# 7 Affective Labour on Kuaishou

## Sister Zhao and her Cyber Karaoke Bar

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**Abstract**
This chapter explores gendered digital labour on the short video-sharing platform Kuaishou through the case of Zhao Jie (Sister Zhao), a female rural user who earns a living as a street vendor selling pancakes. Although Kuaishou provides her with a degree of empowerment and a sense of community, these "positive" aspects are tempered by the technological and social protocols that reinforce, rather than subvert precarity and gendered hierarchies.

**Keywords:** Kuaishou, live streaming, *zhibo,* digital labour

As a result of China's emergence as an influential force in the global capitalist system, its presence on the worldwide media landscape has increased.[1] The significant rise of social media platforms such as WeChat, TikTok, and Kuaishou快手, in response to the rapidly changing "platform society" around the world, has led to a surprisingly high mobile Internet penetration amongst China's rural population.[2] These platforms do not simply reflect the social structures in which we live; they also actively shape them.[3] This chapter sheds light on a digital form of gendered affective labour on Kuaishou, a short video-sharing social platform that is more popular than Douyin抖音 (the Chinese version of TikTok) in lower-tier areas. More specifically, it examines the case of a female rural user named Zhao Jie (Sister Zhao 趙姐), a street vendor selling pancakes for a living, who earns additional income by performing frequent live-stream shows (*zhibo* 直播) in her personal

1 Schiller, "Poles of Market Growth?"
2 Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal, *Platform Society*.
3 Couldry, *Mediated Construction of Reality*.

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online "karaoke bar," where she receives virtual gifts for singing bitter songs. While the act of "liking" (*dianzan* 点赞) is an incremental gift, its exchange depends on her ability to manage and distribute emotions.[4] Rural working-class women invest their emotional energy in engaging with and generating creative content for capital accumulation. However, trading emotions in a capitalist exchange system gives rise to inequality, as users' interactivity is harnessed and promoted for profit.[5] Therefore, it is crucial to examine how platforms create new technological forms of gendered labour from a feminist media studies perspective.

## Digital Work in a Cyber "Karaoke Bar"

Significantly influenced by the accelerating digitisation of society, large numbers of rural Chinese women have been drawn into an astounding social experiment in cyberspace. Like wild grasses spread over the plains, millions of female users are roaming China's leading mobile short video-sharing platform, Kuaishou. Kuaishou is more influential than Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) in rural areas. It boasts more than eleven billion pairs of mutual followers, 2.34 trillion likes, retweets, and comments on videos and live broadcasts, and a monthly average of 777 million active users, twenty-five per cent of whom are content creators.[6]

Kuaishou is used and consumed predominantly by grassroots users, whose social marginalisation and lack of cultural and economic capital make them less visible in mainstream media. Compared with WeChat, which requires higher reading and writing skills, Kuaishou is exceptionally popular among socially disadvantaged groups because it has no language or media literacy thresholds. Douyin, Kuaishou's biggest competitor in first- and second-tier cities, has a centralised content distribution system and has attracted urban youth as a core user group. In contrast, Kuaishou employs a decentralised content distribution model based on an inclusive value-based algorithm.[7] The holistic user experience resulting from this algorithm has attracted many suburban and rural users.

Active users spend an average of 128.1 minutes per day on Kuaishou, which has approximately 150 million female users in what is referred to as

4 Arcy, "Emotion Work."
5 Andrejevic, "Privacy, Exploitation," 47.
6 Kuaishou, *Q1 2021 Results*.
7 Zheng Jieyao, "Naxie ni bu xihuan de ren, tamen ye you jilu de quanli."

