents’ such as drug dealing, vulgarity and violence. Since late 2018, Kuaishou started to promote an upgraded public image by adopting mainstream values and more corporate social responsibilities. Similar to its counterpart Douyin, Kuaishou officials began to operate a dedicated ‘Positive Energy’ account of 20 million followers in line with the state’s ‘positive energy’ campaign. Further, Kuaishou launched a poverty alleviation programme committed to boosting sales of rural agricultural products. Echoing the observations of Chen et al. (2021), state policies and their political implications can shape how platforms conduct their business. It can be inferred that one implicit reason for Kuaishou to transit from video sharing to live commerce was a stricter control and censorship on platform content production.

According to our observation of Xin's Kuaishou profile, livestreaming sessions and publicity articles, we could tell that Xin was cautious to position himself as a humble and responsible citizen. As a successful platform entrepreneur, Xin's Kuaishou profile stated that he was 'born a farmer, son of a farmer and owed everything to the people'. The only two videos pinned under Xin's Kuaishou profile were patriotic songs produced by the 818 jiazhu. Xin has led several sessions to teach local peasants to conduct live commerce and encouraged the 818 jiazhu to livestream for agricultural products in less-developed regions for free. During the COVID-19 epidemic, Xin reportedly donated 150 million yuan (\$ 24 million) to Wuhan, reinforcing his philanthropist image and winning him the provincial 'May 4 Medals' awarded by the Heilongjiang Communist Youth League (China Daily, 2020). Lin and de Kloet (2019, p. 10) have observed that setting up a special 'renshe' (人设, character or personality), especially cultivating and performing 'grassroots authenticity', can create a sense of intimacy with the followers.

Further, Xin's display of entrepreneurial 'qinghuai' helped craft a benign value proposition of his live commerce enterprise that can navigate 'regulatory uncertainties' (Xiao et al., 2021, p. 780) often associated with emerging industrial practices like live commerce. In November 2020, several mainstream media vehemently accused Xin and his apprentice of fraud and selling fake goods (e.g., Xinhua, 2020). Yet, 1 year later, Xin was invited by China Central Television to promote sales for the China International Import Expo with a mainstream news anchor. Appearance on national television symbolised that Xin had gained social impact and political endorsement to a certain degree. Xin's philanthropic and socially responsible persona can be seen as a product co-shaped by Kuaishou and the state that desires 'positive' yet 'down-to-earth' entrepreneurial subjects.

We also observed how Kuaishou and the jiazhus navigate the contingency caused by the sometimes capricious state regulations. Reading from our policy analysis notes, when faced with state regulations, the platform and jiazhu cooperate like comrades: they jointly produce a socially responsible image to outsiders regardless of their internal tension. They experimented in the grey zones where the rules were still obscure. One example would be the profitable yet risky virtual battles between jiazhus that can induce state censorship and implicate Kuaishou. Despite such risks, in 2018 and 2019, Kuaishou appropriated the virtual battles into sales competition 'Maihuo Wang' ('sales king') to boost profit. Our observations align with Davis and Xiao, who argue that 'as markets evolve, limits are set and tested in response to state priorities' (2021, p. 108). Kuaishou entrepreneurs seek a type of guerrilla growth (Chan & Kwok, 2021) that both conform to and manipulate the state governance whenever possible as the state regulations evolve. We present a timeline that summarises major relevant events of Kuaishou, Xin, 818 jiazhu and the state (Table 1). Overall, the state campaign can act as a dominating force that regulates Kuaishou's content production and user behaviour. Yet there are chances for Kuaishou entrepreneurs to exercise autonomy as they negotiate profiting opportunities with Kuaishou.

Discussion and conclusion: Navigating collaborations, conflicts and contingencies

We have set out to explore Kuaishou entrepreneurs through the 818 jiazhu. The findings support our understanding of platform entrepreneurs as a fluid phenomenon conditioned by various relations and contingencies. Kuaishou's unique rural origin led to the gathering of rural microcelebrities who clustered together as jiazhu. Advancing Tan et al.'s (2020) finding that Kuaishou exploits live-streamers through a form of digital labour afforded by the platform, we have depicted how Xin and the 818 jiazhu profit from Kuaishou in a quasi-symbiotic relationship. On the one hand, jiazhu's business practices and behaviour echoed each time Kuaishou shifted its business model, expanded

Table 1. Timeline of major events.

