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**DIGITAL EPHEMERALITY: DIGITAL MEDIA AND RADICAL POLITICS  
IN POSTSOCIALIST CHINA**

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in

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by

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## **Abstract**

### **Digital Ephemerality: Digital Media and Radical Politics in Postsocialist China**

**by Yizhou Guo**

*Digital Ephemerality: Digital Media and Radical Politics in Postsocialist*

*China* visits three youth digital sites in contemporary China to explore the boundary and potentiality of our knowledge about politics in the digital time, precisely what counts as political desires, activities, and futurities in the condition of the postsocialist digital sphere. Analytically, I engage the concept of *digital ephemerality*, or the postsocialist temporal experience of historical lightness, present absence, and disjointed reality in the digital sphere that Chinese youth, in particular, the generation of youth that I term the postsocialist youth, has vividly felt, engaged and lived. Tracking the collective experience and affect of postsocialist youth about such ephemeral temporality on three digital sites, i.e., an online entertainment program, an interest-based film review website, and a virtual space of influencer economy, I pay special attention to those digital archives that were treated as redundant or disposable. Through collecting, engaging and interpreting with these surplus digital materials, I focus on how these postsocialist digital spheres premise alternative imaginaries of politics that a dichotomous confrontational discourse of resistance against the authoritarian state— a discourse of political that possesses the mainstream form of resistant politics— cannot afford to envision.

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transform my “grumblings” about diasporic experiences into a radical critique of geopolitics and neoliberalism. I am also thankful to Prof. Xiao Liu, whose works on the postsocialist information society have inspired me since the beginning and who generously joins my dissertation committee.

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## **Introduction — Digital Ephemerality: Digital Media and Radical Politics in Postsocialist China**

On one episode of the Chinese idol-training show<sup>1</sup> *Youth with You* (*qing chun you ni*), one participant, a 25-year-old woman who was a well-known Internet influencer before the show, confessed her anxiety about being forgotten: “I think an influencer’s career is quite fragile. I don’t know when everyone will stop paying attention to me, stop watching me, or stop liking me” (iQiyi 2020). Feeling insecure about her potentially fading fame, she came to the show with the aspiration of finding more solid and long-lasting attention. Ideally, the young woman would achieve her goal by becoming one of the nine finalists out of one hundred and nine competitors, all girls and young. Judging from this ratio, the chance of her achieving this ultimate goal was low. The survival logic of these talent shows is cruel: you either become the winner, or you are nobody. Unlike conventional talent shows, however, this idol-training show offers a quite different mechanism of attention that can enable young women such as the former influencer to achieve their goal of being seen, liked, and remembered.

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<sup>1</sup> The idol training show craze in China is a spinoff of the K-pop entertainment genre, a new form of the talent show genre that appeared and became popular in the Chinese digital entertainment industry within the last two years. Typically, a show like this features the process of “idol cultivation,” or the process of audience witnessing young idol-wannabes pursuing their goals by participating in and surviving a painstaking training camp, public performance competition, and multiple rounds of evaluation and elimination. See Kim 2011; Zhang 2019).



Instead of emphasizing one's professional ability regarding a specified talent as conventional talent shows usually do, with the help of digital technology, this new genre of entertainment shows prefers a person's likeability over his or her skill and focuses on audience participation over the opinions of professionals. Taking *Youth with You* as an example, throughout the entire three months of the competition, all participants move into an enclosed training camp equipped with cloud-based surveillance cameras everywhere. With their consent, every minute of every participant's activity in every corner is recorded and used as raw material for the show, and this material is considered equally important to the more competitive content such as skill examinations and stage performance competitions. Usually, the edited content is called "everyday shorts" (*ri chang duan pian*) of the trainees (idol-wannabes). For those who are not particularly gifted with on-stage talent and who would not survive on a conventional talent competition, these "raw" moments provide chances for them to build their likeable persona, an impressive demeanor, and an attractive "cuteness" by showing their presumably "real" selves offstage. Those who are not featured in these shorts are easily ignored and face the danger of falling behind in the weekly votes to determine the contestant rankings. And of course, it is usually those who have received more opportunities to display their personalities who rank highly.

Obviously, the "everyday shots" are not "natural" or "real" but rather subjective and suggestive. Although, what remains uncanny is the idea that digital media and technology (in this case, the cloud-based digital cameras) can change the

ways in which analog humanity situates, adapts, and alters itself, and can shift and determine how the meanings and values of a society are produced and perceived. This rise of a digital-dominated culture in tandem with the decline of conventional media culture in the field of popular culture in postsocialist China is the subject of the thematic inquiries in this dissertation.

Further contemplation of this anecdote illuminates a number of inquiries examined in this dissertation. First, it is a self-evident truth that the arrival of digital society, digital culture, and digital politics has been an integral part of the formulation of the social experience of younger generations. Young people, especially the young people born between 1980 and 1999, who I term postsocialist youth, adopt digital lives much more smoothly and with less friction than older generations. For instance, the unhindered, continuous recordability of daily lives, as seen in *Youth with You's* recording of the lives of one hundred and nine young women, was unimaginable even two decades ago. This is not least because surveillance cameras were an expensive investment, and technology at that time did not allow cloud-based, interruption-free, continual recording. More importantly, being recorded by a camera 24/7 was a rather uncomfortable experience for most people at that time — a time when taking a selfie was not particularly common and social media was yet to come (Busetta and Coladonato 2015; Hess 2015; Kuntsman 2017). However, we can see that these young women seem to be quite used to these anonymous and voyeuristic digital gazes. Not only are they fully aware of the existence of hidden cameras, they also know how to make an impression in front of those cameras and feel no timidity about

doing so. Thus, we constantly see these young women talking directly onto the camera, “chatting” with the camera as if they are talking to fans or altering the direction of the cameras to obtain a better angle.

Young people’s comfort and proficiency with digital media, explained by their acceptance of the ubiquitous and omnipresence of digital gaze and their quick accommodation of social media, augmented reality, and virtual reality, show a profound social transition in which digital media has smoothly transformed human beings into a certain type of cyborg. This transformation is epitomized by these young generations. They are cyborgs not in the sense of robotic automation replacing human behaviors, but rather in the sense of how digital media, particularly pixel-based small screen media, changes the ways in which humans observe, interact with, and reflect upon the world. It also changes how humans imagine, understand, and articulate our subjectivities through the lens of digital media. At this moment, when digital media has swept through every aspect of our social lives, it is essential to ask the following questions: in what sense are the analog humanities affected and altered by the power of the digital, especially when we look at the digital lives of young people? In what sense does their comfort with and adaptability to digital life indicate the more intricate way in which analog humanities and society are captured, affected, and even altered by digital media?

More importantly, the very fact that the massive collection of digital data stemming from the uninterrupted recording of every moment of one hundred and nine young women’s lives can eventually be condensed into a few hours of edited videos

that claim to discern reality conjures an unsettling feeling about what counts as real and watchable life. It is paradoxical that the ubiquity of the digital gaze makes everyday lives equally recordable and potentially unimportant. On the one hand, the cloud-based cameras record every detail of the participants' individual activity, claiming to dutifully depict the real living moments through digital signals. On the other hand, the indiscriminately recorded data only gain meaning when they are selected, arranged, and weaved into the coherent and suggestive segments of "everyday shorts," while the majority of the actual "everyday" data are disposed of, being considered unimportant, trivial, or insignificant. In a certain sense, the arrival of digital media relentlessly lays bare a cruel condition: it is exactly because every moment is recorded dutifully that the disposability of some of these moments becomes ruthless: on what grounds are certain living moments considered to be more meaningful than others? On what grounds are certain lives considered not worth watching and remembering?

Essentially, what is confounding about such cruel digital disposability is the question of how the normalization of digital media discloses the power dynamic between lived experiences and the discursive construction that deems certain experiences important and others trivial. Further structural discursive politics are underscored in moments when such decisions are being made. In the making of the "everyday shorts," the ability of digital media to catch every fleeting moment, even those that used to be easily forgettable, and preserve them indiscriminately as equally processed data is at odds with the later disposal of some of the equally processed data.

In a certain sense, preserving and then disposing of those lived experiences as “unwatchable” reveals the violence that exists in the hegemonic production of meaning, in this case, what constitutes a watchable life.

The cruel violence of the hegemonic production of meaning would be harder to discern without the arrival of the digital media era, which was a prerequisite for the excessive production of data. Analog media only presents the results of the hegemonic politics of meaning: the analog camera records only important life events, books and newspapers only publish critical and important opinions, and television only features crucial and significant news and events. In contrast, excessive digital media promises the recording of everything, from transitory moments caught by surveillance cameras and trivial thoughts left on a social media platform to a fleeting exchange of opinions between two anonymous online avatars on a random webpage. Such excessive data bring to the front all of the contents of these surplus archives, or archives of lived experiences that would otherwise be disposed of for not being meaningful. It brings to light the very process by which certain voices, lives, and affects are deemed crucial while others are deemed excessive, redundant, and excrescent.

Therefore, it is productive to ask what we can know by looking at these archives of surplus materials. In what ways can these archives of unimportant material, silenced in the hegemonic mainstream politics of discourse, lead us to make productive critiques of the discursive formation that dismisses these experiences as unimportant in the first place? Moreover, in what sense can developing a critique

from these disposed and trivialized experiences make a louder sound than the critiques we have had up until now?

In this sense, the dissertation intends to explore two questions: In what way does digital media allow us to imagine radical critiques of the hegemonic discourses of a society? In what sense are such radical critiques enabled by the construction of digital sociality and digital humanity? This dissertation explores these questions by looking at what I conceptualize as the archives of surplus from three digital youthspheres (Maira et al. 2013, xviii) in China: a youth culture website, an online entertainment program, and an Internet influencer economy site. I investigate what kinds of political formations emerge from the surplus of these digital sites or from the digital archives that do not necessarily “make sense” and are not “significant,” “profound,” or “politically evocative” but have the potential to provide an alternative angle from which we can understand postsocialist cultural politics in China in the digital era. While the first site emerged in the mid-2000s and has remained active since then, the latter two sites only emerged and developed during the mid-2010s. In the popular discourse in China, all three are known as typical digital spaces exclusively for young people — a commonly shared sense that coincides with the user demographics of these sites, as young people, specifically postsocialist youth, compose the majority of these sites’ frequent visitors.

While the questions asked in this dissertation are concerned with a critique of digital media in general, none of them can be fully grasped and answered without being situated in the very concrete historical context of postsocialist China,

specifically regarding the social experiences of postsocialist youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Instead of seeing the stories in China as merely a counterexample of what happened in the perceived liberal West or an absolute antithesis of the latter, I contend that the postsocialist condition does not make China an exception but rather makes it a productive case for studying the political potentialities and stakes brought by the arrival of digital media. While the criticality of China's history will be further enumerated in later sections of this introduction, at this point, it is helpful to address three historical factors that determine the condition of China as both unique and typical. First, China's postsocialist condition has involved a series of economic reforms and cultural opening up policies since the late 1970s. Its essence rests on a shifting political formation from the socialist revolutionary discourse to a postsocialist neoliberal-oriented discourse. Importantly, this postsocialist condition has coincided with the arrival of a digital society. In other words, postsocialism in China should be understood, in a certain sense, as digital postsocialism. Second, the unique generational experience of China's postsocialist youth, as both living in the aftermath of the socialist past and living in tandem with the arrival of digital society, has made this generation a great sample for thinking about the relationships among youth culture, digital sociality, and digital humanity. Last but not least, the digital authoritarianism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as shown by the practices of massive censorship and information blocking, also makes the postsocialist digital sphere in China a productive case in which to reflect on the potentiality of radical

politics where an omnipresent state power makes any political imaginary within the frame of traditional political formation Sisyphean and dystopian.

When looking at the three digital sites, the dissertation pays special attention to what I call the “surplus digital materials,” i.e., digital archives and repertoires that have been considered unimportant, insignificant, trivial, inconsequential, and therefore not politically vital. Bearing the thematic inquiries of the radical potentiality and stakes of digital media in mind, I ask: in what sense do the thriving digital spheres under investigation offer us a lens through which to look at the potential critiques of discursive politics enabled by the surplus data produced, preserved, and archived by digital media? Additionally, in what ways do these archives of surplus inform us about the structure of feeling of China’s postsocialist youth, especially the collective affects that cannot be grasped through the mainstream discourse on social struggle and aspiration? Moreover, in what manner can radical critiques be elaborated from these digital sites and generate accountable imaginary of a political future of both postsocialist China specifically, and digital humanity in general?

In responding to these questions, the dissertation uses the notion of digital ephemerality to build its thesis argument and political intervention. As I will expand further in the following section of this introduction, digital ephemerality is a postsocialist temporality that is worth contemplating and conceptualizing. Through developing a radical hermeneutic around digital ephemerality and looking how this postsocialist temporality is embodied in various forms such as digital representation, digital affect, and digital enchantment, the dissertation argues that a critique of the



temporal experience of digital ephemerality, a quintessential temporal feeling that is so centrally felt in the postsocialist condition in China, can illuminate a vision of the future that has yet to be illustrated.

In the following discussion, this introduction will first provide theoretical scaffolding for the concept of digital ephemerality as a postsocialist temporality. I will then provide a historical contextualization of the social experience of postsocialist youth with an investigation of the development of postsocialist China's political economy. The methodological intervention will also be investigated as I provide further elaboration of the idea of surplus digital materials and explain the dissertation's research method. The introduction will end with a comprehensive literature review of postsocialist studies and Chinese Internet studies and descriptions of each chapter.

### **Postsocialism and Digital Ephemerality**

The term postsocialism was first coined by Arif Dirlik to describe the nature of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” a rhetoric adopted by the CCP since the 1980s to legitimize China's socialist state amid a series of state-led economic and political reforms with strong capitalist features (1989). Since the spectacular fall of the Berlin Wall and the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union in subsequent years, the term has been widely adopted to describe the political, economic and cultural condition of former socialist countries and regions (Verdery 1996; Hann 2002; Giordano et al. 2014; Wengle 2015). However, postsocialism is “not only a historical

period, but also an epistemology and production of knowledge, and as such it exceeds and outlives its historical eventness.” (Kim 2010). In this sense, the end of the Cold War and the arrival of capitalism in formal socialist camps also initiated a series of shifting global geopolitical structures and cultural politics (Brandtstädter 2007; Chari and Verdery 2009; Gille 2010; Shih 2012, Dai and Rofel 2018).

In this dissertation, following a wide array of literature (Scott 2015; Kim and Atanasoski 2017; Atanasoski and Vora 2018), postsocialism is interpreted as a temporality, or a subjective temporal experience, in which a nuanced implication is captured in the temporal attribute of the “post.” To begin with, the notion of postsocialism refutes the reductive “end of history” argument, which sees the end of the Cold War as a historical point of closure in which the collapse in the East and the advent of Western liberal democracy alongside the growth of the neoliberal capitalist economy indicated that humanity had reached the endpoint of its sociocultural revolution (Fukuyama 1992). Postsocialism does not simply indicate this transitology, or a “status of being ‘in between’ a socialist past, a system from which ‘transition societies’ are moving away, and the capitalist future these societies are moving towards, even if there might be ‘setbacks’” (Brandtstädter 2007: 131). Rather, the development and transformation of countries and regions from the formal socialist camp indicate that instead of pursuing a homogeneous telos, there exist various forms of “other modernities” (Rofel 1999; See also Mandel and Humphrey 2002; Zhang 2008; Ghodsee 2002; Morris 2016). Moreover, the “postness” of postsocialism conjures up a hauntology of the lingering “aftermath” of the socialist past (Scott

2015), the “retro” fascination of socialist past (Pehe 2020), the actual or ghostly existence of the socialist state (Zhang 2008), and the perpetuation of the political discourse and cultural imaginary that the present has inherited from the socialist past (Denton 2014; Wu 2015). In other words, more complicated than a simple demarcation between a before and an after, postsocialism describes the entanglement between the socialist past and the postsocialist contemporary.

The postsocialist temporality is essentially a strange, or even queer temporality (Atanasoski and Vora 2018; 141) in the sense that it neither accepts a teleological future nor is a continuation of a haunted past but rather remains a troublesome time bind that prevents any sort of smooth transition from an old norm to a new one. This queer temporality creates alternative spaces of discursive formation and political imaginary to work with that diverts, challenges, refutes, and overthrows the hegemonic power structure. Resonating with this argument, this dissertation further proposes that the social experience of contemporary China, particularly in the digital sphere in China, provides an important angle for us to further grasp the strangeness and radicalness of postsocialist temporality. As I contend in the following sections, in the digital sphere of contemporary China, postsocialism is experienced as a temporality of ephemerality, or a subjective temporal experience of being ephemeral. While this digital ephemerality is felt in various ways and is a quintessential experience in postsocialist China, an examination of its affective power can provide us with a rich script for articulating a counter-hegemonic imaginary of radical digital politics and futurity.

It is crucial to recognize that the temporality of digital ephemerality is first and foremost experienced in China as a state-enforced violence, embodied in the everyday experiences of ordinary netizens and online activists and epitomized as compulsory short-livedness, or the urgent and uncertain feeling that something has been there before and is there no more. This state-enforced violence is made ubiquitous by the digital authoritarianism of the CCP's rule. Internet censorship in China, enforced by the CCP, is an arbitrary and authoritarian speech surveillance system. While some censorship rules, such as the prohibition of any direct discussions of politically controversial topics, such as the 1989 June 4<sup>th</sup> Tiananmen Square Protest, the Tibet issue, or the Uyghur controversy, are foreseeable, others are rather contingent. Usually, when a public debate is created on the Chinese Internet, what content and opinions are considered politically inappropriate and subject to censorship are unspecified and liable to change. Posts can be deleted for rather vague reasons, websites can be shut down with no warnings, and social media accounts can be entirely deactivated. The feelings of uncertainty and urgency are especially prominent in those online public debates involving political dissent and moral challenges, such as interrogations about government accountability, criticism of social inequality and injustice, and advocacy for minority communities' rights, when the state's violent act of disappearing dissent becomes mostly unpredictable and inscrutable to ordinary people. The passive voice of popular idioms for Internet censorship, such as "*bei xiao shi*" (being disappeared), "*bei he xie*" (being

harmonized), and “*bei si ling si*” (being 404ed), express Chinese netizens’ discontent and discomfort with being deprived of their agency (Benney 2014).<sup>2</sup>

The feeling of short-livedness imposed by compulsory ephemerality easily preconditions a dystopian vision of the future of digital politics in China, as authoritarian power has not been diminished by but rather strengthened with the help of digital technology, which many once believed would democratize political entities such as China and other countries in the former socialist camp during the Cold War. From this viewpoint, the digital sphere has become instrumental in rather than destructive for the establishment of authoritarianism. The intensification of speech censorship, development of an augmented identity recognition surveillance system, the creation of a nearly airtight blocking system known as the “Great Firewall of China,” and increasing effectivity of ideotainment (Lagerkvist 2008), have all been accomplished with the help of digital technology and digital culture; given these developments, what is in the future of China is an Orwellian post-human control society in which individual agency and civil rights are all dissolved and disappeared into controllable, trackable and “debugable” data.

On the other hand, the complicity between the Communist state and the digital sphere in the quotidian experience of compulsory ephemerality also envisions the

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<sup>2</sup> The idiom of “being harmonized” is a reference to the concept of the harmonious society (*he xie she hui*) that was adopted by the CCP in 2004 to suggest a socioeconomic vision for Chinese society. In Internet slang, it is used as a parody to mock the violent erasure of politically sensitive content that is considered “disharmonious.” See Zheng and Tok 2007. The idiom of “being 404ed” refers to the HTTP standard response code for an error message. Code 404 refers to “Page Not Found,” which is used by Chinese netizens to allude to the censorship and deletion of online content. See Xu 2015; Li 2016.

mainstream script of resistant politics in China. In this script, Internet censorship is the ultimate and most crucial predicament which Chinese netizens are supposed to resist and eventually conquer, even though the telos of this digital liberation, i.e., liberation from the control of an authoritarian power through the continual resistance and revolutionary overthrow of that power, is constantly rebuffed in front of the Goliath of state power. This is a narrative of revolutionary heroism symbolized by tragic Sisyphyeen figures who repetitively and assiduously struggle for a brighter future amid the imminent oppressive present.

In this sense, the digital ephemerality of postsocialist China preconditions the difficulty and limitations of elaborating political insubordination and futurity merely through building critiques of state politics, specifically building resistant political formats in critiquing state policies, regulations, and prohibitions. It is on these grounds that the dissertation proposes to take a deeper look at the alternative potentiality embedded in the digital sphere, the political formation of which cannot be provided by simply looking at state politics and the resistance to them. Specifically, the dissertation further theorizes digital ephemerality through three perspectives. Digital ephemerality, I argue, signifies historical lightness, present absence, and disjointed reality, and all three perspectives provide radical hermeneutic space for the imagining of digital politics outside of the realm of state politics.

First, digital ephemerality signifies the status of historical lightness, or the disposable temporally situated experiences that are considered insignificant as compared to monumentality or History with a capital “H.” In other words,

ephemerality speaks of the previously and currently existing life experiences excluded by the hegemonic discourse of modern historical time, which, considering the latter's pursuit of eventful teleology, are nonhistorical, if not the ruin of History. By modern historical time, I mean the linear chronological narrative that is "organized around a notion of discrete but continuous modular change, in particular, modular change as linear, diachronically, stretched-out succession of cumulative instants, an endless chain of displacements of before and after" (Scott 2015, 5). Ephemerality, in this sense, is the opposite of the story of the "metanarrative," or the narrative with History's "functors, great heroes, great dangers, great voyages, and great goals" (Lyotard 1984), as well as the meta-anti-narrative, or a narrative of those heroes of insubordination, travelers who resist the voyage, or iconoclasts who challenge social goals. While in an ideology of the fetish of monumentality these metanarratives and meta-anti-narratives become the favorites of History, those vivid lived experiences that do not necessarily have the privilege of being narrated and recorded are left outside and abandoned by History.

The dominant power undoubtedly determines the ephemerality and monumentality of past and current experiences of living. Ephemerality, in this sense, belongs to the historical underdogs, the oppressed, the subalterns, and the forgotten. Retrieving the historical time of these "ephemeras," therefore also retrieves an alternative temporal unfolding of histories. Feminist historiographies have played a pivotal role in uncovering the history of ephemerality. For instance, in gathering the collective and individual memories of rural Chinese women in the 1950s, Gail

Hershatter (2011) shows the ways in which the ignored textures of these women's historical memories reveal gendered memories distanced from the official History of the revolution and communist victory upheld by the CCP. The gender of the memories projects a totally distinguished timeline, time knots, and chronologies when those unsignifying and inconsequential experiences were incorporated and interrupted the monumentality of History.

The radical potentiality of looking at digital experience and digital existence, which have been dismissed as ephemeral, is explored in chapter one, where I provide an alternative interpretation of the political promise that digital entertainment in China enables for elaborating queer politics in China. As I see it, aside from the mainstream resistant rhetoric of queer liberation that targets the state censorship of popular cultural representations of LGBT identities and recognizes the overthrow of it in the final telos, those ephemeral moments in digital entertainment provide a very different trajectory of radical queer politics that not only disintegrates the symbolic elimination of sexual minorities but also deconstructs the hegemonic logic of queer liberalism that normalizes the heterosexual order.

While the temporal lightness of digital ephemerality is summative, as it describes the conclusion of certain things that have lived in the past, the concept of ephemerality also signifies an affective feeling in the present tense, particularly an affective feeling of the very existence of absence in the present. The hegemonic definition of ephemerality as short-lived existence determines that the temporal experience happened in the past tense, since it is only through the experience of



something being over that this feeling emerges. In other words, being ephemeral actually always describes the status of “was being ephemeral,” as things that feel ephemeral are always no longer here. What is left in the present, overwhelmed by the notion of the ephemerality of the lost past, is the experience of the absence left by that lost thing. In this sense, ephemerality catches the vivid experience of present absence, the feeling that something is absent in the here and now. In other words, the present is a ruined time. In discussing the esthetic of postwar Japanese architecture, Jin Baek (2006) recognizes the notion of “mujo,” a Japanese word for “no permanence” as the central allegory of the discourse of the ruins in this esthetic. The nihilistic belief of the fatal finitude of human societies, augmented by the notion that nothing permanent will be left, is embodied in the repetitive and obsessive representation of ruins, particularly of those mega-structures. Different from the naturalized time flow in which the past is replaced by the present as time progresses, the discourse of the ruins accentuates the abrupt and melancholic removal of the past that eventually makes the present unwanted and untempting. In this sense, the present, perceived through relics, ruins, and unlivedness embodies the experience of ephemerality through the exhibition of absence to remind us of the passing of the past in the now and the yet to come of the future.

Moreover, as a consequence of the linkage, the present experience of ephemerality also illuminates the impossibility of a future that is to be arrived at because the present fails to afford an imaginary of the future. In his studies of the aftermath of the Grenada Revolution, Scott (2015) analyzes the postrevolution

present as a temporal abyss, or “the present as ruined time” (9). The failed promise of the abruptly sabotaged revolution leads to the sudden vacuumization of the futurity elaborated by the revolutionary narrative and leaves those who experienced the narrative a futurity that is already absent. The present, therefore, becomes a repetitive indication of the futurity that is no-longer there, a “temporal still, stranded in the limbo – the pure, desolate duration – of a post-revolutionary present that has nowhere to go” (73). In this sense, the present is the ruin of the past and the future and resoundingly conjures up the feeling of the absence of both.