a vast "sinking market user base" (*xiachen shichang* 下沉市场), comprising users from the small-town and rural areas where most Chinese live.[8] Based on China's demographic structure, it is estimated that ninety per cent of active female users are young workers, farmers, and students, most of whom have experienced some form of migration. These women face a critical lack of survival resources and are trapped in low social status and structural disadvantages within China's rigid social stratification. However, Kuaishou provides them with a parallel virtual space for entertainment after work. It also allows them to present themselves in digital society through an alternative network of social relations. This digital network of virtual interactions is fostered by the platform, as Kuaishou provides users not only with a virtual screening room for watching user-generated mobile shorts, but also with a public space for socialising. Having created a personal account, users can "hang out" in the virtual space with digital identities created by altering their appearance using filters provided by the platform, or they can reveal their real identities by making and uploading mobile shorts using smartphones. If eligible, they can also broadcast live-stream shows, thereby earning a small income. Eligibility criteria include binding their account to a mobile phone number, having more than six followers, and being over eighteen years old.

A digital presence on Kuaishou can be seen as a new form of instrumental relationship, as users utilise their bodies to create and present content for income and social interaction in the virtual world. This relationship between the body and digital labour is like the instrumental relationship between the working class and the body described by Bourdieu.[9] However, the virtual nature of this relationship means that it operates in a different context and with different power dynamics. This underscores the significance of analysing the ways in which platforms generate novel forms of gendered labour through the lens of feminist media studies.

My fieldwork for this digital ethnographic research project on Kuaishou was undertaken through semi-participant observation for six months from June to December 2021. I first met Zhao Jie ("jie" 姐 means older sister) by chance on the "Trending" channel (*faxian* 發現) of the application's main interface. The platform recommended a three-minute short video, the cover of which was a miserable-looking woman in her forties holding a microphone, kneeling on the ground on a country footpath, with a huge subtitle, "Dreaming of Mama" (*mengzhongde mama* 夢中的媽媽). The

8 Kuaishou, *Q1 2022 Results*.

9 Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction."

rough quality of the image suggested that the video had been shot using a cheap smartphone. The main character in the clip was Sister Zhao (*Anhui nongcun zhaojie* 安徽農村趙姐), a middle-aged rural woman born in a village in Anhui Province. In the video, she shared with the audience how tough it was to be a mother. Although her mother had passed away years previously, Sister Zhao still wanted to sing a song to mourn her. This video received nearly 700 likes and 219 comments. Sister Zhao has 338,000 followers on Kuaishou, and has received a total of a million likes for all her posted videos. As of February 2023, she had posted 759 videos and broadcast 103 live-stream shows. Her personal page is like a cyber "karaoke bar" in which she performs the role of a country chanteuse, who sings about her hard life. It is also a virtual living room where she meets strangers from thousands of miles away who send virtual gifts to encourage and comfort her.

Offline, Zhao Jie earns a living by selling pancakes from a trailer near a construction site in Changzhou, a second-tier city in Jiangsu Province. During a live-stream show in December 2021, she mentioned that she earns 300 to 500 yuan ($47.10 to $78.50) per day to support her two sons, unless her trailer is detained by the urban management officers (*chengguan* 城管). Sister Zhao regularly broadcasts her live-stream shows on Kuaishou for two hours a day after closing her pancake business at noon. She also uploads short clips of solo singing on her homepage.

The tools and higher-quality equipment essential for producing such videos and live streams have become more accessible to rural users owing to the development of infrastructure for rural e-commerce platforms and logistics systems. In addition to owning smartphones, rural live streamers can now afford to purchase a microphone, a selfie ring light, and a sound card for approximately 300 yuan ($47.10) as a complete live-streaming package, through online shopping platforms such as *Taobao.com*, the most popular shopping site in China and the eighth most visited website globally in 2021.[10] However, the most crucial parts of Sister Zhao's work are planning her singing performance, and interacting effectively with the audience through the platform's comments section. In her most viewed video, entitled "The Ugly Woman's Singing Captivated a Large Audience" (丑女人的歌声迷倒一大片), having introduced herself as "a homeless rural woman who loves to sing", she performs a song called "Father." She adds, "I want to sing this song to you. If you like it, please click the little red heart for me." This video has received 4,503 likes and 651 comments. Sister Zhao has replied to