Year	Kuaishou	Xin	818 Jiazu	State Campaigns
2011	Kuaishou launched to make.gif images	An undocumented migrant worker in Japan	N/A	
2012	User-generated video sharing	Trafficking household diapers to China		'Positive energy' became an internet catchphrase
2013	Short video-based social platform popular in less-developed regions			Positive energy campaign since October
2014		Jailed in Japan for 2 months and expatriated for illegal trafficking		
2016	Launched livestreaming; known to the mainstream as vulgar and ruthless due to a viral article depicting its grassroots-generated videos	Registered as a Kuaishou user		'Clear online space' campaign since November, closed down hundreds of social media accounts due to violent, pornographic contents; criticised Kuaishou influencers for 'fake philanthropy'.
2017	Largest livestreaming platform by virtual gift revenue; Kuaishou launched cooperate social responsibility institute; sponsored mainstream reality programs	Registered several international business trading companies in Guangzhou; began to promote agricultural products via livestreaming; started gifting established livestreamers		'Clear online space' campaign continued
2018	Started live commerce; published 'Kuaishou social value report'; banned numerous prominent influencers due to 'harmful contents' like adolescent pregnancy and drug dealing	Virtual gift on Kuaishou: Spent millions on established livestreamers to gain visibility and followers	The code '818' emerged to refer to Xin's fans; 818 jiazu came into being	State administration urges national cyberspace 'rectification measures' of 'violent, pornographic or otherwise harmful programs' on Kuaishou and Toutiao

(continued)

Table I. (continued)

Year	Kuaishou	Xin	818 Jiazou	State Campaigns
2019	Second largest live commerce platform by gross merchandise volume after Alibaba's Taobao Live.	Spectacular wedding; established his own brand, Xin Xuan	Debut of apprentice Dandan; 818 jiazou became the biggest jiazou in terms of fans number and sales revenue	Offered an exclusive livestreaming channel to Kuaishou during the 70th-anniversary ceremony of the PRC, which received one billion views
2020	More than 300 million daily active users	Suspended twice yet remained the most-followed Kuaishou influencer	Three leading apprentices championed sales in cosmetics, fast fashion and snacks; established a 10,000-square metre livestreaming headquarters in Guangzhou	Eight-month 'clear online space' campaign
2021	Initial public offering in Hong Kong in February	Returned to livestreaming in March; suspended again in September and returned in October	Continued to champion sales revenue	Cut children's online gaming to one hour; fined three major livestreamers on Taobao for tax evasion

platform functions and updated its algorithm. On the other hand, with every platform iteration, jiazus quickly formulated collective responses to game the platform logic. For example, since 2019, jiazus' profiting model has expanded from encouraging virtual gifts through guabang to stimulating live commerce sales. This shift followed the platform's diversion of profit model.

Since jiazus can be seen as 'indigenous' to Kuaishou, their demographic traits, organisations and practices co-constitute the platform structures (Chu & Choi, 2010) and further shape the platformed entrepreneurial environment. Currently, it is observed that Kuaishou lacks effective ways to curb the influence of jiazus. Since many jiazus can be unruly and are effectively semi-family businesses, they tend not to function with strict professionalism as their MCN counterparts. This has posed difficulties and increased risks for brands to collaborate with Kuaishou. Kuaishou has sought to strategically balance the power between jiazus and MCNs by decreasing the visibility of jiazus in its media release, reports and various types of ranking. So far, collaborating with the jiazou masters is still the most efficient promotional method for brands to gather followers on Kuaishou effectively. For example, the chairwoman of Gree Electric⁶ has chosen to collaborate with ErLv for her second live commerce session after the debut went unnoticed. Conversely, jiazus cannot entirely function outside the Kuaishou ecology. Many entrepreneurs, including Xin, have established their own provision chains and logistic channels, so their live commerce revenue no longer entirely depends on platform payment channels. However, they are not able to mobilise their existing followers to abandon the platforms and use their own apps or channels instead. In line with Keane and Chen (2019), who have argued to rethink Chinese neoliberal development in tandem with the authoritarian state regulations, Kuaishou entrepreneurs are part of the state scheme that aims at cultivating

public complicity and political consensus. However, it can be argued that Kuaishou jiazus are not passive and docile subjects conceding the institutional power and platform policies. Conversely, they actively game the system for monetary and symbolic gains.