Rather than an interpretative deployment that just describes the same thing from a different perspective, this dissertation’s hermeneutic refashioning of digital ephemerality as the present feeling of absence provides us with a crucial trope for understanding the central structure of the feeling shared by postsocialist youth in China and expressed on the Internet. This topic will be explored in detail in chapter two, where I contemplate the political stakes of the digital sphere-inflicted affect of present absence on a postsocialist youth interest-based website.

Moreover, the temporality of digital ephemerality is also experienced as the construction of disjointed reality in the digital sphere, which I argue is expected in the proliferating digital economy, where continual, consecutive, and coherent analog humanity becomes disposable labor. Taking the anecdote introduced in the beginning as an example, the “everyday shorts” made from the 24/7 live videos recorded by the surveillance cameras exploit the young women by subjecting their ordinary lives to the ubiquitous and ceaseless digital gaze and alienating their continual lived

experiences in the unfolding of time into watchable and unwatchable isolated, nonconsecutive, and ephemeral moments. While these watchable ephemeral moments provide profits by attracting anonymous attention from the digital sphere, the unwatchable moments are abandoned with easy disposability. In other words, in the era of the digital economy, the analog existence of human beings that was coherent, consecutive and continual is disintegrated and deprived of its comprehensiveness. Digital ephemerality, in this sense, illuminates the process of the digitalization of analog humanity — a topic that will be further explored in chapter three’s discussion of the livestreaming economy’s digitalization of the analog existence of gendered labor.

### **Postsocialist Youth and the Generation of Threshold**

In 1980, the CCP implemented a demographic policy that would produce profound influences in the following decades by requesting that all married couples in urban households have only one child. This birth control policy, known as the “one-child policy” (*du sheng zi nv zheng ce*), was issued to compensate for the demographic crisis left by the radical population policy of the Maoist era. In 1953, the first census of the P.R.C revealed a naturally high population increase rate, which worried the leading demographer, Ma Yinchu. However, his suggestions for “family planning” and “popular control” were soon dismissed by the then radical left party leaders during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), the economic campaign mobilized by CCP to speed up China’s economic development procedures, and the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-

1959), a political purge that targeted the alleged “Rightists” within the CCP who were mainly political dissidents of Maoist ideology. Ma’s suggestion for population control was criticized as reactionary and anti-revolutionary (He 2002). In 1958, Mao wrote “the more people we have, the more power we have,” suggesting the increasing and expanding population was a determinant of the strength of the nation (Mao 1954). At the same time, Ma was interrogated as a Rightist and removed of his official position. The Great Famine (1958-1962) followed premature economic pursuits and produced an unbearably high death toll within the nation, further rationalizing the compensationally high birth rate during the 1960s. In the 1970s, facing the burden of an exponentially increasing population, the government finally introduced slogans such as “One is good enough, two are perfect, three are too many” (*Yi ge bu shao, liang ge geng hao, san ge duo le*), and “Later, sparser, less” (*Wan, xi, shao*) to discourage people’s enthusiasm for producing more babies. However, these persuasive strategies had little effect. In 1976, when the radical political movement of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was finally marked as officially over, the Chinese population had increased from four hundred million in 1949 to nearly ten hundred million, with a birth rate of 3.2%, far higher than the world average at that time.

It was under this population burden that the post-Cultural Revolution government brought the idea of birth control back on the policy-making table. In 1979, the one-child policy was enacted as part of an effort to achieve the government goal of lowering the 1980 population growth rate to under 1%.<sup>3</sup> In 1981, the National Family

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<sup>3</sup> The actual increase birth rate of that year was 1.19%.

Planning Commission (*guo jia ji hua sheng yu wei yuan hui*), a cabinet-level executive department, overseen by the State Council, was institutionalized and charged with the implementation of the policy on the national level, especially among urban populations. In the 1990s, family planning was further incorporated into the performance assessment of local governments and implemented as a national policy. In 2010, mainland China had reached the lowest birth rate in the world, which was a warning sign of the potential risk of becoming an aging society in the future. To prevent further aging problems, the CCP decided to remove the restrictive policy in 2013, and implemented the so-called “one single, two children” (*dan du liang hai*) policy, which allows married couples to have two children if one of them was a single child. In 2015, the one-child policy that had been enforced for more than three decades was finally removed entirely and replaced by a two-child policy, which aims to compensate for the decreasing birth rate while keeping the gross population in check.

Although on paper the one-child policy was in effect from 1980 to 2015, a closer analysis reveals that certain demographic groups were directly affected by the policy, i.e., the only children belong to a much narrower age range than is represented by the complete time frame. Since the early 1980s, a “two singles, two children” (*shuang du liang hai*) policy, which allows married couples who are both the only children of their respective families to have two children, has been implemented on the provincial level. Technically speaking, however, before the early 2000s, this policy would not have had an extensive effect among urban populations. This is not only because it took nearly three decades for all provinces to implement these special clauses

(while most provinces practiced the policy during the 1980s, three provinces did not implement it until the 2000s). More importantly, technically speaking, it was only after 2002 that these policies were truly able to affect larger populations since the first generation of one-child children came of legal age to be married in that year. In other words, while the “two singles two children” policy was implemented in parallel with the one-child policy, for most married couples who had kids during the 1980s and 1990s, the likelihood of them meeting the special clause was very low, while since the early 2000s, married couples who meet such criteria have increased exponentially. Therefore, strictly speaking, the one-child policy only comprehensively influences those Chinese youth who were born between 1980 and 2002.

It has become clear in hindsight that the one-child policy was a threshold marker situated between an old China whose population increased widely and could not be controlled, and a new China facing the common failing of almost all modern and advanced nation-states — the aging problem. It was because of the enforcement of the one-child policy that the historical burden of the socialist past could be contained, and it is for the same reason that postsocialist China is finally meeting its new challenges. People who are deeply attached to this policy, particularly those young people who were born in the 1980s and 1990s as analyzed in the above paragraph, are also distinguished from their fellow citizens with a rather figurative label because of their direct relation with the policy: the “little emperor,” i.e., the privileged and spoiled only child of the household who received all the attention from his or her inverted triangle-shaped family (four grandparents, two parents and one child). The one-child policy, as

a threshold policy, has shaped these young people's lives in various ways: the absence of siblings as both companions and compensators generates feelings of loneliness and isolation, which have more or less contributed to the popular notion of the "little emperors" as a generation of self-centered and even selfish individuals. The burden of being the "only" hope of the family, added to the typical burdens of love in traditional Chinese kinship and increased social pressure for success, have also placed this generation under pressure. In a more direct way, the dreary stories of forced abortion, hide-and-seek with birth control administrators, gender-based infanticide, and secret births have created feelings of abandonment, insecurity, and unwantedness for children who were "not supposed to be" or were "unwanted," and become a haunting story for this generation. All of these generational experiences distinguish the one-child children from both their parents and their younger fellows.

These one-child children have two other names: the post-80s (*ba ling hou*) and post-90s (*jiu lin hou*). Both are generational labels based on the first year of the decade of their birth. While the idea that "there is a generation every ten years" (*shi nian yi cha ren*) is not a new idea but a conventional part of generational consciousness in China, using decimalism to demarcate generations was only popularized in the 2000s, when the "post-80s" became a popular term to describe young writers who were born in the 1980s to signify that the different literary styles and personalities these writers showed were generational attributes. In a certain sense, the idea of naming a generation by decade is actually a postsocialist phenomenon. While looking back at the 1980s and 1990s when these young people were born and began to come of age, the threshold

condition of this generation extends from being the only generation of one-child children to having various political, economic, and cultural aspects. Compared to their parents' generation—the socialist generation that lived through the aspiration and predicaments of and then disillusionment with China's socialist revolution, and to their younger fellows, or the millennial generation—who were born into a brand new world wired by another revolution in which networks are everywhere and iPhones, social media, virtual reality and ineluctable connectivity are the new norms, the generational cohorts of the post-80s and post-90s are distinct in their “in-between” status as a threshold generation.

In this dissertation, I call these young people “postsocialist youth” to distinguish them from the socialist generation and the millennial generation and conflate the less relevant decimal demarcations. The three sites investigated in the chapters can all be recognized as being within, though not exclusive to, the digital sphere of postsocialist youth.<sup>4</sup> The generational experience of postsocialist youth on the threshold, which I shall provide context for in the following few pages, determines the unique historical position of these youth in China. This threshold experience is critical for us in understanding the postsocialist condition in the digital sphere of China.

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<sup>4</sup> This assessment will be addressed in each chapter respectively. It is worthwhile to point out here that my argument of these sites as a postsocialist youth digital sphere are based on both quantitative data provided by the original sites and data related to analytic agency, and popular perceptions about these sites circulated in Chinese popular discourse. While the data proves that the majority of those frequent users are post-80s and post-90s, the general perception does more than simply affirm the data results: the notion that certain digital sites are meant for certain generations unequivocally shapes and even constructs the popular discourse about that generation.



The making of a “generation as an actuality” usually involves the process of the cohort “being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic destabilization” (Mannheim 1968, 303). For postsocialist youth, two key aspects contribute to the dynamic destabilization of their generation: their experience of living through the aftermath of the catastrophic socialist past and the experience of coming of age in tandem with the arrival, development, and regularization of the Internet as a way of life.

Postsocialist youth did not directly experience the socialist past, nor do they hold memories of it, but they have nonetheless lived through the tremendous aftermath of this past. Two demographic facts prerequisite their generational experience: first, the majority of postsocialist youth have no direct memories of the June 4<sup>th</sup> incident or the Tiananmen Square Protest and Massacre in 1989, although most of them grew up in the decade directly after that catastrophic moment. Additionally, most of the parents of postsocialist youth were born primarily in the 1950s and 1960s and are the country’s socialist generation, having lived through the radical socialist revolutionary era, especially the ten years of the Cultural Revolution. This chain of descent determined that postsocialist youth cultivated very different family memories from those of millennials, whose parents were mostly born in the 1970s.

Another aspect of the threshold experience of postsocialist youth is related to the development of the digital sphere in China. Although China’s information revolution started long before postsocialist youth came of age (Liu 2019), the arrival of an information society in public life that premises the current condition of global

ineluctable connectivity (Liu 2018) and digital capitalism only started to play out in the late 1990s (Zhou 2006; Zhou 2008; Yang 2012; Hockx 2015). By coming of age in tandem with today's network society, postsocialist youth obtained unique generational experiences with analog media and communication, retaining vivid childhood memories while benefiting from the early development of information technology and Internet culture in the early 2000s in China.

All of these shifting patterns have scripted the lives of postsocialist youth. The shifting economic geography of the 1990s deeply influenced the childhood experiences of postsocialist youth. A series of economic reform and opening up policies that privatized the national economy and encouraged self-initiated entrepreneurship outside of the institution was implemented during the 1980s and extended into the 1990s. In 1992, the special economic zones (SEZ) were established along the south coast to boost private business and overseas exportation and importation. The gradual concentration on light industry, the service sector, and a consumer economy directly led to a shifting economic geography in China that was experienced in part as a decline in heavy industry capital in Northeast China that started in the 1990s and was exacerbated in the 2000s, and in part as the plan for the eastern and southeastern coasts to “get rich first,” which was endorsed by then national leader Deng Xiaoping as a strategic inequality for the sake of longer-term economic development plan. Common childhood memories for postsocialist youth include their parents being laid off because of a massive bankruptcy or structural transition in state-owned working units and the absence of their parent(s) due to them “going down to the sea” (xia hai), a popular idiom referring to going to the

coastal cities to start a small business. Although China's GDP (gross domestic product) increased steadily during the 1980s and 1990s, an exponential increase did not come until the new millennium.<sup>5</sup> Memories of austerity during the 1980s and most of the 1990s are shared by postsocialist youth in both cities and the countryside (the food coupon distribution system, a symbol of material shortage, was abandoned in 1993).

In terms of political conditions, the short period of democratization during the 1980s was violently halted by the political crisis in June 1989, when a student-led mass-mobilized protest was repressed through a military bloodbath. The event was soon denounced by the party official as a reactionary response to political turmoil, and memories of the event have been highly suppressed and censored in the public sphere. For most postsocialist youth, this historical event, if they even know of it, only exists as a vague taboo subject, as they rarely retain any direct memory of or experience with it. Rather, the political atmosphere after 1989 has been gradually replaced by a depoliticized reconfiguration of the "postsocialist human being" built from the newly described aspiration of "quality" (*suzhi*) as ideal citizenry (Rofel 2010). Crucially, most of the generational memories of the political events in the 1990s were mediated through mass media, which have extensively shaped the political consciousness of the generation. The successful cross-strait meetings with Taiwan, also known as the Wang-Koo Summits, in 1993 and 1998, as well as the "homecomings" of two "wandering sons" of the mother nation from colonial governments, i.e., Hong Kong's turnover from

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<sup>5</sup> The data are gathered from the Google Public Data Explorer Gross Domestic Product category (accessed February 25, 2020).

the British Government in 1997 and Portugal's turnover of Macau in 1999, have fostered the nationalist sentiments of postsocialist youth through mass media news photos and pop cultural works that depict the increasing power of China on the global stage. The tragic 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade led to the very first anti-U.S. mass protest that mainly consisted of post-80s youth and cultivated generational hostility towards "anti-China influences from the West" (*xi fang fan hua shi li*). A firm and recurring hostility re-emerged in all of the geopolitical and ideological controversies between China and liberal democratic nations that followed in later decades. Not long after the turn of the new century, gory images of Falun Gong members self-immolating in Tiananmen Square terrified adolescent postsocialist youth, which also consolidated their almost instinctive repulsion of anti-CCP religious group as evil cults.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of culture, postsocialist youth were too young to know about, let alone participate in, the cultural events and trends that happened in the 1980s and early 1990s such as the "culture craze" (*wen hua re*, 1985-1988). "Culture craze" described the intellectual enthusiasm for studying the "cultural histories" of China in order to reconnect contemporary China to both traditional Chinese culture and early twentieth-

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<sup>6</sup> In places outside of mainland China, especially in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the U.S., Falun Gong is described as a Chinese religious group that originated in the early 1990s, towards the end of China's boom of qigong (a conglomerative practice of meditation, slow-moving energy exercise and regulated breathing), that was suppressed by the CCP as a potential threat due to its size, independence from the state, and spiritual teachings since the late 1990s. Additionally, after the CCP cracked down on the Falun Gong as a heretical organization in 1999, Falun Gong members were exiled but continued to grow, finding constituencies in overseas countries and developing into a sturdy anti-CCP diasporic community. Although evidence has shown that there are people in mainland China who continue to practice Falun Gong in spite of the persecution they face, any public discussion or mention of it, even in the form of criticism, is prohibited.

century theses of modernity, both repudiated during the Cultural Revolution (Ma 2012). The “grand discussion of the humanist spirit” (*ren wen jing shen da tao lun*) in 1993 was the intelligentsia’s reflection on the shifting role of intellectuals in fast-developing Chinese society, especially regarding concerns about the increasing infiltration of consumerism. These movements were estranged from and archaic for postsocialist youth. Additionally, 1980s literary movements mobilized by the socialist generation such as the “misty poetry” movement, a poetic genre exploring reticent and ambiguous theses through non-cliché and implicit symbolism that rose from Beijing universities, had little influence on shaping the cultural archives of postsocialist youth.<sup>7</sup>

Instead, an emerging pop culture field built on the sprouting cultural industry and consumer-oriented marketing, as well as the cultural convergence contributing to the main archives of the cultural memories of postsocialist youth. The popular culture of Taiwan and Hong Kong dominated popular culture in the mainland in the 1990s. TV programs and dramas imported from both locations filled the childhood memories of postsocialist youth in the mainland. Historical dramas and urban professional dramas made by Hong Kong Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB) and dubbed in Mandarin were imported to mainland China during the late 1980s and 1990s and gave young people an imaginative cultural memory of Hong Kong before it was turned over. Taiwan idol melodramas, a genre of TV drama first popularized by a female Taiwanese

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<sup>7</sup> Ironically, as a literary movement with an anti-consumerism undertone, “misty poetry” resurged in the 2000s, marketized by both publishing companies and mass media as a popular focus of nostalgia, and gained renewed popularity among postsocialist youth, especially among “Wenqing”, a typical social identity and categorization of youth that will be discussed in chapter two.

writer named Qiong Yao in the 1970s, resurged around the new millennium with the Taiwan-mainland cooperative hit *My Fair Princess* (1998). The craze of Hong Kong films, especially Stephen Chow's "*mo lei tau*" (absurdist) comedy, Tsu Hark's martial art melodrama, John Woo's action thriller, and the gangster film serial *Young and Dangerous* (1995-2000), created a pop culture canon for postsocialist youth and cultivated early cinephile communities on the Internet. Hong Kong and Taiwan's relatively mature music industry also became early keystones for postsocialist youth. The indie folk song tradition of Taiwan and Western rock and pop influenced-Hong Kong music, represented by musicians such as the Hong Kong rock band Beyond and the Taiwanese singer-songwriter Lo Ta-yu, have been constant sources of inspiration for a generation of postsocialist youth musicians. Pop singers such as Leslie Cheung, Wakin Chau, and the Hong Kong-based Beijinger singer Faye Wong have become generational idols in not only China but also across East Asia.

Along with the deep influence of pop culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan, dubbed Kong-Tai culture (*gang tai wen hua*) in the language of Chinese popular idioms, was the increasing influence of foreign cultures. While the socialist generation mainly absorbed meticulously selected foreign culture from neighboring countries, particularly from Communist allies such as the Soviet Union and North Korea as well as international allies in Africa and Southeast Asia, the foreign culture cultivation of postsocialist youth was relatively market-driven. Japanese ACG (animation, comic, and game) culture first arrived in China through early cartoon works such as *Astro Boy*, *Doraemon*, and *Ikkyu San*. Throughout the 1990s, children's TV channels saved their

primetime slots for Japanese cartoons. Watching cartoons such as *Slum Dunk*, *Sailor Moon*, and *Saint Seiya* during that period has become a common memory exclusive to postsocialist youth.<sup>8</sup> During the mid-1990s, Chinese people, for the first time since the founding of the P.R.C., could watch contemporary Hollywood hits in movie theatres, a crucial transition that marked the gradual maturation of the domestic film market. In 1994, the Chinese Film Corporation first tested the box office revenue-sharing option by importing *The Fugitive* (1993), a Hollywood action film, to six major cities in China. Since then, the Department of Culture permitted the import of 10 foreign films each year to China, increasing to 20 in 2002 and 34 in 2012. With the regularization of foreign film importation and the box office revenue system, the Chinese film market joined the global economy of film production and consumption. Increasing foreign images in the mainstream media therefore were major contributors to shaping the cinematic imaginary of the globe for postsocialist youth and their worldview in general. Watching global hits such as *The Lion King* (1995) and *Titanic* (1997) became a memorable event for urban Chinese children that grew up in the 1990s.

When the new millennium arrived, most postsocialist youth entered adolescence and the memories and social experiences of the 1990s were felt to be a distant fiction. Most of the series of reformist economic policies were only fully enacted after 2000. Statistically, economic data showed a clear boost trend in

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<sup>8</sup> In a 2004 announcement “Some Suggestions on Developing the Animation Industry in Our Nation” (*guan yu fa zhan wo guo yin shi dong hua chan ye de ruo gan yi jian*), which required children’s channels to dedicate specific prime time slots for domestic cartoons and limited the portion of foreign cartoon to 66% of the domestic cartoons. Since then, Japanese cartoons have gradually retreated from television schedules and migrated to online platforms and subcultural communities.

approximately 2000.<sup>9</sup> The expanding consumption culture in the 2000s, furthered by an excessive commodity surplus and the growing development of commercialization in every social aspect, created a drastically distinct social experience from that in the relatively arduous 1990s. In 2001, China joined the WTO (World Trade Organization) and officially registered the global circulation of capital, manufacturing and consumption. China's reputation as the world's factory was consolidated during the time when China outpaced the United States in terms of factory output, a decades-long procedure accomplished by the major demographic dividend that offers mass labor, especially women's labor, and the series of attractive incentives announced by the Chinese government in 1992 such as prebuilt industrial zones and tax exemptions, to attract foreign companies to its SEZs (Lee 1998; Ngai 2005).

The same decade also witnessed the continual rise of developmental nationalism, exemplified by the CCP's refashioning of the national slogan from "Prosper the Chinese nation" (*zhen xing zhong hua*) to "Great revitalization of the Chinese nation" (*zhong hua ming zu wei da fu xing*). In 2001, China successfully bid to hold the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. In 2002, China's national men's football team participated in the FIFA World Cup. The two sports events greatly boosted national confidence, as sports strength has been an important aspect of China's nation-building project and diplomatic strategies since the socialist revolution. The

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<sup>9</sup> The annual GDP (gross domestic product) in 1999 was 9,056,440. It surpassed ten million in 2000 (10,028,010). While it took more than a decade to reach the first ten-million milestone (1986-2000), it took only five years for China to hit the twenty-million milestone (GDP in 2006 was 21,943,850). In terms of GNI (gross national income) per capita, while the rate of increase in the 1990s was 1.66, it also took less than half that time for China to reach the same rate of increase in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



consecutive international events of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo propagated China's self-image as an emerging superpower in the contemporary world. With all these great achievements and "firsts," it was natural for the CCP to bring up the idea of the "China dream" in 2012 to perfect the project of national revitalization. Chinese nationals gained more leverage and confidence in responding to geopolitical conflicts with nationalist pride. During the 2008 Summer Olympic torch relay, Chinese youth responded to European countries' criticism and protests of the Chinese government's handling of Tibet with even more energetic and furious populist protests, prompting millions of ordinary Chinese citizens to walk in the streets to protest "anti-China forces" and vandalizing French-owned merchandise and commercial sites. Similar populist nationalism escalated over the following decade in a manner that was not foreseen before the 1999 NATO bombing incident, generating larger-scale national protests and demonstrations both online and offline that are anti-Japan (because of both the historical hatred lingering after the Sino-Japanese War and the territorial dispute on Diaoyu Dao, also known as Uotsuri Jima), anti-Korea (because of Korea allowing the U.S. to build THAAD, an anti-ballistic missile defense that arguably threatens China's military power in the Pacific region), and anti-U.S.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In recent years, the populist nationalism in China has adopted a more restrictive interpretation of mainland Chineseness, a direct consequence of a series of political disputes between the mainland and places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, where indigenous identity politics have combined with anti-Communist Party and anti-China political scripts, leading to political movements and turmoil such as the "Occupy Central with Love and Peace" movement in 2011, the "Sunflower Student Movement" in 2014, and the 2019 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement as well as the subsequent independent protest.

In terms of culture, the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century witnessed the consecutive rise of postsocialist youth cultural workers, particularly in literary culture, the convergence of conventional media with digital media, and the increasing collaboration between Chinese and foreign capital in the global cultural industry. First, the post-80s writers (*ba ling hou zuo jia*) surged in the early 2000s. In 1999, Han Han, born in 1982, won the literary prize in the New Concept Writing Competition (*Xin gai nian zuo wen da sai*), an annually-held competition sponsored by the China Writers Association and youth literary magazine *Sprouting* (*Meng ya*). In the following year, Han's novel *Triple Door* (*San chong men*, 2000) made the short list of best sellers of the year. In the following few years, the competition introduced more young writers, all of whom were labeled by the decade of their birth year. These post-80s writers quickly realized successful cultural entrepreneurship thanks to the massive commercialization and privatization of the publishing business and the emergence of Internet literature based on literature websites and blog services (the blogosphere emerged in China around 2005, when Sina Blog, one of the largest blog platforms in China, was launched).

The convergence of traditional publishing houses and Internet literature was first explored in the late 1990s, when post-70s writers such as Anni Baobei started to post short stories online on early Internet literature websites such as the Banyan Tree (*rong shu xia*). In 1999, the hard-copy publishing of *The First Intimate Contact* (*Di yi ci de qin mi jie chu*), an Internet novel by Taiwanese writer Cai Zhiheng, as a paperback book in mainland China further boosted the prospering field of Internet literature in

China. While during the 2000s, Internet literature remained a side project of publishing houses, in the 2010s, the digitalization of reading gradually but fundamentally changed the landscape of the publishing business in China through a decline in traditional magazine sales and the mass selling of books and the emergence of digital publishing and curated digital marketing for book-selling businesses. While magazine and newspaper journalism prospered in the 2000s thanks to expanding news corps such as Southern Media Corporation and the remaining basic need of Chinese people to gain information through traditional media, it declined exponentially in the 2010s with the popularization of social media (Sina Weibo was found in 2009), which fundamentally changed people's reading habits. The traditional publishing business, after years of resistance, gradually adopted an online-offline cooperative business model by publishing eBooks and beautifully designed paper-format books in tandem.<sup>11</sup> While such media convergence in the TV and film industries arrived roughly a decade later than in the literature field, the influence of digital media in the 2000s was reflected in the emergence of prosumer culture, including fan-made videos, spoof videos, and digital video (DV) movements, which challenged the authority of conventional media and brought the voice of ordinary people into once elite cultural fields.