10 Alexa Internet, "taobao.com Site Overview."


Figure 1. Sister Zhao performing "Dreaming of Mama"


Figure 2. Sister Zhao singing in her pancake cabin

almost every encouraging comment, saying "thank you so much" hundreds of times. During her live-stream shows, she first expresses how much she has missed her followers, whom she refers to as "family" (*jiarenmen* 家人們), and answers viewers' questions, such as "where has your husband gone?" She performs at least 16 songs in a single live-stream show lasting around two hours. Sister Zhao once complained in a short video that she was suffering from burnout (*changbudongle* 唱不动了) after performing continuous live-stream shows, and that she had been diagnosed with vocal nodules.

## Making Money on Kuaishou and the Digital Labour of *Zhubos*

Sister Zhao was particularly anxious that data traffic (*liuliang* 流量) would decrease drastically if she "took a break" (*xiabo* 下播) for a few days. She explained why she would not dare to become a full-time live streamer (*zhubo* 主播), confessing that the income from live streaming was not as "stable" (*wending* 稳定) as what she earned from making pancakes. Live streamers' payments consist of two parts. One is virtual gifts, which cost users between 0.1 and 2,888 yuan ($0.02 to $453) and can be converted into cash if they are sent to the live streamers. The other is live-streaming e-commerce (*zhibo daihuo* 直播带貨). The latter source of online revenue is much more common among live streamers, who have risen to the status of online celebrities (*wanghong* 网红) and have millions of followers.

According to Kuaishou, more than 240 million users have earned income from the application.[11] In the third quarter of 2021, the number of daily active users (DAU) reached 320 million, and revenues from Kuaishou's live-stream service amounted to 5.59 billion yuan ($877 million).[12] In the second quarter of 2021, 1.9 million active live streamers broadcast their shows on the platform, and monthly average revenues of paid live-stream users (付费直播用户) were 55.9 yuan ($8.80).[13] The short video industry is expanding into "sinking markets" owing to extraordinary growth in consumer spending in middle- and lower-tier areas.[14] As of December 2020, the user base for short videos had reached 873 million, accounting for 93.7 per cent of total netizens in China.[15] Through the empowerment of information and communications technology (ICT) in post-socialist China, the rate of access to smartphones and mobile Internet in rural areas has been growing faster than in urban areas. The rapid development of communications infrastructure has led to a boom in China's digital platform economy over the last fifteen years. Data show that the aggregate value of China's digital economy reached 39.2 trillion yuan ($6.15 trillion) in 2021.[16]

The estimated scale of "digital rewards" (*dashang* 打賞) sent to live streamers by viewers had reached 25.315 billion yuan ($3.65 billion) in 2020.[17] In the first quarter of 2022, Kuaishou's live-streaming service was its primary source

11 Kuaishou, *Q1 2021 Results*.
12 Kuaishou, *Q3 2021 Results*.
13 Kuaishou, *Q2 2021 Results*.
14 Ho et al., *China Consumer Report*.
15 CINIC, *47th China Statistical Report*.
16 Guan and Lin, "Scale of China's Digital Economy."
17 News China, "Kuaishou daily 'digital rewards' have reached 100 million yuan."