Platform entrepreneurship, both amplified by and subject to platform and state governance, opens up a quotidian negotiating space for individual and collective entrepreneurs. In the case of Xin and 818, we have found that platform entrepreneurs virtually resort to strategic clustering to increase impact and keep ongoing bargaining with the platform and the regulations behind the platform operations. We echo [Sun and Chen's \(2021\)](#) articulation of contingent labour that foregrounds the agency by accounting for 'more micro-level industrial practices'. [Sun and Chen \(2021, p. 25\)](#) aptly pointed out that the delivery workers' 'agentic performances are largely circumstantial and reactive to the precarious and unpredictable platform assemblage. But this by no means suggests that workers are all but act to extend the capital's logic.' Our findings complement the contingent labour by adding a relational approach that visibly depicts platform entrepreneurship as not only entailing the 'structure antagonism' ([Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2019, p. 1](#)) but also the strategic collaborations and 'ongoing negotiations' ([Zhang & Fung, 2014, p. 42](#)) between entrepreneurs and a broadened notion of the platform environment. As the state regulation on live commerce platforms becomes more rigorous, observing and researching the entrepreneurial agencies will become a long-standing effort.

[Havens et al. \(2009\)](#) argue that power can be understood as a form of production rather than coercion in the context of critical media industrial analysis. In this way, power is not seen as an entirely hierarchical form of control, passed on from the state to platforms, platforms to users or masters to apprentices. Power lies in the relational space where the agency of the entrepreneur associations intertwines with the platform ecology and a broader sociocultural environment. This intricate form of power has demonstrated enormous ability to mobilise purchase, shape merchandise and set trends. Although digital platforms are sites of struggle, compliance and contestation, this example indicates that the platform entrepreneurs can be resilient as they develop new skills. Platform entrepreneurs not only need 'new skills and expertise in fostering connections and managing boundaries' ([Baym, 2015, p. 19](#)), but new sociotechnical skills to navigate multilateral and changeable relationships. For example, platform entrepreneurs need to be sensitive to new entrants and potential competitors of an industry under rapid technological upgrades. They need to be resourceful in establishing and connecting new pathways to gain the upper hand at developing a new market or a way of doing business. They need to be aware of the shifting relationships and identify their strategic collaborators, and maintain relationships with them, while remaining flexible to adapt to new platform-business dynamics. Only those who understand how to navigate the complex sociotechnical changes might be able to travel far, but not without contingencies. By seeing platforms as dynamic relations ([Schüßler et al., 2021](#)), our advocacy of relational platform entrepreneurs potentiates a way to understand platforms beyond 'platform-centricity' ([Willems, 2021](#)).

Prompting a relational approach to understanding platform entrepreneurs, we note the constant evolution of China's platform ecology at large. We also preliminarily observed platform entrepreneurship as gendered practices, which was beyond the detailed discussion of this paper. Future research can explore the contribution of female entrepreneurs to Kuaishou, including the wives, apprentices and other collaborators of the jiazus masters. More in-depth analysis of platform entrepreneurs' commercial strategies would also be timely.

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Notes

1. The authors made equal contributions to the article.
2. In Chinese, the number 8 has a connotation of ‘getting rich’.
3. Most of the earlier videos of Xin were deleted between April to June 2020, when Xin’s account was suspended. Livestreaming sessions are usually not available for replay but the researchers screen-recorded some sessions.
4. Female members played an important role in the formation and solidarity of jiazu, transiting between roles of mother, daughter, wife and businesswomen. The topic, though beyond our scope of this article, deserves more analysis. For example, see [Wang and Keane \(2020\)](#) for discussions of a myriad of difficulties faced with China’s female digital creative entrepreneurs.
5. In contrast, when collaborating with less popular influencers, brands sometimes merely send samples and testers to be featured for free.
6. Gree Electric ranked 488 in Forbes 500 company in 2021.

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