Regarding cultural transnationalism, the 2000s and 2010s witnessed an increase in both formal and informal cross-border cultural communication, which helped

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<sup>11</sup> This media convergence can also be discerned through the perspective of bookstore entrepreneurship. While the 1990s and most of the 2000s were an era of mass-scale bookstores (taking the Beijing Book "Building" and Shanghai Book "Town" as examples), in the 2010s, independent bookstores oriented around branding and experience design became a major way to encounter brick-and-mortar bookstores for Chinese people, especially postsocialist youth.

postsocialist youth build their vision of “worlding,” a cultural process involving translocal movements, displacement, and reconfiguration (Zhan 2009, 7), mainly through formal and informal contact and collaboration primarily with the developed world, i.e., Europe and the U.S. On the one hand, cultural communication and collaboration between China and foreign cultural capitals, especially the U.S. cultural industry, became highly developed. In 2004, the Chinese blockbuster *Hero* (2002) was released in North America and became widely acclaimed, accelerating future collaborative relationships between Chinese film capital and Hollywood capital in film exhibition, publication and even production. By 2019, China had become the largest film market for and the most ardent investor in Hollywood studios (Davis 2019). On the other hand, cultural communication has also been carried out through an informal economy. Pirated cultural products have played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural cultivation of Chinese youth. Youth culture in postsocialist China has been intimately tied with the informal economy. Imported Western CDs “with a cut” nourished a generation of rock n’ roll subculture adherents in China in the 1990s. In the 2000s, this informal transnationalism contributed to the prosperity of both a short-lived DVD black market and a longer-lasting digital sharing economy. The popularity of American dramas such as *Prison Break* and *Sex and the City* in China was fueled by vendors of pirated DVDs and by illegal torrent sharing. Indeed, “disc-digging” (*tao die*, shopping for pirated DVDs in brick-and-mortar stores) and “source finding” (*zhao zi yuan*, finding and downloading or streaming sources online) are both common cultural

practices among young people in China, and the generation of postsocialist youth has built quite cross-national and eclectic cultural collections.

### **Surplus Digital Material as Methodology**

Digital ephemerality not only forms the central part of the this dissertation's thesis argument for understanding digital politics in postsocialist China, but also guides its research methods. Specifically, this dissertation advocates a methodology of studying surplus digital materials, or paratextual materials and activities that are considered excessive and trivial such as forum comments and posts, social media updates, grassroots video productions, instant messages, and instant comments as archives for analyzing the collective affects and political aspirations of the digital subjects who produce these materials.<sup>12</sup> The ephemeral quality of these surplus materials provides the impactful, illuminating, and productive scripts of radical political imaginary that normative resistant politics acting against state policy are not able to provide, a promise embedded in the very fact that these surplus paratexts are considered too insignificant or incomprehensible to form coherent and practical political arguments. However, the actual short-lived condition of these digital materials, either because of organic programmed data coverage or due to compulsory effacement by Internet censorship, also produces a predicament for conducting research and requires different research approaches.

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<sup>12</sup> I borrow the concept of paratexts from Genette's poststructuralist definition of the concept as a threshold that divides text and nontext and breaks the hierarchy of the politics of textuality (1991). See also Desrochers and Apollon 2014; Pesce and Noto 2018.

The normalization of digital media has produced indefinite digital materials that are either directly “born digital” or transcribed into a digital format. The promise of the permanence of digital materials poses fundamental changes in terms of the dynamic between the transitory and the permanent, passing and stable. On the one hand, digital archives allow those things that were once easily forgotten or lost, be they personal and individual memories (photos, diaries, letters, etc.) or systemically erased histories (archives of the oppressed and the discriminated against; see Withers 2016), to be dutifully recorded. On the other hand, the indiscriminate and indefinite saving of life events as big data renders the conflation of memory and storage, as Chun argues, two things that both “underlie...and undermine...digital media’s archival promise” (2008, 148). The artificial memory made up of digital data therefore makes “the permanent into an enduring ephemeral” (ibid.). In other words, rather than actually preserving human memories by making an easily degenerated memory permanent, the massive and excessive storage of these memories actually makes all of these memories immemorable—for instance, consider the example of how the digital “album” of the smartphone produces many more photos but retains significantly fewer memories.

While the challenges that emerge from the influence of digital media on human cognition are beyond the topic of this dissertation, the power dynamic behind the production of memorable materials in the era of digital media is the central concern of the dissertation because it foregrounds the radical political implication of the abovementioned surplus materials. As I introduced in the opening anecdote, the

cruel process of selecting a small amount of memorable material from the excessive store of more than one hundred individuals' living experiences provides a crucial lens through which we can discern how power works in making certain digitalized subjects alluring while other subjects are disposable. While the selected materials construct and contribute the entertainment content the show provides to the audience and profits from, the stored lived experiences that become the surplus are disposed of. Looking into the process in which these selections are made informs us about the politics of what counts as a watchable life, a political formation that conventional media does not offer.

Furthermore, these surplus materials are valuable resources for digital media studies, not only for considering the relationship between digital media and political formation but also for elaborating radical digital politics outside of the realm of hegemonic political discourse and practice. In this sense, the dissertation project involved building three archives of surplus digital materials. The first archive consists of surplus materials from mainstream political activism of LGBT people in China produced in a digital entertainment program. Instead of looking at how the program enhances the shadowed visibility of LGBT communities in Chinese mainstream culture, I collect representations from the program that do not necessarily coincide with the mainstream queer politics of visibility but nonetheless embed a radical imaginary of a queer future. The second archive consists of surplus materials on political opinions, particularly sporadic, fleeting, and bitty digital data (Møller and Robards 2019) of anonymous individuals on a youth interest-based website. These

small data are not considered politically viable in mainstream political discourse as they are randomly made, disorganized, and less intentional. However, in collecting sentence-long rantings, one-click grades, and copy-paste comments, I discover ample political discontent and aspiration. The last archive consists of the surplus materials of social anxiety, specifically anxious discourse towards the corruption of appropriate femininity. In placing women's body and body images at the focal point of criticism, these data actually vent the more general feeling of unsettledness about a deeper structural crisis.

In terms of practical research methods, the dissertation adopts the following cross-disciplinary methods: interpretative analysis, specifically the visual analysis of archival material such as digital video content; liquid content analysis, or the purposeful and somewhat inductive explanatory analysis of quantitatively gathered data such as accumulative data resulting from a film-rating platform (Karlsson and Sjøvaag 2016); digital affect studies that identify important "nodes" (Reestorff 2015) such as high-traffic webpages, intensively discussed topics, and "most-liked" posts on social networking sites to track the production, distribution, and intensification of collective affect through these digital nodes; and virtual ethnography, which sees the digital sphere as both a site for cultural formation and a cultural artifact (Hine 2000; See also Kozinets 2009; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Pink et al. 2016). Using these methods, I track the formation of a digital culture of popular aesthetics, as well as the production of a particular kind of appearance of female beauty.



Additionally, as I mentioned above, the short-lived condition of open access digital materials as the result of either an organic process or an enforced violence offers both a predicament and potential for studying digital politics. This confinement is especially pertinent for the studies in chapter two, as the content of that chapter involves a great number of deleted webpages and deactivated accounts. With the help of Internet archive services, in particular, the Wayback Machine website ([web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org)), as well as text and image searching engines such as Google and Baidu, I built an archive collection of the “ghostly matter,” i.e., a collection of the deleted content. All of this archived ghostly matter is turned into static fossils, which means that users cannot change or even obtain access to these digital sites. These static ghosts of ephemeral digital memories are used in the dissertation to build a narrative trajectory of the erased surplus digital materials.

### **Literature Review**

My research on the contemporary digital sphere in postsocialist China contributes to current scholarship in two ways. To begin with, my thesis argument and theorization of postsocialist temporality in China through the lens of digital ephemerality adds to the intellectual thread of postsocialist studies that frames postsocialism as a critique of the teleological narratives of socialist revolutionarism, its role as the antithesis of capitalism, and the similar teleological narrative of global neoliberalism after the end of the Cold War. A study of the temporal experience in the postsocialist condition provides a sufficient critique of this oppositional consciousness. Furthermore, my

work engages with digital culture studies by providing a critical examination of the role digital media performs within the shifting contours of political contestation in post-1989 China, showing the potentiality and confinement of radical political formations and engagement that digital media enables in both the specific context of postsocialist China and digital society more broadly. By doing so, my research aims to foreground, or even challenge, the hegemonic structure of the geopolitics of knowledge production.

### ***Postsocialist Temporality***

As I elaborated in the previous section, the “postness” of postsocialism accurately corrects the lack of historicism in arguments such as that of “the end of history” elaborated by Francis Fukuyama (1992), who believes that the collapse in the east and the advent of Western liberal democracy alongside the growth of the neoliberal capitalist economy indicates that humanity has reached the endpoint of its sociocultural revolution. With the logic of this argument, the “post” in postsocialism can only mean the “end.” This belief that liberal democracy would serve as the end of human development has already been proven to be problematic. Moreover, the resurgence of Russia and China, the rise of radical religious fundamentalism in the Middle East, and the demonstrated tendency towards conservative national populism in the U.S. and U.K., with its newest acerbic version of so-called post-truth politics, have reminded the world that history is not over at all.

Therefore, the implication of the “post” in postsocialism by no means suggests the “end” of socialism. Rather, as a temporal conceptualization, it illuminates a varied collection of temporalities that cannot simply be explained as a transitory stage. The “post” can mean the lingering and enduring of the perpetual “aftermath” and conjure the experience of hauntology. In his ethnography of archives of the last Soviet generation, Yurchak (2013) touches upon the contradictory temporality of late Soviet life as simultaneously eternal and stagnating, vigorous and ailing, and bleak and full of promise. Scott’s (2014) literary study of post-revolutionary Grenada literature further accurately catches the temporal feeling of the “out of jointness of time,” in which the sense of futurity is nullified by the abruptly ruptured ending of the linear revolutionary narrative. Revolutionary futurity became impossible and was overshadowed by the feeling of being stuck in the present and perpetually mourning the past. Being stuck in time is also experienced in other circumstances as the refusal to synchronize with the new time. Studying contemporary literature in Eastern Europe, Starosta (2014) recognizes the “postsocialist marks modes of personhood and modes of locution that are perverse with respect to the reproductive aims of the new global order” and disables “the apparent closed language of neoliberal freedom and progress”, or the “perverse tongue”, as she calls it, for foregrounding the rhetoric of impoverishment and abandonment to make the postsocialist temporality at odds with a bright new future.

In addition to a hauntology of the aftermath, postsocialism further suggests an alternative of temporal progression in relation to neoliberal teleology. In the

problematic transitology argument, socialism and capitalism are seen as oppositional and incomparable monolithic ideologies. From this perspective, postsocialism is “an absence of any credible overarching emancipatory project despite the proliferation of fronts of struggle” (Fraser 1997, 3). However, more studies have proven that in terms of political imaginative and discursive formations, the imagined ontological antagonism between socialism and capitalism is actually not that fundamental. Susan Buck-Morss notes that in the binaristic structure of socialism vs. capitalism, or the east vs. the West, the two “opponents” in fact share more similarities than differences. Both share the dreamworld of “the construction of mass utopia”, which “was the driving ideological force of industrial modernization in both its capitalist and socialist forms” (2002). In this sense, the arrival of the postsocialist condition indicates differences and alternatives in the ruining of both the socialist dreamworld and the capitalist dreamworld and signifies new forms of social lives and political formations that cannot be exhausted as a simple matter of transition.

For instance, the privatization of previously state-owned factories by foreign investment complicates workers’ self-conception between being a socialist worker and providing capitalist labor (Dunn 2015). The critical transitional condition of postsocialism also brings to light the emergence of multiple new political subjectivities of contention and resistance that by no means imitate civil rights activism or continue state-endorsed class revolution (Horvat and Štikš 2015). Moreover, neoliberal political and economic policies also have introduced the novel ideal of self-governance, which scholars define as the “enterprising” of oneself in

former socialist locations (Makovicky 2016). The “flexible postsocialist assemblages,” coined by Li Zhang in her observations of the experiences of economic reform in China and Vietnam make use of neoliberal ideas and techniques for their own ends. Similar flexible assemblages have also happened in the realm of cultural politics. Taking film culture as an example, the state heteronomy that ostensibly expired in the postsocialist era never fully abdicated its power but rather found ways to maintain control over cultural production through managing on top of market heteronomy (McGrath 2008, 11). The degree to which people abide by state ideology also directly influences the market occupancy and profitability of domestic film production even though direct propaganda film is no longer the mainstream genre in the postsocialist film market (Zhang 2007).

Postsocialism produces novel conditions and invites new forms of social identifications including the invention of social categorization of non-normative gender and sexuality identities. While a transitory epistemology would argue that the postsocialist period of transition marks a retreat from the economic egalitarianism of socialism to the politics of identity-based pursuits of cultural resistance, recognition, and respect for minority social groups, more nuanced studies show that the actual conditions in postsocialist regimes are more complicated than the simple embracing of identity politics (Fraser 1997). It is true that the singularly class-based discourse of economic-political struggle has lost the most legibility within and beyond former socialist regimes. It is also true that a universally recognizable discourse of oppression and hegemony based on marginalized culturally and socially defined

identities has attained global popularity. However, other than a one-stop wholesale adoption of the affirmative politics of recognition, the subject making and political formation in postsocialist loci present and should be considered in a more intricate and untidy manner.

For instance, Rofel (2007) examined the explosion of self-identified gay populations in Chinese metropolises in the mid-1990s and contended that the self-making of these gay populations speaks to the desire for both cosmopolitanism and cultural belonging to tradition. A postsocialist allegory encourages gay men to freely express their own sexuality to subvert socialist conventions, yet it also facilitates the consolidation of a new normalcy based on the ideal citizenship of “quality.” In this sense, postsocialist homonormative politics, although aligned with a universally applicable notion of recognition and respectability, exhibit rather different strategies and mindsets. For instance, in discussing the politics of visibility adopted by Chinese lesbian women, Kam (2013) suggests that “a politics of public correctness” directs these women’s negotiation of the boundary of public and private in relation to their agency and freedom. A similar argument was also made in Newton’s (2016) ethnography of the Saigon lesbian community, describing how the state governance of urban space enables and limits this population’s organization and activities to a level of contingent invisibility. Fojtova and Sokolova (2013) elaborate on the idea of “involuntary invisibility” based on their examination of Czech lesbian activism on same-sex parental rights: “The main reference point for such consideration is not

some ‘Western’ context but rather the communist legacy of deeply seated homophobic structures within which the Czech queer discourses operate.”

In addition, the postsocialist temporality also invokes the “reordering” of global temporal space that not only suggests the provinciality of neoliberal democracy but also participates in the global expansion of capitalism and orients the direction of the latter’s development. The state-led economic reform of postsocialist China has deeply transformed the dynamics and structure of global labor distribution and influenced the discourse of geopolitical power struggles in adjusting to the newly constructed global order of production and consumption. For instance, the massive availability of cheap labor in former socialist countries, particularly China and Vietnam, has directly boosted the expansion of the global manufacturing economy, while the symbolism of sweat factories and exploitative mechanisms provides the basic grammar of condemnation of the inhumane authoritarian essence of socialist regimes (Lee 1998; Pun 2005). In her investigation of the intimacy between China’s information on postsocialism and the construction of the myth of an intimately connected “global village,” Xiao Liu (2019) points out the “forced severance of information work from factory work” and the global redistribution of manual labor and intellectual labor enabled by the postsocialist reordering of global temporal space, making certain labor and lives neglectable and disposable. In other words, postsocialist economic conditions do not simply mean that nations such as China participate in the global production and reproduction cycle. Rather, the world we dwell in now is the direct result of the postsocialist condition. McElroy (2018) keenly

points out that not only is the whole imaginary of the Silicon Valley as the engineer of the free world based on Cold War antagonism, the entire tech boom 2.0, inciting the consumer-orientation of information technology, is a consequence of geopolitical change in the post-1989 era.

In other words, postsocialism should not be placed “in the homogeneous and empty time-space of the rubble of the Wall and the 1991 disintegration of the Soviet Union replicate the inevitability of the capitalist ‘now’,” but rather, as Atanasoski and Vora (2018) contend, postsocialism should serve as “an analytic” that “has the potential to disrupt teleological narratives of oppositional consciousness tied to a demand for a transformation or revolution in the future, about revolution and ends of the revolution.” The accounts of postsocialism not only conjure a hauntology of the aftermath, a stuck-in-the-past conditional temporality, or the melancholic loss of “what could have been,” but also pluralize various articulations of futures that do not replicate the already written future of the neoliberal script. Even more so, a postsocialist approach to temporality shows that the end of the Cold War was, in fact, not the end of history but rather the reigniting of the multiplicity of socialism and socialist legacies acting in the world today.

My dissertation’s conceptualization of the radical temporality of ephemerality, aligning with Atanasoski and Vora’s (2018) proposal to see postsocialism as a queer temporality that does not reproduce the pre-existing social order (141), contributes to this thesis on postsocialist temporality as a critical move towards disrupting the teleological narratives of oppositional consciousness generated from the antagonistic



discourse of the Cold War. First, while the predominant literature on the aftermath of the temporality of postsocialism limits the generationally embedded experience of those populations that have experienced both the socialist era and the postsocialist era, little has been done to introduce the perspective of younger generations with no direct memory of the socialist past to reflect the affective aftermath of the fall of socialism (Wang 2008; Cai 2013; Scott 2015; Mihelj 2017). My dissertation intentionally focuses on the postsocialist generation, i.e., postsocialist youth in China, as the pivotal point of concern in formulating my examination of how the postsocialist condition, more than three decades after the end of socialist revolutionary ideology, remains a critical element in shaping the temporal experience of young people, which is especially reflected in the feeling of a present absence, as I will elaborate in chapter two. Second, in terms of how postsocialist temporality provides alternative collective political formations that may look very different from both socialist and neoliberal formations, I theorize these alternatives to pursue nonmonumental ephemerality as a certain form of perverse speech in projecting different articulations of futurity in the postsocialist digital sphere in chapter one. Last but not least, in gauging the close ties between the ephemeral instantaneity of a kind of postsocialist digital labor with the crisis of analog humanity in front of digital biopower, chapter three of the dissertation provides a reordered read of the global condition of digital humanity.

### ***Digital Culture and Digital Culture in China***

My conceptualization of ephemerality as a postsocialist temporality in China comes directly from my critical observation of China's digital sphere and digital politics. Therefore, in building the hermeneutic of ephemerality, my research also engages in digital culture studies by examining the role digital media plays in the shifting contours of political contestation in post-1989 China. Further, it examines the potentiality and confinement of radical political formations and engagement that digital media enables. In doing so, I propose to make the case of postsocialist China accountable for both contributing to the knowledge of digital culture in general and providing nonhegemonic knowledge about the intersection of digital politics and the postsocialist condition. More broadly, my research intervenes in the intersecting fields of digital studies and Chinese studies by situating the invention and transformation of the digital sphere in the context of postsocialist China, particularly focusing on the formulation of the postsocialist generation's collective experience and structure of feeling. I join current Chinese Internet studies scholarship in challenging the notion of China as a digital dystopian wasteland, a reductive account held by mainstream digital media studies in the liberal context.

The arrival of a digital society in China seems to have failed in delivering a society that is more liberal, democratic, and diverse—an aspirational notion elaborated in the narrative of “techno-utopian liberalism” (McElroy 2018). Rather, an Orwellian dystopian vision of China is described in mainstream liberal media in the West, fueled by imagery of an ever-growing authoritarian power from the soil of digital technology: the actualizing massive digital surveillance based on facial recognition (Walton 2001;

Hughes and Wacker 2003; Pan 2010; Qiang 2019); the rising chauvinistic nationalism fueled by the patriarchy, heterosexism, racism, and ethnocentrism that is nourished by the CCP's well-choreographed digital propaganda, or "ideotainment" (Lagerkvist 2008); the image of the "Great Firewall of China," and a systematically instructed Internet surveillance and block infrastructure that filters, manages, erases, and prevents online activities and content, especially that which is considered threatening to the CCP's political authority, from being freely communicated (Morozov 2011)—all of which confirms the binaristic notion of China as the opposite of the liberal West. According to this notion, China is a place where the arrival of the digital has only nourished the goliath of authoritarian ideology and the political power of the authoritarian government, and mass surveillance has made the imagination of a "China spring," a democratic movement that started on the Internet, only a phantasmal idea (Franceschini and Negro 2014).

Such overt attention to China's digital authoritarianism as the opposite of the liberal West prevents people from seeing the many de facto facets of illiberal digital culture in supposedly liberal democracies, similar to how the critique of homophobia in places such as East Asia diverts critical attention away from the violence of homonormative liberalism in the West. Removing these obsessions can provide a critical lens through which we can revisit the Chinese digital sphere and reflect on what it offers for understanding digital culture and digital politics. Scholars on digital culture and politics in China have initiated such projects using various approaches by starting with a refutation of reductive and dystopian imaginings of the Chinese digital sphere

and offering a much more intricate description and examination of the digital landscape in the country. The Internet is a postsocialist technology that requests investigation outside of the confines of the binaristic Cold War notion of the liberal and the illiberal. The advent and proliferation of “information society” and the Chinese approach to the “information superhighway” in the 1980s was a national project that usurped and appropriated socialist imaginaries for a refashioned purpose (Yang 2009, Liu 2019). Rather than a defeated informative neoliberalism, the stories unfolding in China need to be interpreted through a lens of digital postsocialism.

One of the most heated controversies over digital politics in China is censorship, epitomized by the image of the Great Firewall of China and the power of disappearing that imagines the Chinese Internet to be “scary, invariably filtering out every online occurrence of unwanted language while preventing Chinese netizens from accessing the likes of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter” (Hockx 2015, 9). However, the obsessive focus on censorship as the epitome of Internet culture in China displays the problematic fantasy of “digital orientalism” (Herold and de Seta 2015, 70). In contrast, other studies depict a rather more intricate condition of the Internet in China. The durable power of the “networked authoritarian regime” does exist, as the CCP has persistently established a set of sophisticated cyber network control programs (Tsai 2016). However, the imagined airtight “wall” does not truly exist. In real life, as has been keenly observed by scholars, websites that are supposedly officially blocked are frequently visited by Chinese netizens with the help of technologies such as VPNs

(virtual private networks) (Hockx 2015, 9).<sup>13</sup> Rather than a coherent and hierarchical system of content control, Internet censorship in China is actually based on voluntarily customized practices by individual web spaces, whose principles are constantly improvised and changed (Mackinnon 2012). Netizens are never short of originality and creativity in inventing contingent tactics to dodge censorship (Yang and Jiang 2015). Although research on the production and reproduction of confrontational online activities suggests that the relationship between dissent and hegemony is complicated and that the complicity between the two is as prominent in China as it is in more liberal contexts like that of the U.S., questions remain: Why are certain contentions allowed and tolerated while others become impermissible? Is there an appropriate style of dissent configured by the Internet? In what way is dissent appropriated by commercialism and consumerism? The business model of online contention is examined by Yang (2009), who argues that the economy of attention entails cooperation between ecommerce and online activism (103-124). In this sense, visible dissent produces a dilemma between political activation and inactivation. In research on the gender politics of three user-generated texts protesting censorship, Wallis (2015) points out that the texts deploy a masculinist discourse and visual style that turn the female body into the site of subordination, penetration, and insult. The dissent is

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<sup>13</sup> However, in recent years, accessing VPNs has become increasingly trickier thanks to the tightening of state sanctions and shutting down of both domestic and oversea VPN servers. Nevertheless, it is still quite possible for a savvy Chinese netizen to find informal ways to access banned websites as long as enough effort is put in. Additionally, with a greater number of Chinese students studying abroad (universities normally offer free VPNs for students to access resources from off-campus locations) and an increasing number of foreign companies in China (which are normally authorized to use VPNs in China for commercial reasons), there are also formal ways for a large number of Chinese youth to legally use VPN services.

realized through further domination. All of these complicated topographies show that rather than a monolithic situation of domination and subordination, the discussion of Chinese Internet censorship calls for a much more nuanced investigation of how postsocialist governance truly interferes with and disrupts postsocialist netizens' contingent freedom on the premise of political stability.

Extending from past developing complexity in studying issues of censorship online, the current Chinese Internet studies literature also produces critical knowledge about Chinese netizens as “postsocialist human beings” (Rofel 2010, 1). Online public debate has become the preferred method by which Chinese citizens participate in politics (Yang 2003). In return, the “repertoire of collective action” on the Internet shapes the way in which ideal citizenship in China is articulated (Sima 2016). In terms of cyber-nationalism, research also shows a more complicated image than that of state-inflicted populist propaganda. As an emerging form of nationalism in China that was only made possible by online space, cyber-nationalism shows certain signs of political liberalism with its quality of spontaneity (Wu 2010; Jiang 2012; Shen 2015). However, the state remains a complicated actor. Cyber-nationalist sentiment incited netizens that are “both for and against the state vying for authority” (Gries 2004, 176). Additionally, while at the global scale, nationalism has developed into a powerful force in response to the post-Cold War global economy's increased inequalities, the circulation of nationalist sentiment on the Chinese Internet is the result of complicit cooperation between political powers and economic powers and should actually be interpreted as a consumer-oriented product in which the ideal patriot is simultaneously an assiduous

consumer of the national economy (Jiang 2012, 99). In this way, the practice of cyber-nationalism creates, as well as restricts, mass movements in the postsocialist era. Additionally, passionate participation—in a “healthy way”—defines properly patriotic Chinese people in the post-Cold War era.