of revenue, accounting for 37.2 per cent of total revenues.[18] Ironically, despite the country's flourishing digital economy, individual live streamers may find it ever more challenging to make money from live streaming because the platform takes a larger cut of their earnings. Analysis of data collected from company announcements reveals that Kuaishou's cut from live streamers' gross earnings amounted to fourty-two per cent in the third quarter of 2019 and 43.5 per cent in 2020.[19] Scrutiny of general revenues made by live streamers on Kuaishou suggests that although the company provides the platform, and maintains the servers and other equipment that support the app, it "cannot justify this large cut, even if the façade of innocuous play that covers the activity of live-streaming softens its corrosive impact."[20] Chinese anthropologists argue that Kuaishou's rise points to changes in the nature of labour in contemporary China. The digital social media platform's success indicates a shift towards immaterial labour, whereas the economy remains rooted in the material labour of agricultural and industrial production.[21] Immaterial labour refers to labour that "produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication."[22] Digital platforms rely on generating revenues from exchanging the commodities of data and attention, both of which are generated by users' immaterial labour. While users watch free shows broadcast by live streamers, embedded advertisements generate surplus value for the digital platforms. Transaction data and viewers' attention can be sold to advertisers as commodities. Users who upload images, write comments, send mail messages to their contacts, accumulate friends, or browse profiles on Facebook constitute an audience commodity that is sold to advertisers.[23] The underlying profit-making mechanism is that when attention economies expand to a significant scale, revenues increase dramatically because numerous users absorb the costs of production, enabling live-streaming apps to yield profits.[24] Although the nature of digital activities, such as creating content, interacting, watching, liking, and commenting, has been widely discussed, users' labour on social media platforms is not recognised as "labour" by the platform providers. Even users themselves misrecognise their "digital activity" as entertainment or self-creation, rather than formal employment in the workplace (*zhengjing*

18 Kuaishou, *Q1 2022 Results*.
19 Orient Securities, *Kuaishou First Report*.
20 Tan et al., "Real Digital Housewives."
21 Tan et al.
22 Negri and Hardt, *Empire*.
23 Fuchs, "Dallas Smythe Today."
24 Jarrett, "Labor of Love"; Tan et al., "Real Digital Housewives."

*gongzuo* 正經工作). For example, the creation work done by Japanese mobile phone novelists is labour that "integrates processes of capital accumulation with the practice of self-determination by further blurring the line between paid and unpaid work."[25] The notion of "prosumers," introduced by Alvin Toffler in the early 1980s, refers to the "progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer."[26] The term was coined to describe a new form of economic and political democracy, self-determined work, labour autonomy, and autonomous self-production. However, Fuchs notes that Toffler overlooked the fact that prosumption can be used to outsource work to users and consumers, who work without payment.[27] Specifically, Sister Zhao's unpaid work creating mobile shorts is entirely free to watch on her personal page. She maintains her cyber karaoke bar by spending hours every day working on planning, shooting, singing, editing, and interacting in live-stream shows on the platform. Although, like Sister Zhao, millions of "daily active users" contribute their creative content production to platforms, the possibility of earning a stable income from virtual gifts sent by viewers during live-stream shows remains extremely limited in the age of "prosumption."

## Immaterial and Affective Labour on Kuaishou: Interactions between "Agony Aunt" and Viewers

The sharp rise of social media in the West has sparked academic debate about "free digital labour," revolving around whether unpaid social media activities redirect power from media institutions to the audience, or allow corporations to exploit users by freely harnessing their content and data.[28] Against this backdrop, feminist scholars criticise more specifically the role played by platforms in the digital era, because interactions on social network sites always involve affective labour, which is expected more from women.[29] Shedding light on how social network sites function as "extensions of the home," Cirucci argues that rather than being invited to contribute new cultural products, women are frequently led only to support existing ones, thus creating less valuable data and even generating

25 Lukacs, "Dreamwork."
26 Toffler, *Third Wave*; Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson, "Coming of Age of the Prosumer."
27 Fuchs, "Dallas Smythe Today."
28 Terranova, "Free Labor."
29 Cirucci, "New Women's Work."

more exchange and surplus value than other forms of digital labour.[30] Unfortunately, the affective labour of underclass women on Kuaishou has been demonstrated to be incremental digital labour. They make emotional investments through repetition, hence fulfilling "reproduction" under the dual oppression of capitalism and patriarchy in the digital media economy.[31] Feminist media studies scholars claim that affective, immaterial labour has a variable and often indirect relationship with capitalist exchange, which is the social order itself.[32] The traditional gender division of labour, whereby capital accumulation depends on women's unpaid labour, has shifted in late capitalism to rely increasingly on immaterial labour.[33] In the context of digitizing China, unpaid immaterial labour most frequently takes the form of gendered affective labour on digital platforms.

Affective labour emerges because of the commercialisation of human emotions. Therefore, varying levels of commercialisation affect live streamers' management strategies for distributing emotions. For the most influential Internet celebrities, live-streaming chat rooms are more like cyber shopping malls, but for ordinary live streamers with much fewer followers, financial incentives are not the only reason for performing. Sister Zhao says that she broadcasts live-stream shows for two primary reasons: to earn extra income and to "make friends" (*jiaopengyou* 交朋友). Online ethnographic evidence indicates that ordinary performers tend to adopt a strategy of performing with "true feelings" (*zhenqing shigan* 真情实感) during live-stream shows, because most everyday live streamers have never been trained to act like professional performers, nor can they afford to undergo any form of professional training. Consequently, Sister Zhao believes it is easier and better to "be herself" (*bense chuyan* 本色出演) when performing in her live-stream shows. However, deploying this strategy does not mean that she performs and responds to viewers arbitrarily. Rather, she develops particular patterns to cope with uncertainty during live streaming, based on her understanding of her role as a rural singer performing online. Viewers have described Sister Zhao as an "agony aunt" (*zhixin dajie* 知心大姐), because she is "simple and unadorned" (*pushi wuhua* 朴实无华) and acts like their own mother, aunt, or elder sister. She has to interact with viewers in real time, because if she does not do so, viewers will leave the virtual chat room with an unpleasant feeling of having failed to attract the performer's

30 Cirucci.

31 Arcy, "Emotion Work"; Hartmann, "Unhappy Marriage."

32 Jarrett, "Relevance of 'Women's Work'."

33 Arcy, "Emotion Work."

attention and concern. During a live-stream show in December 2021, Sister Zhao repeatedly expressed her gratitude to the viewers, saying:

> I know that the brothers and sisters in my live-stream chat room are all offering support to me. When I feel upset, you empathise with my miserable life and find a way to comfort me. I don't know how to express myself in words, but I am thankful. Since my husband was put in jail to serve his sentence 12 years ago, I haven't had any friends or relatives in my real life offline to provide me with consolation like this. No one cares about an ugly rural woman making pancakes. But here you all are, like spiritual support for me. I love this platform so much. I make friends here and feel warm and grateful.

Scholars have expanded Bourdieu's concept of "capital" to include emotions.[34] Although Bourdieu did not explicitly refer to emotional capital, he described practical and symbolic work that generates devotion, generosity, and solidarity, arguing that "this work falls disproportionately on women, who are responsible for maintaining relationships."[35] The audience attracted by Sister Zhao's performances is of very similar socio-economic status as her. To some extent, she reflects the nostalgia of rural users on Kuaishou, as she embodies the familiar appearance of a normal rural woman struggling to improve her livelihood in the suburban area on screen. The general emotional structures of performer and audience are much the same, satisfying a precondition for affective interaction. Consumer society has led to increasing dependence on emotional services to meet consumers' affective needs.[36] The new media sphere has become the primary provider of these affective exchanges, constructing a bi-directional pattern of emotional consumption that drives participants to be both producer and consumer. As mentioned above, mutual interactions between Sister Zhao and her viewers illustrate that "liking" (*dianzan*), "following" (*guanzhu* 关注), giving virtual gifts (*shua liwu* 刷礼物), and chatting in the comments area satisfy various affective needs for both live streamers and their audience. In this sense, underclass women may become trapped by the underlying mechanism of transforming and compounding digital labour with affective support, which drives them to participate in constant unpaid digital work.