In addition, scholarship on the Chinese Internet looks into the utopian promise that the digital sphere in China has incited and potentialized. In her study of early intellectual and cultural discourse on the “information wave” in the 1980s and early 1990s, Liu (2019) shows how a postsocialist utopian vision of humanity is wired into the enthusiasm of technology fantasies. In the contemporary context of the everyday practices of Chinese netizens, rather than a wasteland of dystopian visions, there is an impulse to imagine a utopian future that forms a vibrant aspect of the online community in the postsocialist era. Defining such an impulse as “utopian realism,” Yang (2009) argues that “what is most striking about Chinese online communities is not their practical and utilitarian functions...But how they nurture moral sentiments. Like any utopia, this utopian impulse is a critique of the present and a yearning for a better world” (156). New forms of political formation and subjectivity that have emerged from the online sphere reveal such a utopian impulse. For instance, in his research on Internet literature in China, Hockx (2015) sees the Internet as a brand-new literary space that comes from the “postsocialist uncertainty” of the Chinese literary field. The literature produced in this new literary space could help in re-evaluating and redefining the standards of genres, style, and publishing, as well as the reading conventions of Chinese literary productions (26-27). The rise of Internet literary production and cultural

production coincides with an emerging and novel kind of subjectivity named either “collective individuality” or “me culture,” which is embedded in the generational experience of Chinese youth and also provides visions of a utopian future (Sima and Pugsley 2010; Wu 2014).

### **Chapter Description**

The dissertation examines three digital sites visited by postsocialist youth in China to examine the potentiality of the radical politics embedded in the surplus digital paratext from these sites. Each chapter discusses one of the sites and explores one embodiment of digital ephemerality. The first chapter, titled “Queer Future in the Ephemeral: Sexualizing Digital Entertainment and the Promise of Queer Insouciance,” explores the political promise of digital representations that have been seen as trivial and unimportant in mainstream resistant politics. The second chapter, titled “Utopian in the Ephemeral: ‘*Wenyi*’ as Postsocialist Digital Affect,” looks at the utopian promise embedded in the digital affect that has emerged from the ephemeral archives produced by postsocialist youth. The last chapter, titled “Livestreaming Reality: Nonhuman Beauty and the Digital Fetishization of Ephemerality,” contemplates the political stakes behind the dissolution of analog humanities in the face of the digital craving for ephemerality. Altogether, the chapters provide three perspectives for understanding digital politics in postsocialist China.

In detail, chapter one elaborates on the promise of digital entertainment in shaping radical queer politics in China. Tracking the historical transition of China’s



audiovisual entertainment from a socialist television culture to a postsocialist digital culture, the dissertation pays special attention to the transformation of the language and representation of gender and sexuality. By looking at the transgressive representation of gender and sexuality in a specific digital entertainment program, namely, *Let's Talk* (*Qi pa shuo*, 2014-present), the chapter reflects on the liminality of the mainstream politics of resistance, specifically the mainstream LGBT politics of visibility, in imagining radical queer culture in the cultural field of digital entertainment. The chapter argues that the arrival of digital entertainment has promised a radical political imaginary for a Chinese queer future more than a simple enhancement of visibility. Only by looking at the digital representations that are considered insignificant can we discover this radical futurity, which I name the politics of queer insouciance.

Chapter two examines the radical political affect contained in a widely shared postsocialist youth structure of feeling, i.e., the digital affect of *wenyi*, a collective structure of feeling that has been dismissed as a neoliberal-oriented sentiment of individuals with few political implications. The chapter digs into Douban, a digital site where this digital affect is produced, elaborated, and circulated, by looking at the ways in which the surplus archives from the site provide us with critical evidence of the political yearning the *wenyi* affect expresses. I argue that instead of a neoliberal sentiment of individuals, the *wenyi* affect, in fact, carries radical political utopianism that can only be grasped through digital ephemerality, specifically the ephemeral temporality that feels the present as a perpetual state of absence.

Chapter three argues that the deprivation of the comprehensiveness and coherence of analog humanity is central to digital biopower, or the technology of power that can manage human bodies in large groups through digital interfaces and in the digital sphere. The chapter supports this argument by looking at the mechanism of exploitation of the thriving livestreaming economy and the anxious media discourse regarding the gendered labor of this economy. By analyzing the exploitative structure of the livestreaming economy, I argue that the digital platform of livestreaming fetishizes a short-lived, abruptive, and disjointed co-existence experience and captivates analog humanity to adjust and cater to this ephemeral ecstasy. Based on this notion of the digital fetishization of ephemeral co-existence, the chapter advocates a radical feminist critique of the stigmatization of the “wanghong look” (*wang hong lian*), a Chinese term used to describe a particular kind of female beauty standard popularized by influencers in the livestreaming economy. As I argue, the central trope of this stigmatization, which I recognize as the dehumanization of the young women involved, ironically remits the social anxiety about the threat the digitalization posts to analog humanity.

## **Chapter One — Queer Future in the Ephemeral: Sexualizing Digital Entertainment and the Promise of Queer Insouciance**

On August 21, 2015, an episode of *Let's Talk (qi pa shuo)*, a popular online entertainment debate show in China, disappeared from iQiyi, the video platform that produced and released the program. The episode, titled “Whether or not gay people should come out to their parents,” was the sixth episode of the show’s second season and had just been released about a month prior. Branding itself as a talent show that gathers the “most articulate people” in Chinese speaking circles, the show had become well known among young audiences for its advocacy of fiery debates on unconventional topics. This episode was no exception. One of the hosts, Kevin Tsai confesses his feeling of loneliness as the only out gay celebrity in Chinese entertainment circles and ended his speech by whimpering “we are not monsters.” With this touching speech, the episode immediately went viral on Chinese social media. Netizens lauded the episode for having the courage to address issues regarding homosexuality, a sensitive, if not entirely taboo topic in Chinese mainstream media. After its removal, netizens immediately realized that this courage was what brought the show into trouble, since openly talking about the “gay stuff” absolutely crosses the “red line” of state censored material. And the culture censorship institution of the Chinese state, i.e., the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and

Television (SAPPRFT)<sup>14</sup>, was undoubtedly the hand behind the curtain. A few days later, an official order appeared on social media. The document explained that “the content showed empathy towards abnormal sexual relationships and challenged traditional morality and value” and therefore “is not suitable for communicating to the public” (Doze 2015). Not only did the order reject homosexuality as being “abnormal,” but the public was also patronized as not being able to make choices of their own. The dictatorship of the CCP over the cultural representation of sexuality, especially their suppression of nonheteronormative forms of gender and sexuality, became, once again, crystal clear.

In hindsight, the deletion was just the beginning. In February 2016, *Addicted* (*Shang yin*), a web series based on the boys’ love (bl) novel *Are You Addicted?* (*Ni yao shang yin le*), was banned after the first three of a planned fifteen episodes were streamed on iQiyi. In the following years, the China Netcasting Service Association (CNSA), an institution directly affiliated with the SAPPRFT, released the *General Regulation of Censorship on the Content of Internet Audiovisual Program* (*Wang luo shi ting jie mu nei rong shen he tong ze*), which lists homosexuality, along with incest, sexual perversion, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual violence as the

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<sup>14</sup> Since it was founded in 1986, P.R.C.’s cultural censorship institution has changed its name several times. In the beginning, it was named the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, conglomerated by the Ministry of Culture Film Bureau and the Ministry of Radio and Television. In 1988, it was re-organized as the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). In 2013, SARFT was merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication and renamed as the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT). In 2018, SAPPRFT was abolished, subordinated to the CCP’s central committee’s Publicity Department, and renamed as National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA). The dissertation adopts different abbreviations of the institution according to the year the document or policy under discussion was released.

“representation and exhibition of abnormal sexual relations” and indicates that such topics are subject to revision, deletion and prohibition for “propagating obscenity and pornography, and [being]vulgar and low-taste interest” (2017). Although the prohibition obviously “forbids [all these activities] indiscriminately and violates the right of sexual minorities to freely express their sexual orientations and sexual preferences” and “censoring people’s sexual desire with control instrument is as ridiculous as censoring people’s appetite with control instrument” (Li 2017), the regulation is nevertheless enforced on all audiovisual entertainment works made and circulated on the Internet.

These incidents reveal the exacerbation of the CCP’s homophobic cultural policy, epitomized in the discriminative censorship of homosexual content for nearly three decades, as its cultural authoritarianism has extended to yet another emerging field of popular culture: digital entertainment culture, which has only developed substantially very recently. The deleted episode of *Let’s Talk*, in particular, verifies that there is a monumental crisis of intolerance because the homophobic state is not only suppressing LGBTQ voices but also prohibiting any public display of sympathy for such voices. All of this vindicates the notion that state violence, with all of its conservative, patriarchal, and authoritarian character, has never abdicated its authority in impeding the organic development of popular culture in China.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Not only do homosexual folks have a target on their back, the shifting visual languages of recent digital entertainment programs, such as the mosaic icon regularly used by these programs to cover earrings of male personae and tattoos of both male and female personae, also deploy a conservative and restrictive understanding of masculinity and femininity. See Zhang X, 2019.

Indeed, for decades, Chinese LGBTQ communities have struggled over the issue of public visibility and fought over the politics of representation in the popular culture sphere. With the relentless efforts made by LGBTQ and queer cultural workers, we have witnessed the flourishing of a rich archives of queer films, literature, and arts in China. These Chinese queer cultural works have circulated among local and transnational LGBTQ communities and challenged state censorship (Lim 2006; Bao 2015; Shaw and Zhang 2018). However, the dire conundrum these communities face amid this proliferation is the difficulty of entering the realm of mainstream culture, in the extensive sense of mass-targeted cultural products such as theatre-released movies, published books, public exhibitions, and state television programs. Instead, because of official bans, LGBTQ topics remain stigmatized if not totally taboo. In this sense, an entire episode dedicated to the issue of coming out on a popular entertainment program that does not target LGBTQ communities is indisputably great progress in light of the increasing visibility of LGBTQ people in mainstream culture. The deletion of the episode, in return, reaffirms the existence of the predicament and demonstrates the cruciality of continuing to fight for the issue of visibility of LGBTQ folks in mainstream popular culture.

In this sense, the deleted episode of *Let's Talk* shows the mainstream discourse of resistance in the political elaboration of Chinese queer politics with a central focus on public visibility and representation, but this chapter argues that what digital entertainment programs such as *Let's Talk* offer to queer politics in China is much more than that. Digital culture does not simply provide a relatively open

cultural space that encourages the representation of LGBTQ content before the state eventually suppresses this open space. Rather, I argue that the promise of queer politics' future course emerges from the historical development of entertainment culture in China, from television-based to digital platform-based entertainment culture, particularly in the latter's refutation of the former's ideology and in the latter's invention of defiant techniques of coding and representation. Unlike the monumental story of a deleted episode about LGBTQ issues, queer futurity could also be perceived in these transitioning processes in a rather ephemeral way. It is through these moments that radical queer politics can be glimpsed.

In other words, the chapter solicits a re-examination and recalibration of how an emerging form of popular entertainment could contribute to the political imaginary of futurity, specifically the imaginary of a queer future. Essentially, the chapter asks the following: in what sense does digital entertainment differ from conventional television entertainment? What kind of political promises can be found in the arrival of digital entertainment that is open to postsocialist youth in China elaborating a rather different kind of popular culture? If the politics of popular visibility and representation script the monumental history of Chinese LGBTQ communities' history of resistance, in what sense does digital entertainment premise an alternative, although ephemeral, script of gender and sexuality insubordination?

This chapter looks at the first two seasons of *Let's Talk* as an exemplar to investigate this alternative promise of digital entertainment. I argue that digital entertainment provides effective defiance techniques to overthrow the hegemonic

ideology of pedagogical entertainment. In particular, small screen techniques inflict defiance against the conventional representations of gender and sexuality. Although these tactics may appear light, trivial, and jesting, they project a critical political imaginary of queerness in China, which I conceptualize as queer insouciance. This queer insouciance is the true legacy that digital entertainment provides for queer politics in postsocialist China.

### **Entertainment as Pedagogy: The Ideology and Practice of Television**

#### **Entertainment**

Strictly speaking, the history of market-based mass entertainment culture did not start with the official closure of revolutionary cultural politics in the 1980s. In this historical process, television, among other mediums, plays a major role in constructing postsocialist mass entertainment culture. The notion of entertainment as part of national culture was introduced in the early twentieth century along with the introduction of the idea of the nation-state to China and has been debated since then. In this section, I provide a historical review of television entertainment in postsocialist China, with a focus on the formulation and consolidation of the hegemonic ideology of entertainment held by the CCP, which uses entertainment as pedagogy for the purpose of educating and entertaining the masses. With this ideology, mass entertainment, in this case television entertainment programs, is institutionalized as a state apparatus for civil education, and audiences are patronized as being vulnerable protégés who need perpetual protection and guidance. Within this



pedagogical entertainment culture, a scrupulous heteronormative discourse on gender and sexuality is constructed as a critical part of entertainment education.

### ***History of entertainment consciousness in twentieth century China***

In the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese discourse on entertainment was built on the differentiation between good and bad entertainment. While the former, dubbed “noble entertainment” (*gao shang yu le*, Yu 1921), or “light art for lay people” (Dai 1932) would enhance the physical and spiritual strength of the people, the latter, either named as “mundane entertainment” (*shi su yu le*) or simply “low taste and sketchy” would bring moral corruption and social peril. In this sense, entertainment is directly associated with national strength, as “a nation-state with a good entertainment culture will definitely have a prosperous future. Otherwise, it can only decline and diminish” (Ci 1939). The vigilant tone underscoring these arguments reveals a general hostility towards entertainment, mostly because unruly, low-taste and self-indulgent enthrallment, if not properly guided, is a threat to social stability and the national spirit.

This hostility was exacerbated during the Cultural Revolution and morphed into a total negation of entertainment as an anti-revolutionary scheme planned by the capitalist enemy whose purpose was to corrupt the mind and body of the revolutionary proletariat. In a 1974 editorial titled “Anti-entertainment theory” (*chi yu le lun*) in the *People’s Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CCP, the idea of cultural entertainment (*wen yi yu le*), or entertaining culture and art, was denounced as a

conspiracy: the “recently appearing attack on our revolutionary culture and art as ‘lacking relaxation and enjoyment’ [was] a malicious attack from the class enemy... the so-called idea that culture and art are ‘tools of entertainment’ and ‘for entertainment’ is a total lie to disguise the class nature and fighting nature of culture and art.” By referring to the theory of class struggle, accepting or rejecting entertainment became a sign of class division. Entertainment was used by a class enemy to attack the proletarian class: “The fallacy that tied culture and art to entertainment will replace the militancy of revolutionary culture, block the ardent class struggle and route struggle, disarm people’s conscious weapon, and paralyze people’s revolutionary determinacy under the smoke of ‘relaxing and delightful’” (Hong).

Although the militarized notion of entertainment was dismissed after the end of the Cultural Revolution along with the dying out of radical class struggle politics, the idea that entertainment sugarcoats ideological indoctrination remained valid, though it is now justified as a tool for propagating socialist ideology. The Horatian edutainment theory, which suggests the efficiency of incorporating education into entertainment, was rediscovered among the early writing of nonradical CCP leaders. As long as it was adopted appropriately, entertainment could become an efficient pedagogical instrument for educating the masses. During the 1980s, socialist entertainment for youth communities was propagated in the name of “building socialist spiritual culture” (*jian she she hui zhu yi jing shen wen ming*) to “carry out healthy entertainment activities widely to nourish the daily lives of young adults and

teenagers.” Central to this entertainment culture project, was using “the culture of socialism to dominate the battlefield of young adults and teenagers’ leisure lives... to resist the spiritual pollution from the capitalist class” (Li, 1983).

Since then, the notion of entertainment as a pedagogical tool for educating the masses has remained part of the doctrine of CCP cultural ideology. Deviations from it, such as “entertainment for the sake of entertainment” (*wei yu le er yu le*), have been repudiated. An example would be the debate on “entertainment film” (*yu le pian*) in the late 1980s (Chen 2010). The concept was raised in 1988 to advocate for films with less pedagogical and didactic purposes and more captivating plots and simulative scenes for the sake of boosting the weak domestic film market at that time (Li et al. 1987; Liu 1989). Then vice minister of the Department of Radio, Film and TV, Chen Haosu, endorsed the idea as the “ontology of entertainment” (*yu le ben ti lun*), in which he suggested that entertainment, rather than education, should be the essential purpose of film: “entertainment is necessary for the progress of social civilization,” although “in the past, it was absent from people’s lives, due to political turmoil and economic plight... now is the time to change this situation” (1988). Implicitly criticizing the hostility towards entertainment during the high socialist era as a historical mistake, Chen encouraged a separation of propaganda and education from entertainment; since “there are already propaganda films made for the purpose of education and enlightenment,” there should also be films made “purely for the entertainment of the popular masses” (Zhang 1989).

Chen's view was quickly refuted (Shao 1989; Jia 1989; Jiang & Zhang 1989; Wang & Ji 1989; Hua 1989; Wang 1989; Yang 1989; Tang 1990). In criticizing Chen's theory, anti-entertainment film critics suggested that he misunderstood the "entertainment quality" (*yu le xing*), or the essence of entertainment, as an independent quality of its own. Instead, they argued, entertainment quality cannot be earned through simple sensational stimulation but rather requires correct social ethos and moral values to support those stimulations (Shao 1989). In other words, not only does entertainment require a proper educational purpose to nourish itself, it cannot even be considered entertaining if this pedagogical quality is missing. Additionally, entertainment should not passively cater to audiences' needs because such works would cause "aesthetic and sensational fatigue and numbness," "decrease audiences' sensitivity," and "harm the progression of the entire nation's cultural and spiritual quality" (Xu 1989). Therefore, close-monitored guidance is always needed to assure that mass entertainment leads the masses along the right track.

The above brief historical review shows that the hegemonic ideology of entertainment, inherited from the discourse of leftist politics in the early decades of the twentieth century, radicalized during the high socialist revolutionary period, and institutionalized in the post-Cultural Revolutionary period centralizes the pedagogical essence of entertainment in educating the masses. First, entertainment should not simply provide entertainment but should also encode ideological indoctrination to influence people in a subconscious manner. Second, while entertainment contributes to the social ethos and collective spirit of dominated subjects—seen as the masses

(*qun zhong*), or the less-educated majority of the population; as the People (*ren min*), or the leaders of the proletarian dictatorship; or as the masses (*da zhong*), or the general audience of the mass media and mass culture—these subjects are easily misled and enthralled. Finally, it is therefore essentially necessary and obligatory for the cultural authority to control entertainment in order to provide proper guidance and correction when it moves in the wrong direction.

***Postsocialist television entertainment: The making of zongyi***

The ideology of pedagogical entertainment extends to influence the development of postsocialist television entertainment culture, unfolding with the building of the national network of television stations and the popularization of household TV sets beginning in the late 1980s and 1990s. A particular genre of television entertainment works, the *zongyi* (variety show), was invented and regularized, becoming the most popular genre of television entertainment. In this section, I look at the invention and development of the genre over more than three decades (late 1980s to early 2010s). I argue that as postsocialist mass entertainment, *zongyi* has abided by the hegemonic ideology and performed a role in the state apparatus by conducting mass didactic education and formulating social norms of proper Chineseness.

Etymologically speaking, the term *zongyi* emerged in the early twentieth century. While it was eventually deployed to describe a loosely defined genre of reality-based audiovisual entertainment programs, it was originally used for a different purpose by modern-minded intellectuals and artists in China, developing as

a neologism—an abbreviation for two phrases—in this case “*zong he*” (synthetic) “*yi shu*” (art) (Feng 1929). Art workers at the time used the term to describe the notion of “art circles” (*yi shu quan*) as a unified social sector contributing to holistic society or a “collection and unity of all art works and workers that should participate, as a collective, in the nation-building after victory and the social-stabilization after turmoil” (Gao 1948).

When the term reappeared in the popular lexicon in 1990, it was used in the names of two television entertainment programs made by the Chinese Central Television (CCTV) network, the mouthpiece television station directly overseen by the CCP. The implications of synthesis and being part of a wholeness were both underscored: the two early television *zongyi* works are known for their synthetic exhibition of the kaleidoscopic aspects of great, entertaining cultural works that are incorporated as part of postsocialist culture. The first, *Zongyi Da Guan* (*Super Variety Show*, hereinafter referred to as *ZYDG*), is a weekly performance show that features an hour-long collection of staged performances including music, comedy, acrobatics and magic tricks to provide Chinese audiences with an enjoyable weekly presentation of the multifarious faces of national culture in a unified and formal manner. The second program, *Zheng Da Zongyi* (*Zheng Da Variety Show*, hereinafter referred to as *ZDZY*) features novelty-seeking, exoticism-craving quiz segments about foreign culture and customs. With segments such as “What a marvelous world” (*shi jie zhen qi miao*) and “Kaleidoscope” (*wu hua ba men*), the show successfully guides the

developing Chinese nation to envision cosmopolitanism via these foreign astonishments.

The success of the two archetypes quickly brought out similar programs, also made by CCTV (Qu 1994 & 1997; Hu 1994; Wang 1997). In hindsight, the proliferation of this light-hearted and enjoyable television entertainment cannot be isolated from the political economy and cultural politics in the 1990s, a time that demarcated “the end of the era of revolution and the beginning of the era of consumption” (Dai 1999). In her critique of the very first postsocialist soap opera, Rofel (2007: 37-43) reflected upon the political undertones of the growing forms of television entertainment. In her example, the melodrama series *Yearning* (1991), produced in the wake of the 1989 political turmoil, Rofel argued that the surging of popular culture in the post-Tiananmen era contributed to the reconstruction of cultural symbolism and popular discourse to reconcile the enforced amnesia of government brutality and dissipated the nation’s attention from the conjured trauma left by the political catastrophe. In a similar manner, *zongyi* programs, filled with delightful performances and gripping videos, appeared around the same time and reoriented the popular sentiment towards a future-oriented excitement that has the prerequisite of a “republic of amnesia” (Lim 2015).

The notion that mass entertainment work would cultivate people to construct common and collective emotions and sentiments directs the making of television *zongyi*. These weekly galas have efficiently transformed the “sacred ritual” of nation building into the “profane ritual” of television watching and “the home television is

connected to the nation's center through weekly or annual routine and repetition” (Zhao 1998; Lv 2006). As the most accessible and welcomed form of entertainment available to ordinary Chinese people, television *zongyi* efficiently propagates an integrated cultural identity of “Chineseness” by “synthesizing all kinds of performance art into one integrity and combines the qualities of ideological content, timeliness, entertainment and art” (Chen 1996). Instead of random collages or eclectic assemblages, the selection and arrangement of its content prioritize ideological conformity as its ultimate concern. The central concern is “choosing a ‘soul’, because without a clear theme that goes through, and an appropriate artistic reflection of the theme, [the genre] would lose both its political implication and artistic value” (Zhang 1994: 17). And the theme should always center on “using the cultural consciousness of the Chinese nation as the structure and theme of the program and obtain international qualities but manage them to help achieve a certain cultural identification” (Shen 1994).

The postsocialist culture in China is, by all means, a process of “divergence and fragmentation” (McGrath 2008). Since the late 1990s, television entertainment has undergone great development. First, provincial television stations have gradually offset the dominant authority of CCTV. For instance, Hunan TV (HNTV), a provincial satellite television station, has been an avant-garde in genre innovation and multiplication in television *zongyi*. Since the late 1990s, it has continuously produced popular *zongyi* programs that surpass the CCTV production in terms of quality and popularity. Some of them have remained the longest and most popular of their genre.



This process of divergence efficiently reduces the centralizing power of the CCTV and diversifies the landscape of television *zongyi*.

Additionally, new and derivative genres have been invented. For instance, HNTV's most famous program, *Happy Camp (Kuai le da ben ying, 1997)*, first incorporated audiences as active actors in televised shows by inviting sit-in audiences to the stage as part of the routine show. The 2004 success of *Super Girl (Chao ji nv sheng)* initiated the decades-long fad of the talent show and its innumerable derivative subgenres. Another provincial station JSTV's *If You're the One (Fei cheng wu rao, 2010)* popularized dating shows. Transnational influence also plays a crucial role in shaping Chinese television entertainment. Many *zongyi* shows, such as *The Voice of China*, *China's Got Talent*, and *Happy Dictionary*, are made either as direct spinoffs or imitations of foreign shows (Li 2014; Xing 2015).

The most eminent trend of divergence has been the regularization of a consumer-led market. One example of this is the rise of "cross-year concerts" (*kua nian wan hui*) in the mid-2000s. The genre was introduced by HNTV as an alternative to CCTV's Spring Festival Gala (*chun jie lian huan wan hui*) and aired on New Year's Eve according to the Gregorian calendar instead of the traditional Lunar New Year. Compared to a typical Spring Festival Gala, in which traditional and folk art are carefully choreographed to serve a clear theme, the 2005 cross-year concert mostly featured popular singers performing top billboard pop songs and expressed no specific agenda other than amusing audiences. The sacred ritual of the "passing of the year" (*guo nian*) sacralized by the CCTV gala has gradually been combated with

strategic marketing about the “crossing of the year” (*kua nian*), which, in a certain sense, signals a conscious departure from the grand narrative of nation building to a shared global moment that was itself a marketized idea of fictional synchronization in the age of consumerism (Chen 2011; Shen 2012; Lin 2014).