34 Reay, "Gendering Bourdieu."
35 Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*.
36 Wang, "Emotional Consumption."

## Representing a Rural "Self" and "Performing Resistance"

Sister Zhao told her audience that she had never received any professional vocal music training owing to her lack of time, energy, and budget. When she began to conduct live-stream shows, she tried to learn vocal skills from free online teaching videos, but "failed to understand" (*tingbudong* 听不懂). Incorrect sound production and breathing resulted in chronic hoarseness, requiring a break from live streaming. Although many viewers leave comments such as "This is beautiful" and "Your songs are pleasant to hear," the compliments seem to relate more to her emotional engagement as an organic part of the performance, rather than her technical singing skills or stage effects. In other words, the goods that viewers consume in this mutual process of digital production seem primarily to be the content rather than the form of the performance. Pursuit of affection (e.g., *The Dearest Ones* [*zuiqinde ren* 最親的人]), bitter longing for love (e.g., *Listening to the Heart* [*tingxin* 聽心]), loneliness, and the frustration of being a migrant worker (e.g., *Whose Heart is Drifting in Midnight* [*shuidexin zai wuye piaobo* 誰的心在午夜漂泊]) are three recurrent themes emerging from textual analysis of Sister Zhao's selection of songs. Her performances are mainly of ballads with light rhythms and plain lyrics, expressing desires and wishes that resonate with ordinary Chinese people, especially those from socially disadvantaged classes.

Sister Zhao's rustic casual wear and visual layout of her performance are a constant feature in her videos, which are shot in her dough-making cabin, her rented dormitory in the city, and her rural living space. The consistent visual style of her performances illustrates the lived experiences of a typical Chinese rural migrant worker (*nongmingong* 農民工). Sister Zhao's self-shot raw footage, her own singing, the simple shooting location, and basic editing are four fundamental elements of the audiovisual language in her 759 videos. She does not follow a specific pattern, nor intentionally design her shooting sites for mobile shorts. She simply hangs up a randomly chosen background fabric or sheet behind her during her live-stream shows to hide her disorderly living space, creating a relatively neat performance stage. She uses a wide range of shooting locations for her short videos, and rarely settles on one location as her main site for performing. Her personal page showcases her singing in various indoor and outdoor scenes. Her realistic visual style is the result of effectively utilising her limited living space, rather than meticulous design. The rural chanteuse's stage effects bring the online audience into her personal world, where she can be seen standing by a river flowing near her village, or wearing an apron in the kitchen after


Figure 3. Thumbnails of Sister Zhao's personal page on Kuaishou


Figure 4. Thumbnails of Uncle Shoushan's personal page on Kuaishou

finishing her household chores. In contrast, professional performers often decorate and modify their performance spaces by investing in fixed stage effects to strengthen audience recognition.

Sister Zhao's stage-setting preference for her singing performances is very similar to that of some male vocalists on Kuaishou. Popular rural singer Uncle Shoushan (*shoushan dashu* 守山大叔), who has 2.2 million followers on Kuaishou, deploys the same staging strategies for his live-streams. He currently lives in a village in Hebei Province, and before he became famous on Kuaishou, he earned a living by running a small chicken farm. He mostly performs in rural living spaces, such as a backyard, a grove, a cornfield,

by the riverside, or in his bedroom. His singing performances never show any trace of elaborate design. By presenting an unadorned image of rural China, rural performers can convey a convincing sense of intimacy and familiarity to their audience.

However, Sister Zhao deploys a fundamentally different strategy from Uncle Shoushan in constructing her public persona. While Uncle Shoushan has established himself as a public role model, who embodies "positive energy" (*zhengnengliang* 正能量), Sister Zhao constructs a self-image that underscores the hardships she faces in life. For instance, most cover images for the short videos presented on Uncle Shaoshan's personal page show his smiling face and encouraging words, such as "Come on, my Motherland" (*jiayou zuguo* 加油祖国) and "I'll be Waiting for You on a Warm Night" (*wo zai wennuan zhiye deng ni* 我在温暖之夜等你). The Chinese press has reported on the rise in "positive energy" online, referring to "uplifting power and emotion, representing hope."[37] The Chinese Party-state has long emphasised positive propaganda, also known as the main melody (*zhu xuanlü* 主旋律) in the realm of media, arts, and cultural production, and positive energy is largely in line with this propaganda strategy, which can be seen as a hegemonic online discourse.[38] Compared with the typical role of a positive-energy rural male singer, Sister Zhao's public persona is more ambiguous. The cover images of her videos mainly show bitter expressions on her face. Instead of performing as a role model for "positive energy," Sister Zhao adopts more sorrowful expressions and dramatic body language not often observed in Uncle Shoushan's videos. Similar positive-energy strategies can be observed on the channels of other male rural singers, such as Brother Little Nine (*Shandong xiaojiuge* 山东小九哥) and Singer Daxin (*geshou daxin* 歌手大心). While the evidence collected from ethnographic observation does not indicate that male rural singers merely perform songs with "positive energy" and never show "negative" feelings, it is nevertheless noteworthy that Sister Zhao has chosen to represent herself as "an ugly heart-breaking woman," rather than embodying a "positive energy" role model as male rural singers seem to be more likely to do. Although rural singers of both genders employ the same strategy of utilising natural living spaces as their main filming locations, their distinct performing styles offer us insight into how gender norms shape content creation on Kuaishou. At the same time, we should not view female creators as passive agents. Foregrounding more undesirable content such as pain, loneliness, etc. may in fact also be

37 Xinming Evening News, "Number of Positive Energy Transmissions."
38 Yang and Tang, "Positive Energy."

understood as a subtle critique of the "positive energy" discourse on social media – thereby resisting or at least bringing into focus the different ways gender hierarchies are re-enacted in digital spaces.

## Women's Digital Labour

Although the bustling platform economy promises opportunities for empowerment, self-expression, new forms of labour and upward mobility for its users, it rarely makes any significant improvement to their socio-economic situation. Instead, both performers and viewers unconsciously collaborate in realising and maintaining the generation of surplus value for the platform. Moreover, online affective labour conducted by rural women appears to mostly reinforce gendered hierarchies and precarity. Sister Zhao's situation illustrates that content creators on Kuaishou commodify their supposedly inalienable emotions. Digitisation of one's bodily and affective labour reflects the imperative to maximise human capital for material gain that lies at the core of neoliberalism.[39] Live streamers like Sister Zhao actively create content through the unpaid digital labour they provide (in Sister Zhao's words, she is "just playing here") for Kuaishou. In this sense, Kuaishou and other digital platforms offering live-streaming services present a digital public stage where performers are empowered by online social support from viewers, yet simultaneously disempowered by constant unpaid digital work. Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult for rural users from contemporary Chinese society, and particularly for performers with limited social resources, to perceive their gendered and affective digital labour as anything more than "playing." Although some are not necessarily intent on generating income and live-stream for other reasons, such as social support in the case of Sister Zhao, they experience live-streaming as a deeply ambivalent activity.[40] Sister Zhao must either accept that her digital work primarily benefits the platform while comforting herself with the support and encouragement of her followers, or not live-stream at all.

Despite the disadvantageous socio-economic situations faced by rural users and the minimal revenues they can generate through live-streaming, some are trying to gain social support from mutual affective labour, creative content production, and interactive shows. In doing so, live-streaming can

39 Tan et al., "Real Digital Housewives."
40 Tan et al.

also become a way of drawing attention to, and possibly also resisting, the reproduction of social inequalities on digital platforms. Overall, however, these positive aspects have yet to gain critical momentum within China's digital society, where economic and social inequalities persist, and women's labour remains undervalued.

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