Even though television *zongyi* have gone through the above process of multiplication, decentralization, and commercialization, it is nevertheless too reductive to celebrate the television *zongyi* culture as an autonomous cultural field. The state remains an omnipresent patriarch in preventing television *zongyi* from “crossing the line.” In requiring *zongyi* works to follow certain rules, accomplish certain tasks, and abide by certain punitive regulations, the official state authority efficiently ensures that television entertainment remains a pedagogical site for moral correction, citizenship education, and nationalist sentiment cultivation. For instance, in 2006, SARFT restricted talent shows by restricting their length, airtime, and portion to avoid having an excess of “low quality shows.” The cross-year concert market was also given budget limitations to eliminate “extravagant and money-wasting ethics” and “negative influences on people” (2013). SARFT also carefully supervises the content of shows in more direct ways. For instance, *If You’re the One* was once criticized for its “uncritical representation of materialism and immoral marriage values” and “dissemination of inappropriate messages to young people.” SARFT then ordered a rectification of the show’s core values to align them with mainstream values on courtship and marriage (2010). Additionally, SARFT meticulously required singing talent shows to perform propaganda songs for more

than one-third of their lineups. Programs are instructed to avoid the representation of scenes with “negative emotions and attitudes,” such as competitors crying after losing a game, family and friends crying about a defeat, and fans cheering with improper fanaticism (Hong 2009). Moreover, during “special occasions,” provincial stations need to make room for officially endorsed entertainment propaganda. For instance, during the Beijing Olympics, all stations other than the CCTV were prohibited from using “*ao yun*” (Olympics) in their program titles (Zhu 2008).

In these documents, audiences, regardless of their actual heterogeneity and multiplicity, are interpellated as monolithic, easily lured and all-too-often confused. This paternalistic undertone is best epitomized by an executive order that urged television to be the “scholarly mentor and beneficial friend” (*liang shi yi you*) of young people by making an effort to “create excellent television programs that represent the direction of advanced socialist culture and meet the spiritual and cultural needs of the juveniles” (SARFT 2004). Although the executive order nominally concerns underaged audiences, it in fact applies to all television programs since it suggests that “all television programs are playing a major role in the ideological and moral construction of juveniles,” and it is necessary for all television sectors to provide a “green cultural space” for their healthy growth.

One example of television entertainment’s pedagogical purpose regarding Chineseness is its popularization of the standard national speaking language, *putonghua* (standard Mandarin). In 1956, the P.R.C. defined the standard national language as *putonghua*, which literally means “general language” and is defined as

“the standard form of modern Chinese with the Beijing phonological system as its norm of pronunciation and Northern dialects for its grammatical norms” (Li 2006). However, its actual popularization has taken decades of continuous effort. Until 1982, there was little achievement at the national level (Chen 1999). It was not until 2001 that *putonghua* was legislated as the actual language to be used for common communication (Rohsenow 2004).

Broadcast networks have been instructed to popularize *putonghua* among general audiences. In 1986, all broadcasting units at all levels were ordered to reduce the number of dialects used and formalize *putonghua*. In 1994, the *putonghua* proficiency test was designed, and all broadcasting professionals have been required to obtain the certification. A 1997 regulation declared *putonghua* as the only broadcasting language, which was further emphasized in the 2001 Language Law.

A closer look of how broadcast language is regulated would reveal the official ideology of standard spoken Chinese understands it as static, monolithic and ethnocentric. First, it pushes an accent-free, ethnocentric language that is void of vernacular dialects and is impermeable. Neither vernacular dialects nor foreign languages are allowed to be used in television without authorization (Chan 2018). In particular, news anchors and TV hosts are forbidden to “imitate pronunciations and expressions with prominent local features” and are required to “regulate using foreign language and not mingle *Putonghua* with unnecessary foreign words” (SARFT 2014).

Moreover, the paternal state also upholds a stagnant language view reflected in its denouncing of Internet-derived youth dialects for damaging the national

language and culture. A 2013 SARFT order required television programs to remove any usage of “Internet coinage set phrases” (*wang luo zi zhi cheng yu*). Set phrase (*cheng yu*) is a traditional Chinese idiomatic expression that mostly consists of four characters. According to the prohibition, set phrase is “a major feature of Chinese language culture” that “carries thick humanistic connotation, abundant resources of history, aesthetics, profound thoughts, and morality.” An Internet coinage set phrase refers to a neologism trend popular among Chinese Internet youth culture, in which four random characters from a longer sentence are picked to abbreviate the entire sentence, regardless of the traditional set phrase’s grammar and syntax. These coinages are criticized for “causing the temporal rupture of culture and the confusion of the tongue and disrupting the integrity and continuity of the Chinese cultural tradition” and therefore must be prohibited from public application.

Therefore, although television entertainment, in particular the *zongyi* genre, has developed with variation and diversity since it was first popularized in the early 1990s and became the most popular mass entertainment culture in China, it preserves the ideology of entertainment as pedagogy upheld by the CCP and provides educational materials, positive models, and negative examples for the Chinese audience to establish their common sense regarding certain topics and issues. In this sense, television *zongyi* are a vital component of the state apparatus in the postsocialist China.

***Heteronormative scrupulousness: The television grammar of gender and sexuality***

Among all of the models, regulations, and lessons offered by television *zongyi* is a systematic grammar of gender and sexuality, which I term heteronormative scrupulousness, or a systematic and rigorous regulation of what can be represented and what needs to be represented on television screen in order to abide by the gender and sexuality norms of public discourse in China. In practice, scrupulous heteronormative grammar does not function in a vacuum but rather premises discursive space for queer reading (Kam 2014; Wei 2014; Li 2015; Zhao 2016, 2018; Lavin et al. 2017). Although this queer reading of a heteronormative script allows us to envision the ghostly existence of queer identity and desire in the mainstream or mainstreamized culture, it is nevertheless important and pertinent to directly confront the hegemonic script of gender and sexuality rather than hastily attempt to queer them. Specifically, the scrupulous heteronormative grammar of Chinese television entertainment is established in three ways: a prude eradication of direct and indirect references to sexual desire and practice, an ontological alignment of conflicting sex and gender, and an exotification or pathologizing of non-heterosexualities.

First, cultural authority prohibits any representation of sexuality as obscene expressions that would cause moral degradation. “Obscene or erotic content” (*yin hui qing se nei rong*), including “coarse, indecent, and low-taste lines” (*cu su, xia liu, qu wei di xia de tai cai*) and “low and vulgar music and sound effects” (*di ji yong su de yin yue ji yin xiang xiao guo*), has been prohibited because it would prevent broadcasting programs from “advocating the beauty of the Chinese language,

promoting the civilized and standardized language, and purifying the environment of spoken and written language” (SARFT, 1999; 2007; 2017).

While what is truly considered “obscene” is rather vague, it becomes clear that any direct or indirect reference to sexual desire and sexual practice would fall into this category. In the mid-2000s, SARFT started a campaign to abolish the so-called “five-sex” (*wu xing*) programs, i.e., television or radio programs that design, produce, and broadcast content about sexual life, experiences, feelings, organs and medicines. These programs are “unendurably obscene, erotic, and vulgar,” “severely contaminate our social ethos, [and] corrupt the reputation of broadcasting units” (2007). Although the first batch of censored programs were primary advertising shows for unauthorized sexual medicines, SARFT later extended the prohibition to television and radio programs of all kinds. Regardless of whether a program is about “relation between two genders” (*liang xing guan xi*) or “relationship issues” (*qing gan wen ti*), it is not allowed to feature any content related to sexual desire, since “it is inappropriate for mass media to discuss sex issues, since they are private topics” (Huang 2007). Even for educational purposes, public discussion of sexual behavior is considered unnecessary and not the responsibility of mass entertainment media (Sun 2007). Under such a rule regarding the division of private and public, television entertainment regularizes prude ethics and sterilizes any expressions that would be associated with sexual content.

The second aspect of heteronormative scrupulousness is the normalization of the conflict between sex and gender in the representation of cross-dressing

performances and cross-gender persona. One example is the case of Li Yugang, who is known for his impersonation of well-known female beauties in Chinese history and his modern adaption of the Peking Opera's cross-dressing Dan performance with elements of popular culture. While Li's performance is interpreted as having a trespassing, transgressive, and titillating esthetic ambiguity (He 2013; Cai 2017; Wang 2018; Huyhn 2020), little attention has been paid to how television's representational strategy of his cross-dressing performance normalizes his gender trespassing. For instance, in his debut on the 2006 CCTV talent show *Star Boulevard* (*Xing guang da dao*), his cross-dressing performance was always accompanied by another performance that staged his masculinity along with a nationalist sentiment. In one episode, Li performs two songs where he impersonated a woman. In the other two performances, all of his cross-gender impersonation makeup was removed. Instead, Li appeared with a brush cut, a typical hairdo for a Chinese man, and minimal makeup other than the highlighting of his own thick, straight eyebrows, which indicated his macho sex characteristics and were drastically different from the slenderer eyebrows of his female personae. Additionally, Li took off the long dress and gown and donned a white Zhongshan suit, or a Chinese tunic suit named after the republican leader Sun Zhongshan, which is also known as a Mao suit, named after the idolized revolutionary patriarch Mao (Ge 2006). Through these contrasting representations, the television program separates Li's cross-dressing impersonation from his "real" and "undecorated" self to remind the audience of Li's inauthentic



femininity and reassure them of the stability of his male gender by showcasing his cross-gender performance as artistic talent and excellence.

This reinforcement of the alignment of sex and gender amid gender-crossing performativity is also applied to the configuration of the public image of Jin Xing, a modern dancer-turned television star who was known for her transgenderism in the 1990s (Kimbrough 2006, David and Davies 2010). In 2011, Jin returned to the public stage as a television judge persona on the dance talent show *Shake it Up (Wu lin da hui, 2011-2018)*, a Chinese spinoff of *So You Think You Can Dance*. Her unique speaking style gave her a reputation of having a “poisonous tongue,” a popular idiom for people who do not sugarcoat their discontent and criticism. Later, Jin became further well known as a talk show hostess in *The Jinxing Show (Jin xing xiu, 2015-2017)*, during which her bold speech and down-to-earth opinions earned her the nickname of “Sister Jin” (Jin jie), underscoring her image as an authoritative matriarch.

However, what made Jin’s matriarchal and feminine persona famous and welcomed in mainstream television culture was, ironically, her extremely heteronormative speech saturated with explicit criticism of female singledom (“marriage is the ultimate home to return to for a woman”), a confirmation of the essentialization of motherhood (“being a mother completes a woman”), and an exaggeration of gender differences (“woman shall be elegant and man shall be responsible”). Although Jin became a sensational spectacle in the 1990s for her courageous challenge of the conservative notion of biological determinism, she has

regained mainstream attention since the 2010s by embracing this essentialism, as her transsexual femininity re-enforces a rather conservative, binary, and heteropatriarchal view of womanhood and gender relations. In this sense, Jin's cross-gender persona consolidates rather than destabilizes the normative notion of gender and sexuality and serves as entertainment-education on proper womanhood (Fu and Babcock 2017).

The last perspective of heteronormative scrupulousness can be tracked in the symbolic elimination and censored publicity of nonheterosexual minorities in Chinese television. Starting in 1997, SARFT released various documents on censorship and content regulation in popular cultural works that explicitly prohibit representations of homosexuality as promiscuity (SARFT 1997, 2008; CNSA 2017; See also Wu 2003; McLelland 2016; Bao 2020). Films that directly represent LGBT subjects are banned in China. The strategy of downplaying or denying the representation of same-sex eroticism is also widely adopted by film directors in China to avoid censorship (Lim 2006). Even though queerbaiting (Brennan 2019) has become increasingly common in popular Chinese culture in recent years, indirectly indicating the increasing consumption power of LGBT communities in China (Zhao 2019; Zheng 2019; Li 2020), it is nevertheless undeniable that the visibility of nonnormative sexuality remains dim in Chinese television. In the mist of the overarching symbolic elimination, only a few exceptions can be found, yet the representation of homosexual people in these exceptions adopts either exotification or pathologizing strategies.

The first television program to directly feature homosexual subjects was a 2000 interview titled "Coming Closer to Homosexuals" (*Zou jin tong xing lian*,

HNTV). Ma Dong, who later became the producer and host of *Let's Talk*, interviewed sexologist Li Yinhe, known for her studies of Chinese homosexual communities in the 1990s; Cui Zi'en, an openly out film professor and filmmaker; and Shitou, a lesbian artist. Issues from “whether or not homosexuality is biologically determined” and the ratio of the homosexual population in China to the moral and ethical grounds for homosexuality in China and the social condition and reputation of LGBT people were discussed and drew general audiences' curiosity. However, the entire program was immediately closed down after the episode was aired. The second case was in 2005. *Insight (xin wen diao cha)*, a CCTV investigative news program, aired a feature “In the Name of Life” (*Yi sheng ming de ming yi*). Focusing on AIDS prevention, the show explored Chinese gay men's vulnerability in facing AIDS. Several gay men were interviewed with visual-audio protection along with two professional interviewees: a doctor involved in AIDS prevention in the gay population, and a Family Planning Officer advocating for a male homosexual AIDS prevention project at the governmental level. In 2007, a Hong Kong-based television station released an interview featuring “Stories of Lala” (*La la de gu shi*). Five mainland Chinese women who identified as “*lala*,” the Chinese word for lesbians, shared their experiences with discovering and identifying their sexual orientation and their painful personal accounts of coming out and social discrimination.

While the third program was produced by a Hong Kong television station and the program was only available to a limited mainland audience, the first two shows were available to all audiences with access to basic television services. In retrospect,

these moments of queer visibility on the Chinese television screen were groundbreaking in terms of their unprecedentedness but nonetheless problematic in their strategy for representing homosexual subjects. For instance, the name of the 2000 episode (as well as that of the 2006 episode) objectifies homosexual subjects as an unfamiliar and even mysterious “them” in opposition to the more normal and ordinary “us,” who are presumed to be heterosexual by default. Additionally, describing homosexuality as a novel thing that “we have constantly seen in various media reports only recently” further reinforces the impression of the foreignness and otherness of queer desires.

Moreover, compared to the curious inquiry of “exotic” gay people in the two episodes which eventually led to the shutdown of one of the programs, the attitude adopted in the CCTV investigative feature in some sense represents the appropriate attitude with which television media should approach such issues according to the official ideology. The show directly ties same-sex sexual relations to AIDS by introducing that gay men in China are the origin of the disease, a population at high risk for AIDS infection, and the primary barrier in implementing efficient prevention. The most problematic segment happened during a conversation between the Family Planning officer and the interviewer:

*Interviewer: The mainstream population might think the health condition of this part of the homosexual population is their own business.*

*Officer: Since Chinese is an ethnicity that advocates for reproductive culture, most homosexuals have married, are about to be married, or will be married in the*

*future. After they get married, they do not reduce their same-sex sexual practice.*

*Some heterosexuals also have same-sex sexual behavior. Professor Zhang's research indicates that, on average, one homosexual or bisexual man has sexual contact with five heterosexual men.*

*Interviewer: What does this mean?*

*Officer: This means that the disease of homosexuals, or the disease that spreads among them, also spreads to the ordinary population through their heterosexual sex partners or their wives.*

In this conversation, gay men are stigmatized as a threat to public health. Not only are they stigmatized for being vulnerable to the disease because of promiscuous sexual lifestyles, they are also demonized for bringing the disease into heterosexual marriages and contaminating normal family life. In directly calling AIDS the “disease of homosexuals” (*tong xing lian de bing*) that spreads from them to the “ordinary population” (*pu tong ren qun*), the conversation normalizes the discrimination against gay men as a social threat.

To conclude, the heteronormative scrupulousness of television entertainment discourse is a reflection of the mainstream discourse on gender and sexuality. As I discussed above, this discourse is embedded in the regulative prohibition of any direct or indirect expression and representation in public spaces, the sex ontology in representing cross-gender personae, and the censored publicity of nonheterosexual minorities as either exotic others or a pathological threat. Through such scrupulous

discourse, television entertainment in China helps to maintain mainstream ideas of gender and sexuality.

### **Let's Talk Dirty: Small Screen and the Tactics of Sexual Talk**

On November 29, 2014, the following statement started off the first episode of *Let's Talk*, one of the earliest digital entertainment programs, or the pure Internet *zongyi* (*chun wang zongyi*): “For people who are forty or older, please watch the show under the guidance of the post-90s” (*si shi sui yi shang ren qun qing zai jiu ling hou pei tong xia guan kan*). Unlike most *zongyi* programs in China at that time, which were produced by television stations and aired mostly on television channels, *Let's Talk* was exclusively streamed on iQiyi, which also claimed the exclusive copyright to the show. At that time, entertainment cultural works made on digital platforms were not as prevalent as they are currently. Streaming media was still a new idea being explored by only a few avant-garde entities: Netflix had just released its first hit, *House of Cards*, and the “streaming war” was yet to come. Mass entertainment in China had been overseen by television stations for over three decades. Online platforms rarely participated in the process of production but rather focused on buying the exclusive streaming rights of television programs. Online video was equal to low-quality homemade video or fan-made spoofs, and it was not considered to have any leverage to compete with the high-quality television entertainment programs made with large budgets and professional teams (Li 2016; Voci 2010, Zhao 2016).

The year 2014 has come to be known as the “year zero” of China’s online *zongyi* (Zhang L. 2014; Yin & Liu 2014; You 2015; Yin & Xiang 2017). Good-quality and high-budget digital entertainment shows, such as Youku’s talk show, *Morning Call* (*xiao shuo*, 2012); Tencent Videos’ *Are You Normal* (*ni zheng chang ma*, 2014); *Secretly Greatly* (*yin mi er wei dao*, 2014); and the first season of *Let’s Talk* (iQiyi, 2014), began to be made by major online video platforms and would eventually “stride into the highlands” (Tencent Entertainment 2014). In the following year, the national president, Xi Jinping, spoke at a Politburo meeting to express the Party’s support for the industrialization of digital culture. Later that year, the first industry forum for online video business, named “Video Evolutionism” (*shi pin jin hua lun*), officially introduced the concept of “pure online *zongyi*” (*chun wang zongyi*) to compete with “conventional station *zongyi*” (*chuan tong tai zou*) or *zongyi* programs made by television stations. According to the keynote speaker, the future for online video platforms would depend on making high-quality online *zongyi* and building a productive ecology for pure online content production (iQiyi 2015).

Since then, digital platforms have gradually replaced television as the primary place Chinese audiences go to seek entertainment content. Nearly half of the exponentially increased digital entertainment audiences no longer watch traditional television programs. A generational shift exemplifies this shifting structure, as accurately expressed in the unabashed “ageism” in the aforementioned opening remark. Not only do postsocialist youth comprise the majority audience, they also play the roles of producer, director, editor, and overseer of the content and formality

of these digital entertainment programs.<sup>16</sup> It is not an exaggeration to say that while television stations and the socialist generation witnessed the development of conventional mass entertainment in China after the late 1980s, digital platforms, specifically video streaming media, now prosper in the postsocialist digital entertainment culture with new forms of platformativity, or the infra-individual intra-actions between platform and human, and individual and collective (Lamarre 2017), cultural logic and discursive formation among postsocialist youth.

This section explores the transformation from television entertainment to digital entertainment that has been brought about directly by the shifting materiality and formality of the digital platform. In particular, I argue that the changing visual formality, i.e., the transition from the television screen to the small screen, both requires and enables digital entertainment to develop its own visual languages and representational strategies that are very different from those of conventional television entertainment. Regarding the novel space of representation of gender and sexuality, these small screen techniques most crucially allow digital entertainment to develop a series of tactics surrounding sexual subjects through which the heteronormative scrupulousness of television entertainment is dismissed, dissolved, and disputed on the digital platform and replaced by entertainment content with fewer pedagogical implications and a rather defiant spirit of youth.

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<sup>16</sup> The average age of people appearing on *Let's Talk* in 2015 was 23 years old. See Lu 2015.



### *Small screen visuality*

The most salient material change in the shift from a television-based culture to a digital platform-based culture is the transition of visual format, i.e., the audience now watches digital content on laptops, tablets, and smartphones rather than on traditional TV sets. The transition to the online platform, which some scholars describe as transmedia television (Evans 2011), television 2.0 (Bury 2017), or online TV (Johnson 2019), affects everyday lives in various ways. Central to these shifts in audience engagement and participation, physical interaction and the relation of the viewer and the device, and the interface design of devices is the shifting of the visual format and visual logic from a large, passive, attention-grabbing television screen to a small, active, and easily attention-losing screen or even multiple screens. The shifting visual format and logic, which I name small screen visuality, not only changes the ways in which audiences interact with the content they consume but also further alters the representation of the content produced for the small screen. The small screen visuality drastically influences the ways in which the content is arranged, ordered, and represented in entertainment programs streamed on the Internet.

For instance, comparing the opening routine of *Happy Camp* (2015), a conventional television program, and of *Let's Talk* (2015), an exclusively Internet-based program, shows the distinct visual elements and styles adopted by different platformities. The opening routine of *Happy Camp* (Figure 1.1) runs 30 seconds. The entire routine is made of a sequence of studio cuts of the “happy family,” the show’s five-person host team, combined with a few animated effects. The three male

hosts wear black suits with beige decorations, and the two female hosts wear pure white dresses. The studio background is also white. Although a black-and-white color scheme has an inherently strong contrast, that contrast is lessened by a tinted filter across the entire screen, which increases the warmth and color affinity in the audience's vision (Figure 1.2). The standout visual elements, such as an animated icon of a bouquet or balloons, only appear at the corner of the screen sporadically. Rather than drawing the audience's attention, these elements are decorative and serve to add lighthearted, affective feelings to the entire routine. It is only towards the end of the sequence that the graphic title of the show stands out and extends across the entire screen, while the images of the hosts are blurred and retreat to the background, along with an increase in the focus depth.

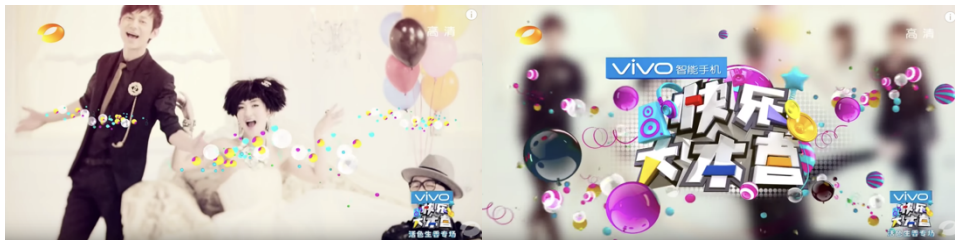


Figure 1-1 Two frames from the television zongyi *Happy Camp* (2015)



Figure 1-2 Color wheel of *Happy Camp*'s opening routine

In contrast, the opening routine of *Let's Talk*'s first season adopted a drastically different visual principle (Figure 1.3). First, the sequence's speed and information

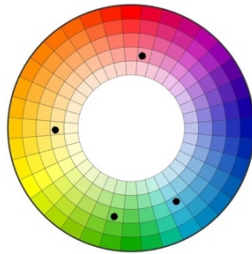
intensity are accelerated as the sequence runs 20 seconds long, much shorter than the *Happy Camp*'s sequence. Also, different from the latter's single studio short, *Let's Talk*'s background changes three times and includes various new visual elements nearly every second. Some of the visual elements, such as a sentence in an artsy font in both English and Chinese characters, are not easy to process during their quick appearance.



Figure 1-3 Four frames from the Internet zongyi *Let's Talk* (2015)

More impressive is its dramatic contrasted color scheme. Different from the tinted beige background in *Happy Camp*, all four background colors in this sequence are bright, highly saturated hues with low shades, tints, and tones. The four hues are complementary to each other, which means they are on opposite sides of the color wheel (cobalt is opposite orange, and turquoise is opposite crimson). Additionally, the comprehensive color scheme of the opening sequence favors a combination of blocks of solid color that are complementary to each other, forming a color scheme that involves colors all over the place on the color wheel (Figure 1.4).





*Figure 1- 4 Color wheel of the four screenshots from Figure 1.3*

Furthermore, the focus depth is decreased in the small screen visuality. In the *Happy Camp* sequence, the studio shot situates five hosts in a real-life scenario, and the comparative positions of each of them provide a vivid sense of stereognosis and realness to the audience's vision. In contrast, the opening sequence of *Let's Talk* abandons such three-dimensional visuality, choosing large blocks of solid color to fill up the entire screen and flattening all visual elements into one dimension.

Additionally, all visual components are animated and have imperfect edges, which does not accommodate the bare-eye perspective. Even in the photographed headshots of the three hosts, a solid white border helps to reduce the stereoscopic visual perception, as if each headshot is simply a patch attached to a flat surface (see the right two shots from Figure 1.3). This visual principle is preserved throughout the show. Similar hand-drawn components with solid colors are adopted in the stage design and costume design to maintain a weak visual perspective (see Figure 1.5).



Figure 1-5 *Let's Talk* season one

It is imaginable that the accelerated speed, dramatic color scheme and flattened visual components of *Let's Talk's* would cause sore eyes on a conventional television screen that is normally sized at least 32 inches in the diagonal. However, the viewing experience is very different on smaller screens, such as those on laptops (an average of 13 inches), tablets (an average of 10 inches), and smartphones (an average of 5 inches). In fact, these visual principles actually serve a purpose on these small screens. Many studies have been conducted on the cognitive stakes of visual image perceptions influenced by the size of the screen. A critical metric of influence is the amount of attention viewers pay to the content, which affected by the downsized screen. As a larger screen is more inviting and engaging for a viewer, smaller screens face the challenge of decreased attention (Grabe et al. 2009). Although a small screen can enhance the intimacy in video-based information processing, the effectiveness of the process is inhibited due to the limits of human visual perception and attention (Nipan et al. 2008). In other words, small screen visuals require more effort to draw and maintain viewers' attention. For instance, in the process of watching a video, a viewer's perception of velocity on a larger screen tends to create a greater sense and enjoyment of physical movement, while in

contrast, the velocity on a smaller screen is less efficiently perceived (Lombard et al. 2000). Therefore, for videos playing on small screens, strategies such as increasing the complexity and intensity of visual elements is helpful in enhancing the viewer's attention level. In contrast, the decrease in attention directly influences the density and efficiency of the viewer's information perception.

### ***Postproduction: Technique for small screen visuality***

Generally, the small screen size usually leads to the decreasing of viewer's attention. Therefore, visual contents on small screens needs to be presented in a dense and rapid manner to retain the viewer's attention. However, information density does not automatically translate into information processing efficiency. Instead, small screen visuality needs to balance the trade-off between the density and rapidness of the information flows and the optimization of the amount of useful information, visual adjustability, and capability of the screen interface to provide easily readable information (Ziefle 2010). Along with a faster editing speed and dramatic color scheme to make digital videos more attractive, another technique, the intensive application of interpretative postproduction elements in various forms such as sound effects, added texts, and visual enhancement was normalized in mass entertainment in China with the arrival of the digital platform to enhance the efficiency and accuracy of audiences in processing the content presented on the small screen.

Postproduction, in the general sense, has been an integral part of video production and is indispensable in the production of mass media works. However, it

was only in 2013 that Chinese entertainment shows started to widely adopt it as a creative technique in the newly popularized reality show genre (Zeng 2014; Zhou 2015; Cai 2019). HNTV first adopted postproduction as a creative replacement for the absence of program hosts in travel reality TV shows such as *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (*Ba ba qu naer*); the postproduction elements guided audiences throughout the show.<sup>17</sup> Other than in reality TV shows, however, creative applications of postproduction elements have rarely been adopted in other television shows. It was only with the arrival and proliferation of digital entertainment two years later, with small screen visuality making visual and narrative aids somehow mandatory, that postproduction become a regular technique in entertainment shows.<sup>18</sup>

A comparison between two similar segments from a 2015 episode of *Let's Talk* and a television entertainment show, *I'm Speaker* (*Wo shi yan shuo jia*) showcases the discrepancy between television entertainment and digital entertainment in terms of the application of postproduction elements.<sup>19</sup> In both of the one-minute segments, a speaker makes a monologue speech in front of the studio audience. Both

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<sup>17</sup> In the US American reality TV tradition, it is usually a voiceover that performs the narrator's role—a tradition that can be tracked back to CBS's reality TV canon *Big Brother* (2000- present and discerned in the very recent Netflix social media reality TV *The Circle* (2019). Early Chinese reality TV archetypes, such as *X-change* (*bian xing ji*, 2006-2015), also adopted similar strategies. The popularization of postproduction in Chinese reality TV since 2013 can be seen as the result of the transcultural influence of Japanese and Korean entertainment cultures. In both entertainment cultures, postproduction elements, especially the open caption telop, have been widely applied since the early development of television entertainment (Park 2009; O'Hagan 2010).

<sup>18</sup> As I mentioned in the introductory segment of this section, by 2015, digital platforms were not only producing rich digital entertainment works but also had become the primary place where young Chinese audiences watched entertainment shows produced by television stations. Therefore, the regularization of television entertainment shows should be understood as a reaction to the digitalization of mass entertainment.

<sup>19</sup> The two segments I choose are the *I'm Speaker* August 28, 2015, episode, 26:29- 27:32, and the *Let's Talk* August 28, 2015, episode, 14:50-15:50.



segments adopt close-up, mid-shot, and distant show and switch view between the speaking person, other participants in the show, and the audience. The frequency of the shot change and the speed of editing of this particular *Let's Talk* segment are not higher than those in intensive television segments. What makes the perception experiences of the two segments so different is the excessive adoption of postproduction effects in the *Let's Talk* segment, in which fourteen postproduction elements are applied. These techniques are entirely absent in the other segment.

In the following discussion, I shall provide an examination of the primary kinds of postproduction elements adopted in *Let's Talk* specifically and in digital entertainment in general. The major formats of postproduction elements adopted in *Let's Talk* can be categorized into four categories: **sound effects**, an ex-post audio effect added to the original soundtrack recorded from the live scene; transcript highlighting, a special effects-applied highlighting of a specific part of the transcript text that makes the part stand out; telops, text and images inserted for purposes other than directly rendering the utterances of the speaker; and *guichu*-style edits, short edited segments that are characterized by quick-paced edits and looped footage.<sup>20</sup> By looking at these postproduction tactics in terms of their functions in guiding audiences to receive and perceive the represented information, I further divide them into two categories: indexical postproduction and expositive postproduction. Sound

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<sup>20</sup> *Guichu* (ghost animal) is a Chinese word directly borrowed from Japanese kanji (“Kichiku”) and is popular slang for a particular genre of spoof video popularized by the Chinese ACG community video platform Bilibili. In U.S. youth culture, the closest phenomenon is the montage parody or MLG meme. See the reference for Bilibili’s *guichu* culture from Fung and Yin 2019; Rui 2020; for a montage parody and MLG memes, see Seventhstudio777 2018.

effects and transcript highlighting are usually indexical because they act as indices to highlight the content that requires the audience's attention. Telops and gui chu-style edits, in comparison, are expositive, since both add new layers of information to the original video content for the audience to perceive.

In addition to suggestive and expositive postproduction elements, digital entertainment also enables a semi-postproduction element that depends directly on audience participation in the interactive digital platform. This participatory postproduction tactic, known as *danmu* (bullet curtain or barrage), allows certain information to be accurately expressed and perceived by audiences even though such information is concealed or only vaguely implied in the formal content.

### **1. Indexical postproduction**

Ex-post added sound effects are the most commonly used post-production technique in television entertainment. They emphasize the atmosphere that certain content aims to express. Sitcoms use the stimulated clapping sound effect to amplify the comedic effect. A grandiose symphony score expresses sublime feeling, a slow and sentimental violin solo creates a sorrowful effect, and short and consecutive drumbeats create suspense. In digital entertainment works such as *Let's Talk*, sound effects are applied in a more intensive and suggestive manner. First, the usual atmosphere-enhancing sound effects are applied in much frequent manner. In a typical *Let's Talk* episode, sound effects are used every two to three seconds, which means in a one-hour episode, there are an average of 150 postproduction sound

effects added to the show, a number much higher than that of a typical television show (60 per hour).<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, compared to conventional atmosphere-enhancing sound effects, traditional, digital entertainment sound effects are more suggestive and interpretative. For instance, an effect imitating the sound of someone gulping and saying “uh oh” is used when participants are talking about parodic content, and the sound of a hiss is usually applied to speeches that sound (sometimes intentionally) pretentious. Also, digital entertainment shows such as *Let's Talk* also deploy sound effects that were not used in Chinese television culture, particularly the bleep censor, and that generate alternative discursive spaces for representation. I shall return to this point in further detail in the next section.

The other indexical postproduction is transcript highlighting, i.e., a special effect added to the original subtitles to highlight a particular part to draw the audience's attention. Transcript subtitles are a default component of most television programs in China (except news programs and live broadcasting shows). Usually, they are placed on the bottom left of the screen and use standard Chinese characters to transcribe the content. Certain rules are applied. For instance, when a foreign language word is used in speech, the transcript should translate the word to its Chinese meaning. There are also standard transcription rules even if certain words are

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<sup>21</sup> To get this impression, I randomly picked ten episodes from the show and randomly watched five one-minute segments from each episode (50 minutes in total). I also used that method to roughly calculate the frequency in television entertainment shows by conducting the same process with *Happy Camp*'s 2015 episodes with a reduced number of samples (20 minutes in total).

not spoken in the original speech—such as replacing the term “Hong Kong” replaced by “China Hong Kong” to accentuate China’s ownership, even though the abbreviation is more common in Chinese people’s daily lexicon. With these routines, transcript subtitles are generally a standardized part of postproduction with little room for creativity.

In comparison, transcript highlighting allows more flexible and inventive transcript practices through the addition of transcripts with special effect characteristics to the original standardized transcript subtitles. Such highlighting allows those words that cannot be included in the standard transcripts to be seen. For instance, in a season two scene, the speaker ends his argument about the benefits of open marriage by suggesting that people should have an open mind about it. The original sentence is a mix of Chinese and English, as he says “*zan men open ba*” – “let’s open.” The standard transcript in the bottom transcribes the sentence completely into Chinese by translating “open” into “*kai fang*.” On top of the screen, a yellow graphic text, however, preserves the original English word (Figure 1.6). Additionally, through transcript highlighting, important information from someone’s speech, such as a punchline and key argument, can stand out in a visual way and decrease the possibility of the audience missing it. In the same scene mentioned above, the highlighted transcript, which by itself draws an imperative conclusion that ends the speaker’s speech abruptly and could be easily misheard, is not neglected. Furthermore, by adopting special effects, the transcript provides transcripts of the lines of speakers who talk simultaneously, breaking the single thread streamline of

the television transcript in which only one line is presented at a time. by For instance, while the speaker from the above scene is talking, another participant’s laughing reaction is featured through transcript highlighting the modal article “*ha*” in a line of five graphic yellow characters (Figure 1.7).



Figure 1-6 Let's Talk, Season 2, Episode 4 (1)



Figure 1-7 Let's Talk, Season 2, Episode 4 (2)

## 2. Expositive postproduction

Originating from Japanese TV culture, telops were derived from the then widely used television opaque projector, a piece of equipment that “transmits separately prepared text or graphics directly on the TV screen without use of camera” (O’Hagan 2015). It therefore refers to the text added on television programs. Strictly speaking, the expositive technique of telops has a similar formality to the transcript highlighting.

The difference between them is that the latter simply changes the shape, appearance and location of the subtitles to highlight a particular segment, and the former adds new content that is external to the original speech.

In *Let's Talk*, telops are in both textual and pictorial formats. Since the content does not come from the scenes shown by the camera, telops serve more like a commentary track that adds to the original scene to explain or comment on what is happening in front of the camera. For instance, in the introductory segment of a season two episode (S2E18)<sup>22</sup>, each host and special guest's self-introduction is added with one or more textual telops: when one of the hosts, Kevin Tsai, greets everyone, two pieces of graphic text, "tender speak" (*xi yu*) and "soft voice" (*qing sheng*), appear on the top of the screen, which emphasizes Tsai's popular personae as a caring and considerate old brother. When the hostess, Jin Xing (the same hostess from *the Jin Xing Show* mentioned in the previous section), says "I am happy that the recording is almost over" (*lu yin ma shang jie shu le wo te kai xin*), a graphic text appears by her face that reads "Sister Jin is joking again" (*jin jie you zai kai wan xiao le*) to ensure that audience does not misread the bantering tone of her speech. Later, after the invited guest is praised by the host for her impressive voice, her nonverbal reaction of nodding her head is accompanied by the graphic text "these words win my heart" (*ci hua ashen de wo xin*) and decorated with heart icons; in this way, her nonverbal appreciation is visually presented to the audience.

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<sup>22</sup> In the following, when discussing a particular scene from an episode of *Let's Talk*, I would cite with the form of "SxEx" to refer the season and the episode numbers of the scene.

Another expositive postproduction element is the *guichu*-style edit, or a short-edited segment that is characterized by quick-paced edits and looped footage. Usually, it features a high-speed loop, rewinding, or a combination of both in a few seconds or occasionally even less than a second, synced with the rhymes and beat in a fast-speed song. As a video genre that first gained popularity in Bilibili, a Chinese online video community of *nijigen* (meaning two dimensional, or people who are into ACG—anime, comics, and games— culture), *guichu*-style video, with its easy-to-go-viral repetitive beats and video, obtained its name from the term “ghost-like convulsion temple.”

Strictly defined *guichu* style videos are rarely adopted in *Let's Talk* since the excessive use of it would affect the perception of the coherence of the video. However, on a few occasions, similar editing methods are adopted to disrupt linear continuity and create visual interruptions to reinforce audiences' impression of certain scenes. For instance, in a season one episode (S1E5), a contestant satirizes himself for giving up other opportunities to attend the show for “very little money” (*zhuan bu liao shen me qian*). In postproduction, the last sentence is repeated three times, followed by a *guichu* style video, in which the video of the contestant is edited into a slow-motion segment dubbed with a soundtrack cut from a viral online video in which a man mimics a young girl's voice and sings “You don't even give me one hundred yuan, and fool me into coming to this far place” (*yi bai kuai ni dou bu gei wo, ba wo pian lai zhe me yuan*). The segment lasts fifteen seconds before the sequence returns to normal speed and the contestant continues with his speech.

Through intentionally changing the speed, order, and repetition of certain segments, the contestant's performed dissatisfaction with the low earnings from the show is mocked and altered into a comedic segment with absurd and ridiculing visual effects.

### **Participative postproduction**

In addition to indexical postproduction, which helps audiences navigate and filter important information, and expositive postproduction, which helps audiences process and perceive information, digital entertainment in China also allows for a relatively uncommon postproduction technique that relies on the audience's participation, the so-called "bullet curtain" (*danmu*), or "barrage," a real-time commenting function for user-generated comments that allows video viewers to post their comments on screen so that they overlay the original video image. All comments are synchronized to appear at specific playback times (Peng et al. 2014; Shen et al. 2014; He et al. 2017; Pan 2017). Similar to telops and *guichu*-style video, this format is also a transcultural practice originating from Japanese ACG subculture and was initially popular among online video communities such as the Bilibili subculture in China in 2007. It is now a common feature adopted by almost all major video platforms to provide instant commentary services for online video viewers in China.

*Danmu* is very much different from conventional comments in terms of its relationship with the original video content. Usually, conventional video comments are left at the bottom of the video, and users need to scroll down to view these comments. The two components remain separate from each other. In the case of



*danmu*, the viewer's comments are projected directly on the video screen. Also, unlike traditional video comments that do not relate the comments with timestamps in the video, *danmu* comments are time sensitive as they appear at the exact timestamp when a viewer posts it. Furthermore, *danmu* comments are instantaneously interactive with a predesigned lag time. Therefore, anonymous and unrelated viewers can interact with each other in real time if they are watching a video at the same time. Later viewers can also see all of the *danmu* comments left at earlier times. In this sense, *danmu* is integrated into the video in a time-sensitive, and instantly interactive manner. In extreme cases, *danmu* even cover the original video entirely, replacing it so that the original content is not even readable to the audience (Figure 1.8).



Figure 1-8 Screenshot from Bilibili.com

In digital entertainment shows like *Let's Talk*, *danmu* is available for viewers who watch the show directly from its original platform with a digital device, either a mobile device, a software application, or a web browser. All *danmu* comments are placed on the top third of the screen, so the majority of the original video is not interfered with.<sup>23</sup> Even though video makers do not have control over how, when, and

<sup>23</sup> In later version of the player, each viewer would also be able to adjust the transparency of the comments and decide the designated area for dan mu to roll in, which allows more flexibility and customization.

about which content the viewers post dan mu, the existence of *danmu*, with its simultaneity and overlaying of characters, very much resembles telop, as it also adds external text that does not come from the camera's viewpoint and is directly related to the content or comments on the original video, with increased unpredictability and flexibility. As I will show in the following section, in certain scenarios, *danmu* works as a crucial postproduction element that enables the show to carry out those representations that it cannot directly depict through formal postproduction elements.

### ***Tactics of sexual talk***

For digital entertainment, using postproduction to guide audiences in navigating useful information is both necessary and enabling. Inventively combining different postproduction techniques, as I will show below, allows digital entertainment like *Let's Talk* to make deviant representations that include restricted context for television entertainment. Specifically, I argue that postproduction techniques for small screen visibility allow digital entertainment to develop a series of tactics to allow for sexual speech. Through talking about sexuality in a tacit manner, the once-scrupulous language of entertainment is eroticized and sexualized.

The tactics of sexual talk begin with the innovative application of the bleep censor as a sound effect. The bleep censor, referring to the bleep sound that is applied to cover the original sound of a word, a few words, or even a sentence whose content is considered inappropriate for the presumed audience, is a relatively common technique applied in public television programs in the U.S. As a removal tool, the

bleep censor allows inappropriate expressions to be preserved in a redacted manner. As a marker, it actually enables, rather than prevents, the use of inappropriate expressions, as “any variation in pitch or tone might actually draw attention, even involuntarily, from the listener,” although “the viewer may not hear the curse per se, they may attend even more to the language being used” (Kremar and Sohn 2004: 574). The effect of the bleep, therefore, contradicts the moral and modeling responsibility of television language in China and therefore has not commonly been practiced in Chinese television programs. Instead of redacting the inappropriate word, programs in China prefer to prohibit such expressions from the beginning or comprehensively remove the entire speech from observation.

*Let's Talk* incorporates the bleep censor regularly. Rather than simply redacting the unwanted word, the bleep censor is used to provoke an ironic effect—in bleeping out certain words, *Let's Talk* invites audiences to decipher them. In discussing the cognitive function of the bleep censor, Valgenti (2016) recognizes the “necessary bleeps intended to be humorous,” or the application of the bleep censor in a manner intended to be more comedic than preventative, through which “laughter arises when one realizes that what at first appears as problematic ambiguity or threat – the panic of the conscience, the public sense of decency, even common sense – is in effect a false alarm” (111). In other words, when a bleep censor is applied in such manner, words are bleeped with an intention of being heard. The existence of the compulsory censorship itself, which appears redundant, becomes the subject of mockery.

One example of how *Let's Talk* deploys the bleep censor as a tactic of sexual speech is the redaction of “*pao*,” a single character that means cannon when used as a sole word but contains explicit meaning when used with particular verbs. In a season two episode, the topic being discussed is “Can you hook up with your close friend?” (*hao peng you ke bu ke yue?*) The Chinese title uses “*yue*” (make a date) to abbreviate the complete slang for “hook up”, or “*yue pao*,” which literally means to “make a date for cannon.” As sexual slang for sexual positivity, “*yue pao*” is usually considered an informal expression of indecent promiscuity. The intentioned omission of the second character in the title is therefore a silent bleep censor. However, during the episode, contestants constantly refer to the complete phrase when stating their arguments. Every time the word “*pao*” is used, its sound is bleeped, and a telop of an icon of a cannon simultaneously appears. Eventually, Kevin Tsai mocks Ma Dong: “Why did you choose to remove the word in the beginning? They are going to say it anyway, and they have said it hundreds of times!” (*Ni gan ma yi kai shi yao qu diao zhe ge zi a? ta men wu lun ru he dou huo jiang, er qie ta men yi jin jiang le ji bai ci le!*) By bleep censoring “*pao*,” the redundancy of censorship is parodied at least three times. First, the fact that only half of the full slang phrase is censored suggests that audience would nonetheless understand what the abbreviated “*yue*” stands for. Second, the telop of the cannon image, which directly shows the audience the literal meaning of the censored word, uses the bleep censor as an index to call attention to the fact that “that word” is being said at that very moment. Last, by showing the

audience the part where Tsai mocks how meaningless the bleep censor is, the censored word becomes louder by being silenced.

From the above example, it becomes clear that the tactics of sexual speech usually start with a bleep censor as an indexical postproduction technique to draw the audience's attention to the redacted word. More often, the bleep censor is further applied innovatively to directly imply the censored content by deploying sound effects that allow the audience to make an association with the bleeped word. Additionally, further collaboration of various postproduction techniques helps make the bleeped contents heard even better by the audience. In the following example, which is one of the most famous scenes in the show's first season, nearly all of the small screen postproduction techniques are deployed so as to enable the preservation of direct references to sexuality without violating the prohibition on profanity and vulgarity.

The scene is in the fifth episode of the first season. As an icebreaking activity, Ma asks the guest that episode, Xie Yiling, a Taiwanese actress, a warm-up question to liven up the atmosphere: "What would you do if you woke up one day and found out that you and your partner had exchanged bodies?" (*Ru guo ni zao shang qi lai fa xian ni he ni de ban lv jiao huan le shen ti, ni hui zen me zuo?*) Xie's complete response is bleeped by the sound of gunshots. An icon of a red warning label covers Xie's mouth. In the same time, a graphic of a cowboy-like figure with Xie's headshot, holding two pistols on each of her hands, appears in the middle of the screen. (Figure 1.9). After the bleep, the entire studio has burst into laughter. In the subsequent scene,

another host, Gao Xiaosong, says, “That’s what Taiwanese boys do. Mainland boys call it...” (*Na shi tai wan nan sheng zuo de. Da lu de nan sheng jiao...*). Again, the last few words are cut off by another sound effect, sounding as if an airplane is passing by. Gao’s mouth is also covered with the same red warning sign. The graphic figure of Xie once again appears on the screen, this time on an airplane (Figure 1.10).



Figure 1-9 Let's Talk, Season 1, Episode 5 (1)



Figure 1-10 Let's Talk, Season 1, Episode 5 (2)

In this sequence, both indexical postproduction elements, i.e., the altered bleep censor sound effect, and expositive postproduction elements, i.e., the telop that provides information external to the camera scene, are adopted to preserve the sexually provocative expression. What Xie actually said was “hit the pistol” (*da shou qiang*), and Gao said “hit the airplane” (*da fei ji*), both euphemisms for male masturbation that are well known among young people. Since masturbation is considered profane and inappropriate to be loudly mentioned in a public context in

such a casual way, it has to be redacted to avoid future censorship trouble. However, if Xie's answer was bleeped entirely with no leftover hint, the comedic effect would also be lost. In this sense, through the tactics of sexual speech, the show preserves the segment as it was recorded. The bleep sound is suggestive. The sound of gunshots encourages the audience to draw an association between what Xie said and the symbol of guns; in a similar way, the airplane sound reminds the audience of the phrase regarding airplanes. The telops adopted here also reinforce this association in a nearly explicit manner, as they both literally put the censored symbols on the screen in their visual formats. As long as audiences recognize the reticent relation between the symbols of the pistol and airplane and possible answers to the question that would need to be bleeped, they are very close to breaking the hidden code. Even if some audience members remain perplexed about the encoded hints, they can still resort to consulting the participative *danmu* for help: some users post their confusion on the screen, and others post explanations. Even five years after the episode was first released, there are *danmu* comments overlaying the sequence that directly address the "riddle" still appear on the screen: several users ask, "What did he say?" (*ta shuo le shen me?*) and "What was said?" (*shuo de shi shen me?*), while others respond, "the cartoon explains it" (*dong hua shuo le a*) or "the sound effect says what was bleeped" (*yin xiao yi jing shuo le xiao yin shi shen me le*) (Figure 1.11). One user directly leaves the answer, "pistol and airplane" (*shou qiang he fei ji a*), and another further explains, "hitting the airplane, the cartoon is an airplane" (*da fei ji a, dong hua bu jiu shi fei ji ma*), in which both airplanes are replaced by an emoji. One user left the

opinion “oh god, such a bold speech” (*wo yun, chi du hao da*); the phrase “chi du” is usually tied to the boundary of sexual representation in cultural works. Another one simply exclaims: “holy, don’t drive the car” (*wo qu, bie kai che a*), in which the slang “drive the car” means making a sexually provocative speech (Figure 1.12). Looking at these *danmu* comments, it is not difficult to speculate that hundreds, even thousands of *danmu* comments would fill the screen five years ago, and thus, no audience member would ever miss or misinterpret what was actually said in the bleeped content.



Figure 1-11 *Let's Talk*, Season 1, Episode 5, with the *danmu* feature turned on (1) (Access in August 15, 2019)



Figure 1-12 *Let's Talk*, Season 1, Episode 5, with the *danmu* feature turned on (2) (Access in August 15, 2019)



## **Deviating Pedagogical Entertainment: The Promise of Queer Insouciance**

The inventive deployment of the tactics of sexual talk efficiently cracks the existing heteronormative scrupulousness in television entertainment culture. While the prudery and binaristic representational strategies of gender and sexuality in the television era are considered rather archaic, didactic, and conservative, the tactics of sexual talk allow digital entertainment such as *Let's Talk* to refashion a different grammar of performing gender and expressing sexuality. This section examines the ways in which various kinds of queer radical subjectivities become viable and intelligible in the show to both make the heteronormative scrupulousness of the television entertainment culture ridiculous, redundant, and vapid. These queer radical subjectivities illuminate an alternative futurity for queer popular culture that I call queer insouciance, i.e., a lighthearted unconcern over identitarian representation and nonchalance towards earning social recognition that the script of the politics of visibility and representation, as upheld by mainstream LGBTQ politics in China, is reluctant to envision. Before I move into a detailed elaboration of this queer politics of popular culture, I start with the following discussion of a critical rhetoric adopted in the show that flips the pedagogical ideology of television entertainment and reorients entertainment as a way of expressing a sincere self. This rhetoric of “*qipa*,” which insists that “the eccentric is the sincere,” sets the stage for the alternative political vision that the rest of the section will depict.

### *The Eccentric Is the Sincere: The Rhetoric of “Qipa/Queer”*

The original Chinese title of *Let's Talk* is “*qipa shuo*,” which is literally translated as “the exotic flower says” and actually means “the eccentric/weirdo is speaking.” The word “*qipa*” was initially a literary metaphor for a person’s unique and extraordinary personality, temperament, quality, or disposition and only became a negative word to designate subjects that are considered abnormal in more recent time. The show picks up the word with this derogatory connotation but flips it into a self-proclaimed recognition of eccentricity, or a lack of social recognizability, as an authentic representation of the sincere self.

The etymological origin of “*qipa*” can be traced back to the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 24). Sima Xiangru (approximately B.C. 179-118) first used it in his famous prose work *Rhapsody of Beauty (mei ren fu)* to metaphorically describe a beautiful and elegant woman. Throughout literary history from dynastic China to the modern period, the word retained these implications. For instance, in *Records of Jade Mirror (yu jing tai ji)*, Ming Dynasty literatus Zhu Ding (in approximately 1573) wrote, “millions of *qipa* present gorgeous beauty.” In 1959, poet and screenwriter Guo Moruo deployed the word to describe the elegant appearance and unique talent of the heroine in the eponymous historical screenplay *Cai Wenji* by analogizing her with “the blossom *qipa* from spring orchid and autumn garden.”

This classical meaning was altered into a pejorative term roughly a decade ago. For instance, a 2011 news report described the misbehavior of Miss Hong Kong beauty pageant contestants, including public smoking and hypersexual outfits, as

“*qipa*” behavior (Xing). In more extensive contexts, *qipa* has been widely used to denigrate individuals who are considered weirdos, outliers, or crackpots or used to describe their unusual and unacceptable behaviors. The positive connotation of being distinguished from the ordinary embedded in the word’s classical meaning is replaced by a negative connotation of being unaligned with the normal.

It is not a coincidence that the derogatory meaning of *qipa* came in tandem with the sprouting of the instant celebrity Internet culture in China, which led to a sudden proliferation of individuals with non-normal personae who attracted sensational attention in the emerging digital sphere in China. In fact, *qipa* was first applied in the Internet discourse to describe entertainment and Internet personae with nontraditional sexual morality and gender dispositions as “abnormal.” Examples include the first generation of Internet celebrities in China, such as Sister Hibiscus (*fu rong jie jie*) and Sister Feng (*feng jie*), who were mocked for their “ambition” given their lack of attractiveness; talent show participants with non-conforming gender, such as Liu Zhu, a non-binary gender queer whose female appearance drew unabashed attacks in the 2010 *Super Boy* singing competition; Shi Yang, who was mocked for his impersonation of a hyperfeminine singer; and flamboyant and extravagant cosplayers from the androgynous and hyperbolic ACG subculture.

It is important to point out that not only does the mainstream normative discourse label these subjects with non-normative gender and sexuality dispositions *qipa* to turn them into social outcasts and subalterns, but feminist and queer scholars to a certain extent also dismiss the political implication of these subjects for their lack

of an explicitly elaborated political agenda. The case of Sister Feng is an example of the dual dismissals contained in the discursive power of *qipa*. Sister Feng attracted unprecedented public attention for her unconventional, jaw-dropping behavior when she publicly announced her marriage criteria in 2009. Judged from a normative perspective, her marriage expectations were far beyond her marriageability. For instance, while requiring her future spouse to have at least a master's degree from one of the top-two universities in China, she had only an associate degree from a less well-known college. While her own physical appearance was considered plain and even unattractive from the perspective of heterosexual lookism, she required her husband to be conventionally handsome and attractive. In addition to these statements, which were judged as ridiculous, her claims that several CEO-level elites had approached her, but she had rejected all of them because "they are old and senile," were considered delusional. With a national reputation for self-overestimation and self-invited humiliation, Sister Feng is the most typical public figure that the rearticulated "*qipa*" would accurately describe.

In retrospect, the queer provocation of Sister Feng's self-ridiculing gender performativity and the discriminatory popular perception is obvious: her unrealistic expectations for marriage that were mocked for being delusional and impudent actually denaturalize the heteronormative economy that ties marriageability to economic value and disrupts the gender stereotype of single women as docile, passive, and submissive. Her seemingly unabashed overconfidence refutes the self-degradation and self-objectification of women that has been in accordance with the

patriarchal stigmatization of female sexuality and desire. A critique of the exclusory discourse adopted under the discriminative name of “*qipa*” would therefore review the violent structure of the normative power that isolates individual defiance of the institutions of gender and sexuality as abnormal accidents or as the term suggests, the acts of eccentric weirdos.

Instead of building a radical critique of the “*qipa*” discourse, however, subjects such as Sister Feng are more often dismissed or simply neglected by advocates for an equal and diverse culture of gender and sexuality in China. For instance, critiques of the similar phenomenon of the Internet celebrity Sister Hibiscus tend to victimize these women for unwittingly subjecting themselves to self-embarrassment and humiliation under male chauvinism (Gai 2006). In a similar manner, queer popular culture scholars are reluctant to recognize personae such as Sister Feng as having any queer implications, but criticize popular figures such as her for merely seeking to “use queer images, but not a queer social or political agenda, to market themselves” (Wang 2015: 159). Using cases such as Sister Feng as examples of “the cult of queerness” in Chinese pop culture, which is more or less equivalent to the exploitation of queerness, Wang suggests that such “queerness as weirdness” cannot compare with more authentic queer popular cultural phenomena, such as Lady Gaga’s queer liberalist persona built around her pop song “Born This Way” or Taiwanese singer Amit’s explicit support of gay equal rights in songs such as “Rainbow.” These popular cultural forms, considered from the perspective of such critiques, are more authentic in the sense that they more clearly elaborate and

explicitly affirm political aspirations in their public performance, while figures such as Sister Feng only “wear provocative make-up and costumes in public without linking that visual image to a socially conscious queer agenda” (ibid.). In other words, Sister Feng’s *qipa*-ness is interpreted not in terms of radical queer potential but rather as self-sensationalization with an inauthentic and insincere agenda.

What is underlined in this refusal to recognize the queerness of so-called *qipa* subjects is the normalization of the identity politics of respectability and a conflation of intentional purpose and actual effect. First, in refusing to recognize the queerness of Sister Feng, queerness is narrowly defined within the framework of sexual minority identities, specifically the rights-based articulated identities in the discursive framing of LGBT politics, or authentic queer subjects with explicit social and political agendas. Such queer subjects are expected to articulate consistent, coherent, and sympathetic political aspirations that incorporate inclusion and respect and therefore are distinguished from subjects who are not explicitly advocating for queer rights and equality or who are even not equipped with such a political consciousness. With these normative politics in mind, a demonstrably articulated political purpose such as advocating for more inclusivity and diversity or simply calling for attention, would justify the political implication of the practice, while the lack of such a purpose would lead to the dismissal of the implication even if the effect is essentially politically provocative. It is in this sense that the queer radicalities of “*qipa*” subjects such as Sister Feng and many others are trivialized and dismissed.

The concept of *qipa* therefore serves as a discourse that dismisses the potentially radical desires and aspirations of certain subjects and trivializes them as merely sensationalism, aberration, eccentric personality, or individual characteristics. It is against this backdrop that *Let's Talk* claims the term for its title while flipping the effect of such trivialization. By situating *qipa* in the subject position in its Chinese title, *Let's Talk* suggests that all its participants are *qipa* subjects and grants them the agency to speak for their own “*qipa*-ness” rather than situating them in the position of being criticized for being *qipa*. Through flipping the notion of *qipa* from a passive attribution to an initiative of self-recognition, the discriminatory implication of the word is alleviated. Instead of treating *qipa* as a pejorative word that depoliticizes non-normative subjectivities as simply eccentric, the deployment of the word in *Let's Talk* conflates the performance of eccentricity with defiant political advocacy by making the exhibition of eccentricity a sincere form of self-expression that deviates from the decent expressions regularized on popular entertainment works, which are dismissed as hypocritical in the rhetoric of *qipa* deployed here.

This rhetorical flipping is best articulated in the opening statement of the program, in which the three hosts each state a punchline to describe the thesis of the show: “The life of *qipa* does not need explanation” (*qi pa de ren sheng wu xu jie shi*); “Intelligence is the weapon, speech is the fire” (*si xiang jiu shi wu qi, neng shuo jiu shi huo li*); and “Let's take off the mask of hypocrisy and have a real conversation” (*rang wo men si xia xu wei de mian ju, hao hao shuo hua*). The first statement justifies the eccentricity or simple weirdness of *qipa* subjects as rightful and dismisses

the necessity for them to “make sense” of themselves on the basis of the social norms that exclude them in the first place. The second statement, through adopting military metaphors, addresses the power of speech specifically and the discursive structure in general in helping *qipa* subjects refute pejoration and discrimination. The last statement directly opposes the expressions and representations of *qipa*-ness advocated in the show to speech under “the mask of hypocrisy” that fails to offer a “real conversation.” In other words, a dichotomous comparison is established in the program: on the one hand, the expression and representation of *qipa*-ness are equivalent to a real and sincere conversation, while the suppression and rejection of such *qipa*-ness, i.e., the convention of normal and decent ways of expression and representation, are tied to hypocritical and insincere speech. This dichotomy of *qipa*/sincere vs. norm/hypocritical becomes the fundamental discursive logic deployed in the show, which extensively prioritizes unconventional forms of expression over forms of expression that are considered conventionally proper, decent and eloquent. In particular, this dichotomous logic advocates the construction of a defiant grammar of digital entertainment that challenges the pedagogical language of television entertainment and ties its deconstruction of hegemonic entertainment ideology to the construction of a queer politics based on trivialized *qipa*/queer subjects.



### *Queer Insouciance as Ideality and Sexual Radicals in Ephemera*

In his critique of the mainstream liberal script of queer politics in the U.S., or what he calls “gay pragmatism,” José Esteban Muñoz (2009) contends that queerness should be imagined and grasped as an ideality. Queerness is “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (1). In other words, rather than simply including forms of gender and sexuality that already exist in the present and reproducing already existing ways of approaching politics of gender and sexuality, the concept of queerness, with its promised potential for radical interpretation, should provoke an alternative anticipation of a future that has not yet arrived, an ideal form of discourse about gender and sexuality that we can only illuminate but not yet grasp in the present.

Proposing the futurity of queerness, Muñoz intervenes in what he perceives as the “erosion of the gay and lesbian political imagination” (ibid. 21) in the U.S. with a dose of hope. Simply speaking, the prevalent gay pragmatism sees the accomplishment of queer politics in the “prison house” of here and now, epitomized in the advocacy for marriage equality and reproductive rights, as well as the normative script of tolerance and inclusivity. The aping of traditional straight relationality as the goal of pursuit for gay politics, which is announced by LGBT activists as a pragmatic strategy to achieve goals in teleological steps, is in fact a deeply ideological project that is hardly practical. Especially disagreeing with the comfortable jouissance among queer liberalists on the success of gay marriage,

Muñoz writes, “Gay marriage is not natural – but then again, neither is marriage for any individual” (ibid., 21).

In other words, what queer liberalism, i.e., the political framing of queer politics through the rhetoric of individual rights, public visibility, and social tolerance, fails to realize is the further subordination of queer subjects and discrimination against queer desires through pragmatism. Only certain individuals can be given the right to have individual rights, and only certain kinds of visibility can be presented to the public. In addition, in the negotiation of visibility, queer subjects are inevitably normalized in certain ways in order to be visible. The idea of tolerance and inclusivity is first and foremost itself therapeutic and remedial when equality falls short (Brown 2009).

In a certain sense, similar pitfalls of pragmatic politics are also eminent in the political discursive field of LGBT politics in postsocialist China. The dismissal of potentially radical “*qipa*” subjects as self-sensationalization reviewed in the above section is one vivid example, as the politics of respectability prevents people from interpreting those subjects with less socially constructed decency and moral rightness as queer subjects with radical defiant potential. The focal accentuation of the issue of queer representation and visibility in popular culture, as introduced in the beginning of this chapter, is another example. In recognizing the public visibility of LGBT subjects in Chinese popular culture as the impending if not the ultimate goal, the mainstream formation of LGBT politics is incapable of offering a critical lens to view what kind of visibility is actually produced and in what sense. Visible queer subjects

and desires are already normalized and homogenized and repeat the repressive logic of inclusion/exclusion that rejected queer subjects from the realm of the popular in the first place.

However, it would be delusional and ungrateful to dismiss these pragmatic political formations as a useless approach that should be abandoned. It is an undeniable fact that the fiery fight for the public visibility of LGBT identities in China has made critical achievements, especially in aspects of consciousness raising and building social alliances. However, as Muñoz's critique of gay pragmatism in the U.S. prevents people from imagining a futuristic there and then that transcends the confinement and limitation of the here and now, it is also counterproductive for queer politics in China to consider the improvement of visibility the only goal in pursuing queerness in mainstream popular culture, as it would prevent us from discerning those things also offered in mainstream popular culture that contain radical scripts for queer futurity, although they are alternative to the current discursive constructions of identitarian visibility and recognition. In other words, instead of a battlefield for the fight over whether lesbian and gay characters can be represented in mainstream cultural works, the field of popular culture in China premises other imagined visions of futurity for queer culture in China that would require a break from the habitual accentuation of the matter of visibility and the reinterpretation of queerness through an alternative lens.

While a thorough critique of the mainstreamization of queer subjects into popular culture and popular discourse in the Chinese context, a topic that has been

scrutinized and critiqued by Chinese queer scholars from various perspectives (Yau 2010; Liu 2015; Huang 2017; Zhao 2018; Zheng 2019; Hung 2019), is outside the scope of this chapter, following Muñoz's trajectory of radical queer critique that recognizes queerness as an ideality rather than a present pragmatic goal, I contend that in the emerging digital entertainment culture in China, a transcendent form of queerness as ideality has been incubated from these digital works' provocations of the conventional television grammars of gender and sexuality.

Specifically, the tactics of sexual talk enabled by the platformivity of digital entertainment allow works such as *Let's Talk* to stage unconventional gendered and sexualized subjects through the dichotomous framework of “*qipa*”/sincere vs. norm/hypocritical. In other words, rather than formulating a speaking subject with explicitly and assertively elaborated appeals for issues such as gender equality, tolerance, and nondiscrimination, the tactics of sexual talk instead construct a series of sexual radicals whose radical queerness exists only in ephemeral moments, usually appearing as simple jests or outspoken performance to defy the scrupulously heteronormative television conventions and to reinforce the authenticity of their eccentricity. In other words, instead of providing serious representations of non-normative gender and sexuality as a political intervention in heterosexual normative identities and soliciting a firm political teleology of either making the cultural representation of gender and sexuality in Chinese popular culture more diverse and multiple or making certain gender and sexual minoritized identities more visible than others in the realm of popular culture, these *qipa* personae constructed from the

tactics of sexual talk are rather indolent, random, or insouciant and are perceived as expressing lighthearted unconcern over the issue of representation through the lens of identitarian politics and nonchalance regarding earning recognition or intelligibility on a normative discursive spectrum. Although such queer insouciance only sparks in the program in an ephemeral manner and could easily be dismissed as insignificant or simply too light to be considered seriously, I contend that it is exactly because this insouciance teases and disrupts the normative discursive structure of scrupulous heteronormativity without necessarily making its teasing and disrupting serious that these ephemeral moments in the show enable an imagined vision of a queer ideality beyond the confinement of representation and visibility.

### *1. The “Virago”: Sexualizing Strong Femininity*

One of the prominent *qipā* personae constructed in the program is the “virago,” or a gendered image of a woman as domineering, aggressive, bad-tempered, and unpredictably and unabashedly outspoken. This persona is best represented by two female participants who actively use the tactics of sexual talk to create their self-representations. The gender representation of strong femininity can be traced back to the popular discourse of the “modern girl” in early-twentieth-century China (Stevens 2003; Luo 2008) as part of a transnational phenomenon (Weinbaum et al. 2008).

During the Cultural Revolution, the image of the “iron girl” (*tie gu niang*) was propagandized as the victory of China’s gender revolution. In this depiction of gender, “women were supposed to work, dress and look like men. Their clothing was not supposed to reveal any female curves” (Pei and Ho 2006). This strong femininity

was considered gender liberatory for women, who could shed gender oppression from the feudal time, be liberated from their confined, submissive roles, and be treated as equal to men—since “the time is different, men and women are equal,” and “women can hold up half of the sky” (Honig 2000; Jin et al. 2006).

This vision of strong womanhood was dismissed in the postsocialist era and deployed as an example of “gender erasure” (Yang 1999), or “the annihilation of femininity” (Yang and Yan 2017) to validate “the postsocialist allegory of modernity,” which “tells a story of how Maoism deferred China’s ability to reach modernity by impeding Chinese people’s ability to express their gendered human natures” (Rofel 2007: 13), even though gender during the Maoist era was de facto not monolithic (Roberts 2006). Since the 1980s, popular culture in China has witnessed a surge in advocacy of soft femininity, which is considered “natural.” The popular image of women either “reprivatizes womanhood” (Sun and Chen 2015) by framing women’s issues in the confinement of marriage and children and solidifies the docile and submissive gender role in images such as the “better half” (Chang 2010) or commodifies women as objects of the erotic gaze in images such as the “beauty writer” (Xu and Feiner 2007; Lu 2008).

What comes in tandem with the claim of rehabilitating the natural woman is the criticism of strong femininity for failing to fulfill the nature of gender. This criticism is epitomized in the image of the “‘strong woman’ (*nv qiang ren*), or ‘career women’ who were successful in their careers but failures in their families, especially in their relationships with their husbands. Being single or divorced could be seen as

the best proof of their failure” (Pei and Ho 2006). In her studies of literary discourse in 1980s China, Xueping Zhong (2000) keenly points out that the critique of “the notion that women were too strong and men too weak as an abnormal phenomenon that had to be corrected” is actually the anxiety of Chinese men about regaining their supposedly natural masculinity (5). Although the image of the strong woman did not necessarily concern appearance, these women were nevertheless deemed unattractive for being “masculinized” and lacking “woman-ness” (*nv ren wei*) because their perceived aggressive, ambitious, and demanding personalities are considered unnatural for woman and rather a man’s gender disposition.

In recent years, especially in the popular entertainment culture, the image of the so-called female man (*nv han zi*) has gradually replaced that of the “strong woman” as the buzzword for describing strong femininity, accentuating the physical strength and conscious independence of women. Popularized first on the Chinese Internet around 2010, the term is first and foremost a refutation of the submissive gender stereotype of the “soft girl” or “girly girl” (*ruan mei zi*) who is submissive, weak, and dependent, which has held wide validity in youth culture as an attractive form of femininity. In configuring the “female man” as independent and not seeking male protection, the strong femininity of these women is described in the popular discourse as a lack of femininity and masculinized, as the combination of the contradictory genders in the phrase itself suggests—a man living in a female body. In this sense, these figures of strong femininity are deprived of female sexuality and are considered less womanly or simply as not women.

In summary, while strong womanhood was encouraged during the socialist era, the popular discourse of gender in postsocialist China discourages it as a desirable temperament for ideal femininity by making a woman's exhibition of strength and independence a reflection of her lack of woman-ness and therefore making her resemble a man—thus, the female sexuality of a strong woman is dismissed. This masculinization of strong womanhood in a patriarchal discursive structure serves as a critical trope for alleviating anxiety about the feminization of weak masculinity; since women who are stronger than men are perceived as less womanly or even not as women at all, male subjects with weak masculinity are spared the allegation of being feminized, as they are not weaker than women but just weaker than those “female men.” Additionally, by refusing to recognize strong femininity's female sexuality, these gender stereotypes also naturalize the understanding of femininity as limited if not monolithic.

The two virago personae who appeared in the first season of *Let's Talk* both debuted with a performance of this strong womanhood. One of them, Ma Weiwei, was a well-known professional debater and a successful communication trainer before appearing on the show. She came to the stage as an intelligent, aggressive, and ambitious “strong woman.” In auditioning for the show (S1E1), Ma takes the initiative of starting the conversation with the three male hosts by making gender-stereotypical jokes about them as “a Scottish kilts boyband” for wearing dresses in front of the camera. Additionally, in introducing herself as the “female version” of one of the hosts, as both of them are “erudite and eloquent, as well as unhandsome,”



Ma makes fun of the male host while simultaneously parodying herself. Her dominant personality is vividly expressed in her response to whether she worries that her intimidating speaking style will impact her likability, to which Ma directly stops the question by responding, “I can just do the patting after I hit them hard.”

The other virago, in a different manner, debuted on the show as a “spicy domineering lady” (*ma la yu jie*) who “bashes hosts badly” (*tong pi dao shi*) (S1E2). Before the show, Fan Tiantian was an unsuccessful comedian whose fiery personality and ferocious speaking style, as audiences later found out, are part of her comedic performance style. Fan starts her audition without introducing herself. Instead, she immediately lashes out against the production team for keeping her waiting so long. She then launches into a monologue about how she hates people calling her “female man,” “strong woman,” or “leftover woman:” “I hate those people who put these descriptions on me.” Instead of arguing that these identities are discriminatory, Fan directly warns, “Those folks have to be careful when speaking in public. The cruel society will slap you and teach you a lesson.” Without further stating why she is upset and what kind of “lesson” those folks would learn, Fan’s hostile comedic performance intensifies her fierce and aggressive personality. Additionally, during her speech, Fan suddenly stops and asks, “I am exhausted, I’m not in a good mood, and I have a really bad temper. Can I sit?” Preceded by a statement of her bad temper, her in fact reasonable request also sounds like a threat. While Fan eventually introduces herself after sitting down, her continuously firing speech and irrefutable

style prevent the hosts from saying a word. After she leaves, one of the relieved hosts says, “This is really a *qipa*,” suggesting the uncommon impression Fan has made.

While both Ma and Fan come to the stage with their gender performance of strong femininity as either a “strong woman” who competes with and is superior to men or a “female man” who intimidates men with her fiery and unfeminine manner, they both contribute to the refashioning of this strong womanhood by explicitly exhibiting the dismissed female sexuality of these gender stereotypes that cannot be achieved in conventional TV entertainment. In various scenarios, their exhibitions are preserved and highlighted by the deployment of the tactics of sexual talk, through which their unconventional expressions about female sexuality, exhibited as sincere representations of their authentic personalities, disrupt the normative discourse of desexualizing strong women.

For instance, during a debate on the topic of “whether non-romantic friendships between genders are possible” (S1E14), Ma deploys a sexual pun riddle to make her argument that sexual attraction is not automatically preconditioned on gender: “As the old saying goes, ‘*ri jiu sheng qing*’; you have to be able to ‘*ri*,’ and as time goes on, you can build love.” The set phrase *ri* (time) *jiu* (long) *sheng* (produce) *qing* (emotion) originally meant that people would develop intimate attachment after spending time together. However, Ma uses the phrase as a paronomasia to suggest a sexually embedded implication. The character “*ri*,” used in the set phrase as a noun modifier to indicate the length of time, is altered in Ma’s rephrasing to a verb with the colloquial meaning of conducting sexual intercourse. Although the meaning is not

officially recognized and is a profane expression, it is nonetheless well known in the vernacular. In this sense, the *jeu de mots* that Ma executes here helps her to make the argument that true friendship does exist between genders, as two people need to have sex before developing a romantic relationship.

While Ma's *jeu de mots* is not inherently a profane expression, as none of the vocabulary she chooses is vulgar or obscure in the official definitions and therefore do not need to be bleeped, this covert sexual expression nonetheless requires that both the indexical and expositive postproductions be more efficiently delivered. Through transcribing highlighting, the Chinese character “*㒼*” is replaced by the *pinyin* spelling “*ri*” to make the word stand out from the transcript subtitles, and through juxtaposing a telop of a cartoon icon of a sun with a grinning on the transcript, the punch word of Ma's speech is highlighted twice.

Another example of how the viragos express their female sexuality with sexual talk comes from another episode in season one in which the topic “Should a beautiful woman fight for a good career or a good husband?” (S1E5) is discussed. A male competitor argues for a good husband, stating that “it is hard for a woman to captivate a man” and that beautiful woman should not waste their attractive appearance on captivating a good career. Before he even finishes the sentence, Fan storms out of her chair and interrupts him by shouting, “Just take off the clothes” (*tuo jiu hao le ya*) while taking off her hoodie and throwing her shoulders and chest out towards him. The male competitor is obviously stunned by Fan's sudden move, as he can only stare at her, speechless. Fan's lashing out is clearly a parodic rebuke of the

male competitor's sexist statement that objectifies woman to mere lookism. Through a sexually suggestive performance to make herself the irrefutable object of the male gaze, Fan invokes an involuntary self-castration of the male competitor, as he is in conflict with his own speech about the difficulty of being captivated.

The program then adopts *guichu*-style edits to make Fan's parodic sexual provocation and the male competitor's self-embarrassment into an unforgettable segment. Fan's movement sequence, from standing up and taking off her hoodie to approaching the male competitor while leaning her shoulders and chest towards him are repeated three times, with one of them in slow motion. The replay is followed by the male competitor's stunned facial expression with a lightening visual and sound effect and a telop with the English phrase "Oh My God", both suggesting and amplifying his shocked and panicky reaction. Two still images of Fan, one with the hoodie on and one with the hoodie off, are collaged into a stop-motion segment and played in rewind-and-loop order. The collage is positioned on the right side of the screen, while the other half features the male competitor's frozen shocked face at an angle that suggests that the man is looking at Fan and is confounded by her. A pop song named "You Are So Poisonous" (*ni hao du*) is inserted as the background soundtrack of this collage, with the lyrics "You're so poisonous. You're speaking more and more off limits. I'm listening and getting more and more lost." Through the *guichu*-style edits of this abrupt confrontation, the theatricality of Fan's self-imposed sexualization of her body is intensified.

Through explicitly representing and directly exhibiting female sexuality with the deployment of tactics of sexual talk, the “virago” personae efficiently refashion the public image of strong womanhood in a deconstructive manner by abandoning the normative discourse that desexualizes these women for lacking “natural” femininity. However, instead of making sexualization a feminist agenda to challenge male dominance and male objectification of the female body, the sexual performance of the virago personae does not align with or provide any concrete message for gender insubordination. Rather, both virago personae constantly make sexist jokes, such as the gender-stereotypical mockery of men wearing dresses, as I mentioned above, and even advocate quite conservative gender views, such as “men should be more tolerant than women,” or “a husband should give all his money to his wife.” Although in a talk show that features competitive debate these arguments should be considered more a strategy than a statement, it nonetheless prevents these personae from being considered feminist subjects or subjects with explicit aspirations to resist gender stereotypes and inequality and therefore makes their sexual radical moments, as discussed above, insignificant and ephemeral jests.

## *2. The “Dirty” Asexual: Disrupting Heteronormative Time*

While the virago persona dismisses the desexualization of strong femininity, the other *qipa* persona discussed in this segment, i.e., the “dirty” asexual, or the representation of an asexual subject as constantly in discord with the normative perception of her sexual unsophistication, disrupts the normative heterosexual time that prioritizes sexual maturation as the preemptive condition of social maturation and infantilizes

socially immature subjects by eradicating their sexuality or dismissing it as premature or not yet developed. In the following, I focus on the program's representation of the asexual persona Yan Rujing, with a special focus on how the deployment of sexual talk allows Yan's stage personae to disturb heteronormative time.

The obvious asocial personality of Yan has been accentuated since the beginning of the show. Yan is a 23-year-old Chinese Malaysian who participated in various Chinese-language competitive debates a year before the first season of the show. Although a talented debater, Yan displays a different personality off the debate stage. In the preparatory interview for *Let's Talk* (S1E4), Yan shows her disinterest and discomfort in answering questions as she simply responds with broken phrases such as "Don't understand how to say" (*bu dong zen me shuo*) or "Don't understand whether gonna speak or not" (*bu dong hui bu hui shuo*). Although her habits of using "don't understand" to replace "don't know" come from her Malaysian Chinese dialect, this habitual expression, which is unfamiliar to mainland Chinese audiences, along with her habit of removing the subject from the sentence, intensifies her introverted temperament. However, such inarticulacy is drastically contrasted with Yan's eloquence in making argumentative speeches in the context of debate. As one of the hosts comments, "It looks like there is an on and off switch on you." Yan's contrasting temperaments imply a potential medical condition of autism or even Asperger's syndrome.

Instead of depicting her lack of basic social skill through a pathological perspective and patronizing her with sympathy, an encoding strategy commonly

adopted in the television culture in representing subjects with either physical or mental disabilities, *Let's Talk* strategically encodes her personality into a sincere representation of her naïveté and innocence. First, the program emphasizes Yan's gender-neutral and childish appearance by associating her with cartoon figures. Her chubby face and bowl-cut hairstyle give her a resemblance to the Japanese cartoon character Doraemon (who is technically a sexless anthropomorphic robotic cat). Her debut outfits are a black suit, red plaid shirt, bow tie, and thick, round black-framed glasses. This boyish outfit associates her with another cartoon avatar, Edogawa Conan, a first-grade boy detective from a Japanese manga; to intensify Yan's resemblance to the character, she also wears exactly the same outfit as the manga character in a later episode. Additionally, her expressionless, stiff face and slow body gestures are constantly edited with sound effects such as a baby noise or cartoon effects to enhance her child-like adorableness. In making her asocial personality cuter, Yan is also called "Rujing the baby" by her fellow participants and audience members throughout the program.

While the emphasis on Yan's genderless cuteness attributes her lack of social ability to her premature gender identity, by accentuating Yan's lack of romantic relationship experiences, her social immaturity is further rationalized by the depiction of her sexual immaturity, epitomized in Yan's self-confession that her weak point in debate is "relationship topics," i.e., debate topics and discussions that touch upon romantic relationships and marriage. Yan's innocence is reinforced when her lack of experience with men is evoked by a male participant in a debate confrontation who

continually asks Yan, “Have you ever been in love?” to dismiss her argument as immature and unsophisticated owing to her lack of knowledge of what an actual relationship should be like (S1E12).

To this extent, Yan’s stage persona presents an alignment between the socialization of an individual and his/her sexual maturation, indicated in a heteronormative temporality that demarcates social lives through the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction (Halberstam 2005). The impression of Yan’s asocial personality is rationalized by her ambiguous gender identity and her asexuality, both explained as her remaining in the early stage of social and sexual maturation at a late age. This heteronormative temporality rationalizes sexual maturation as the preemptive condition for social maturation. Therefore, the sexuality of socially immature subjects such as Yan is eradicated or dismissed as not yet developed in order to normalize them. However, instead of following the assumptions of heteronormative time to build Yan’s asocial/asexual persona, the program disrupts this hegemonic temporality by enlarging moments in which Yan’s performative subject is subjected to ineluctable sexualization with the tactics of sexual talk, through which her naturalized asexuality is problematized.

In an episode that discusses “whether or not one should prepare for rebounds from a relationship” (S2E8), Yan argues for the side that supports the necessity of rebounds. When it is her turn to speak, Yan argues that rebounding means that a person has more choices than the current partner and therefore gains more leverage by resorting to extreme options when the relationship fails. To support her argument,



she quotes the famous martial hero novel *The Return of the Condor Heroes* (*shen diao xia lv*). In the novel, the male protagonist, Yang Guo, also known as the “divine eagle swordsman” because he always appears before civilians with the divine eagle, experiences the death of his true and only love, Xiaolongnv. In quoting the story, Yan says, “You will be in an extreme condition if that person is your only choice. Just like Yang Guo and Xiaolongnv. Xiaolongnv is Yang’s only choice. After she dies, all he has is an eagle.” Immediately after her speech, the entire studio audience bursts into laughter. A subtitle states, “Rujing the baby is going bad (*xue huai le*).” It turns out that due to Yan’s Malaysian accent, she mispronounces the tone of “eagle” (*dīāo*) and makes it sound like the Chinese idiom for male genital organ (*diǎo*). Although Yan might not have intentionally mispronounced the word to provoke the vulgar association, her intention matters less than the effect the sexualization of her speech would generate. In fact, Yan’s slip of the tongue would not even be noticed by the audience except that the show intentionally preserves and exaggerates the other participants’ reactions. It is this intentional preservation that reveals how tempting a sexualized Yan is and how her contradictory image can disrupt the teleology of heterosexual time.

In another scene, Yan argues that parents need to help their underage children develop puppy love (S1E24). She states, “We all know that for everyone in love, it is easy to misfire your gun” and rubs her hands together. The set phrase Yan uses here, “*ca qiang zou huo*,” literally means rubbing the gun and misfiring the bullet, a metaphor for conflict. At first glance, Yan’s adoption of the phrase means creating

trouble between two lovers or for their families. Her following argument also matches this interpretation, as she continues that without parents' considerate guidance and prevention, puppy love might end tragically. Before she finishes her argument, she rubs her hands together another time.

If the scene occurred in a conventional TV program, Yan's argument would be an ordinary argument with no special connotations. However, through editing the sequence in the following order, audiences are guided to interpret Yan's metaphor as a euphemism for unprotected sex and her hand gesture as an imitation of a sexual position: (1) A segment of Kevin Tsai snickering is inserted between the two times Yan rubs her hands. A telop explains that Tsai "is laughing restrainedly" (*ke zhi di xiao*) and suggests that what Tsai finds laughable is not very explicit. (2) The host Ma Dong comments, "Rujing, I beg you to not use the gesture. I can stand anyone doing the gesture, I cannot stand you doing that." Ma's words are described by another textual telop as "cannot bear anymore" (*ren wu ke ren*). Ma's comment that Yan is the only person he cannot see making a vulgar gesture addresses the conflict provoked by Yan's behavior because of the common connection between asociality and asexuality. (3) However, Yan responds to his comment with a plain facial expression that a textual telop describes as "an innocent look from the eyes" (*dan chun de yan shen*), which is an antiphrasis popular on the Chinese Internet that suggests actual "un-innocence" hidden behind the eyes. (4) In the next scene, the third host, Gao Xiaosong, says, "And this is not the right gesture of rubbing" while imitating Yan's hand movement. The postproduction adds an animated telop of Gao

with a blushing face effect and attaches the subtitle “teacher Gao’s teaching” (*gao lao shi jiao xue zhong*). As Gao teaches Yan how to rub the gun, the clear metaphor of a gun as a male genital organ is implied. (5) Then, Yan explains, “I am imitating the gesture of drilling wood to make fire (*zuan mu qu huo*)” while repeating the rubbing gesture for another time. Although she looks sincere, Yan eventually grins as if she realizes something.

It is possible that simply based on the above reiteration of the scenes, the vulgar expressions emphasized in the sequence might be felt to be implicit and indirect. When the episode was released, the participatory tactics contributed a major commentary track that exhausted the entertaining purpose of this sexualization of Yan’s speech. The episode was released on February 8, 2015, and nearly three and half years later, when I checked it on the iQiyi platform through five random visits, there were still more than 100 entries of bullet screen comments that directly address the sequence and explicitly point out the sexual undertones that the sequence intends to express in a more reticent manner. In the following, I numerate a small selection of the examples I gathered on five dates between August 2 and October 2, 2018, in the order that follows the sequence analysis presented in the previous paragraph:

- (1) “Hahah, Bro Kangyong is snickering” (August 2, 2018); “Too dirty. Even Bro Kangyong can’t hold it anymore” (September 24, 2018);
- (2) “Master Ma is losing it” (September 5, 2018); “Rujing is bad, Master Ma can’t see this happening” (September 5, 2018);

- (3) “Rujing the Baby is playing naïve!” (August 2, 2018); “Baby is so good at hiding her evil self” (September 24, 2018);
- (4) “Teacher Gao is driving the car” (September 24, 2018); “Hahahah, ‘not the right way of rubbing’, Xiaosong is so dirty” (October 2, 2018).
- (5) “Ahah, Baby just laughed!” (August 27, 2018); “Rujing the Baby, your grin discloses everything” (October 2, 2018).

Although at a glance, the bullet screen merely points out the things that are happening on the screen, such as Tsai’s snickering and Yan’s grinning, or repeats what the interlocutors upon whom they comment have said, these repetitions of certain parts of the sequence remind the audience to pay attention to these details and implies potential interpretations. For instance, in pointing out that Gao “is driving the car,” an implicit idiomatic phrase for dirty talk, the September 24 bullet screen comment on the fourth scene directly decodes Gao’s reticent speech of “not the right gesture of rubbing” as an unmistakable sexual hint.

Through these sporadic moments when Yan’s seemingly innocent and naïve asexual speech is highlighted and charged with explicit or implicit sexual implications, the normative stereotype of the natural alignment between social immaturity and sexual immaturity is dismissed, played with and mocked. Although it is more than reasonable to interpret these moments as intentional parody of the heteronormative equalization of asociality and asexuality, these ephemeral moments of seemingly pointless jests and banter nonetheless produce the effect of destabilizing such a hegemonic presumption.

### 3. The “Diva”: Teasing the Heterosexual Matrix

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler defines the normative discursive order of gender and sexuality as the heterosexual matrix, or “a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility” that “designates that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender and desires are naturalized” (1990, 208). In other words, a heterosexual matrix, or, as Butler sometimes terms it, the “sex-gender-sexuality tripartite system,” assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense, there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender; i.e., masculine expresses male and feminine expresses female so that oppositionality and hierarchy are defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. Through such a matrix, people make assumptions based on what they see. While two aspects of the tripartite system are known categories, people assume a particular third category (Tredway 2014, 163-176), and when two of the categories are not aligned, the third category flips to the opposite aspect of its own binarism to normalize and make sense of the incoherence. Simply, when femininity is expressed through a male body, the category of sexuality assumes the feminized male body of the homosexual. Similarly, when a male body shows interest in the same gender, this same-sex sexuality is made sense of through the feminization of the body.

The third *qipa* persona discussed in this chapter, the “diva,” however, transcends such a matrix by disorganizing and even disrupting the tripartite system and making themselves an absurd subject that is unintelligible via the grid of the heteronormative matrix. In particular, the persona of Xiao Xiao displays a radical

disruption of the matrix by staging a culturally perceived hyperfeminine male body that constantly parodies heterosexual manhood through drag-like performance.

From the beginning of the show, Xiao's gender disposition is encoded with performative femininity. For instance, in the first episode, Xiao is introduced by the show as "snake-spirited man" (*she jing nan*), a derogatory name that Xiao later claims he has been called for a long time before appearing on the show. As a derivative term of "snake-spirited face" (*she jing lian*), a pejorative word for women with the facial appearance of excessive cosmetic surgical alterations, snake-spirited man refers to a male subject with facial attributes similar to those of the female counterpart.<sup>24</sup> Men who are called by the name are usually considered to lack masculinity for being related to the folklore image of the snake spirit, usually depicted as a seductive and dangerous woman, and expressing overt concern about their looks to the extent of altering their appearance with cosmetic surgery. They are considered effeminate and are usually labeled unattractive.

Xiao's unconventional gender disposition is reinforced throughout the show by the parodic performance of gender misnomers, which exposes the naturalization of gender construction by making Xiao's gender incongruity a trope to mock the presumption of the alignment between sex and gender. For instance, in a season one episode (S1E17), Fan Tiantian calls on Xiao to help her imitate a man with sloppy

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<sup>24</sup> See also my discussion of the "*wanghong* look" in chapter three. In a certain sense, the two terms are interchangeable, as both criticize the acquired appearance of the subjects, they describe altering one's "natural" appearance with cosmetic surgery. Compared to the *wanghong* look's seemingly neutral tone, the term "snake-spirited face" expresses ostensible malice with the metaphor of the "snake-spirit," which reminds people of evil and monstrous characters.

mannerisms. Before Xiao starts the impersonation, Tsai suddenly interrupts and asks Fan, “Aren’t you talking about a man?” (*ni bu shi zai shuo nan sheng ma*), suggesting that Xiao is not the proper example to prove Fan’s point of a man’s sloppy mannerism. The joke about Fan’s gender misnomer that wrongly recognizes Xiao as conventionally male makes Xiao’s unconventional gender mannerisms a disruption of the naturalized equivalence between biologically assigned sex and socially constructed gender dispositions.

A similar mockery of sex-gender congruity also occurs through Xiao’s self-misnomers. For instance, in one scene (S2E24), Xiao depicts a fictional conversation between his future child and him. In impersonating his child, Xiao first uses “Mom” (*ma*) to address himself and then suddenly changes to “Dad” (*ba*) as if it were a slip of the tongue. However, in another scene (S1E4), Xiao refers to his girlfriends and himself as “We girls” (*wo men nv hai zi*) without correcting the gender attribute, even when a fellow participant comments on the misnomer. Through playing with gender attributes, the congruity between Xiao’s sex and gender is further challenged and destabilized.

However, instead of presenting this lack of socially constructed masculinity with a sardonic tone, Xiao’s non-normative gender performativity is acclaimed for being authentic and instinctive, especially when compared with the conventional ideal gender dispositions, which are mocked in the show as deliberative, self-restrained, and hypocritical. This comparison is best epitomized in Xiao’s confrontation with the representative of “iron straight man,” an idiomatic name for a normative heterosexual

man with conventionally appreciated masculinity. In the show, such a normative image is represented by Aili, one of the male participants who is known for his humorless, didactic speaking style and his insistence on gentlemanly mannerisms and “a man’s responsibility for the women he loves” as “real” manhood. His overt sobriety and ostensibly obsolete view of gender have made him a target of mockery in the show, especially by figures such as Xiao, who constantly teases Aili for having “model burden” (*ou xiang bao fu*), attributing his conservative mannerisms to the disciplinary power that burdens him for adhering to social norms and ideals. In one scene (S1E23), Xiao directly mocks Aili for having “a face of self-endorsed solemnity and nobility” (*zhang zhe yi zhang ren jian zheng dao shi cang sang de lian*) in response to Aili’s speech on how a man should be tolerant and forgiving of people who have framed him. The metonymy of Aili’s authoritative appearance, especially his solemn countenance, is deployed to portray his moralistic speech about forgiveness and tolerance in ideal manhood as pretentious and self-approving. In rebutting Aili’s opinion, Xiao continues to explain that he would, as a “bitchy person” (*bi chi*) himself, never hide his grudges and always take revenge. In contrasting his self-exposed petty personality with Aili’s self-glorified tolerance through the trope of “never hide myself,” Xiao’s lack of conventional manhood becomes a sign of his refusal to wear the hypocritical mask of ideal normalcy.

While Xiao’s unconventional gender disposition is repetitively reinforced in the show as authentic self-expression, his parodic performance of hypermasculinity and refusal to acquiesce in a homosexual reading of his gender, achieved via the



deployment of sexual talk, further complicate his incongruity with the heteronormative matrix. For instance, in speaking about his yearning for a relationship (S1E11), Xiao states that “as a hot-blooded macho man, you know how much money I need to spend on paper tissues every month?” (*zuo wei yi ge xue qi fang gang de nan zi han, ni men zhi dao wo mei ge yue wo men jia wei sheng zhi kai zhi jiu yao hua diao wo duo shao qian ma?*). Xiao’s description of himself as a “hot-blooded macho man,” of which the two phrases “hot-blooded” and “macho” are usually used to describe conventionally hypermasculine males, is highlighted in a floating transcript in bold yellow and a sans-serif gothic typeface to emphasize the sense of sobriety of this statement. Such sobriety is immediately mocked by other people’s laughter, since Xiao’s quasi-serious description of himself as a masculine man severely contradicts the gender image of him as ostensibly lacking such conventional masculinity. However, it is through Xiao’s second statement, implicit sexual talk, that the parodic jesting on such conventional masculinity becomes vivid. The reference to paper tissues equates Xiao’s claim to “hot-blooded” macho masculinity with sexual desire, for the former is usually deployed as a metonymic for male masturbation. In further elaborating on the implied sexual reference in Xiao’s words, a sound effect of someone screaming and a dramatic textual telop of the modal particle for exclamation are added after Xiao’s address to call the audience’s attention to the connotations of this reference. In this sense, Xiao is implying that his macho masculinity is reflected in his insatiable sexual desire, which is usually considered a symbolic sign of dominant male power in reproductive heterosexuality. However, this

performance of hypermasculinity is quickly dismissed and mocked by Xiao's following speech, as he explains that the paper tissue is for "wiping tears on those lonely nights" (*ca qu ye li gu du de lei shui*), which completely removes any sexual insinuation in the connection between masculinity and sexual desire. Through inflicting such deliberate misguided misunderstanding, as audiences are encouraged to interpret Xiao's speech as sexual and then to dismiss this interpretation, the naturalization of the bond between gender disposition and sexuality is mocked.

More unexpectedly, Xiao's performative gender and sexuality further denaturalize the heteronormative matrix by dissociating the lack of conventional masculinity and the affirmation of homosexuality. For instance, in supporting the argument that love is the most important factor in marriage (S1E8), Xiao states that he would not be able to perform as man and wife (*fu qi yi wu*) if he does not love his partner. He further states, "This means that I cannot have sexual behavior. Which means I cannot make myself hard and I cannot 'bang'" (*jiu shi shuo wo bu neng fa sheng xing xing wei. Jiu shi shuo wo ying bu qi lai ye gao bu xia qu*). Both the vulgar expressions "bang" (*gao*) and "hard" (*ying*) are bleeped, and Xiao's mouth is also covered with a red warning sign. As the telop sign only partially covers Xiao's lip shape, it is rather easy for any savvy audience member to decipher the two bleeped vulgar words he uses, especially by putting them in the context of sexual relationships. While the two phrases are generally considered disrespectful of women for presenting them as the subject of sexual satisfaction, from Xiao's position, these vulgar expressions of his sexual dominance and proactiveness serve as a

counterimage to his soft masculinity that is usually tied to a stereotypical image of the submissive role in a homosexual relationship. As Xiao refers to himself as the initiating party in sexual behaviors multiple times during the show, by deploying the tactics of sexual talk to relate himself to things such as watching pornography that are usually perceived as “man stuff” in the Chinese conventional gender ethic, the stage persona of Xiao constantly teases the bond between conventional femininity and sexual desire towards men in the heteronormative matrix.

In conclusion, the queer insouciance in digital entertainment can be caught only in these ephemeral moments on *Let's Talk*, when the normative scripts of gender and sexuality are disrupted and teased through the deployment by *qipa* personae of the tactics of sexual talk. The virago, by dirty performances, efficiently refashions the gender stereotype of strong womanhood as a masculinized woman deprived of female sexuality because of a lack of “natural” femininity. The dirty asexual detaches the stable association of social maturation and sexual maturation by making the asexual persona as “dirty” as possible. The hyperfeminized “diva” teases the naturalized bonds and stability of the heteronormative matrix that align sex, gender, and sexuality as a tripartite system. These provocative performances are all made possible by the tactics of sexual talk, which became a viable representational strategy only with the arrival and prospering of digital entertainment. In most scenarios, as introduced above and throughout the show, the “dirty” jesting and bantering, which risk being sexist themselves, are far from being woven into any form of affirmative and advocative

messages with meaningful appeals. However, it is through these insouciant queer performances that we can actually discern an ideal imaginary in which the confinement of consistent gender and sexuality identity are dissolved, sexuality is no longer a pivotal aspect in judging an individual's socialization condition, and the ideas of normal gender and sexuality are collapsed.

### **The Disappeared and the Insouciant**

Although the full “coming out” episode of *Let's Talk* disappeared from iQiyi, audiences can still watch three clips from that episode that features three different views towards the issue about “coming out in China.” The first clip comes from the virago Ma Weiwei. Holding the standing point that gay people should not come out to their parents, Ma proposes that “let's all come out and make the world without difference between gay and straight” and when “everyone comes out... the closet would eventually disappear.” In suggesting straight people come out for the gay people, Ma believes that “gay people would not need to endure oppressions alone.” The second clip comes from Jiang Sida, who had publicly come out right in the show, although he held the negative stance in this episode. Jiang recounts his experience of coming out to his mother: “I think it impacted her lifespan.” As he regrets the pain he brought to his mom, Jiang admits: “I would not choose to come out if I was given a second chance.” The third clip comes from the famous “We're not the monster” speech of Tsai, which made the episode viral in the first place. As Tsai whimpering about the loneliness of being the only publicly out celebrity in China, he nonetheless

affirms his reluctance to let more young public figures to come out because it would be too difficult for them to survive.

At first sight, the survival of these clips amid the deletion suggests a tactical resistance of the state violence of censorship: as the entire episode is forced to be removed, netizens nonetheless find ways to negotiate and preserve the “essential parts” from disappearing. However, reflecting on the survival of these remarks provokes further reflection on what kind of representation of LGBTQ people in China is preserved. To begin with, all the three remarks take the stance of not coming out, even though two of the speakers have come out publicly. Ma’s speech further invokes an empty instigation of human love than calling for any actual social change. The other locuters’ stories of shame send a further clear message of dissuading gay people from confronting social normalcy as they would eventually regret their actions and suffer. Also, the emotional and sentimental expressions from Jiang and Tsai employ the discourse of self-shaming, which reinforces “the only emotion non-normative sexual subjects are permitted to express concerning their sexuality” (Kam 2012: 94). Jiang’s regret for causing pain to his mom conveys that being gay is a burden to the family and causes unnecessary suffering to the parents. Tsai’s remark puts himself and the community that he represents in a degraded status, thirsting for the recognition of a society that demonized them in the first place. Such self-shaming accounts neither challenge the social order of heteronormativity nor offer a conduit to empathize with the abjected sexuality. Instead, these clips, in their isolated forms,

actually advocate the preservation of the status quo and refrain from any potential that might have been provoked by the topic itself.

In this sense, it would not be too cynical to raise the concern: If what can be represented of the LGBTQ community in China in mass entertainment culture is limited to such self-shaming and hollow propositions of tolerance, to what degree would this visibility actually bring further subordination of queer subjects in China as subaltern and marginalized than enabling an ideal queer politics in which the construction of gender and sexuality hierarchy is dissembled? Bearing these concerns in mind, it would be more preemptive to ruminate on those alternative potentialities that the arrival of a digital media platform could substantially bring to break the heteronormative scrupulousness that repetitively subordinates queer subjects as secondary and submissive in the first place.

## Chapter Two — Utopian in the Ephemeral: ‘Wenyi’ as Postsocialist Digital Affect

In 2011, I started to pursue my master’s degree in literary theory in Shanghai. The program was affiliated under the Department of Chinese and was named “*wenyi xue*,” which literally means the studies of literature (*wen*) and art (*yi*) — an alternative to the more institutionalized jargon of “*wen xue li lun*” (literary theory). Since then, any small talk involving me introducing my major has become an awkward conversation. Almost every time, people either grin or are astounded: “So you are studying *wenyi* film?”; “You must be a *wenyi* youth!” Further, every time I explain that the “*wenyi*” in my major’s name is not the “*wenyi*” in their minds, only after a few exchanges do people realize it: “I see, so you are studying literary stuff” (*gao wen xue*).

The term *wenyi*, as easy as it looks — a composition that comes from two clearly defined concepts — reminds my interlocutors of very different things that are more complicated than a simple reference to “literary stuff.” In the context of postsocialist China, the connotation of *wenyi* is intricate. Sometimes, it is used in a traditional sense, in the self-identification of some young people to claim their enthusiasm for literature and art, although this self-identification, namely the so-called *wenyi* youth (*wenyi qing nian*), could also be applied by others to ridicule and tease others for being pretentious and narcissistic. On other occasions, *wenyi* is also used as an adjective to differentiate some film works from mainstream commodity films to communicate sentimental and complex human emotions. Although in other

times, the same nomenclature was used to differentiate boring films from good films, *wenyi* film is equal to films that makes one drowsy. It could describe certain entities: a *wenyi* coffeehouse, street, city, or bookstore or a piece of furniture, or it could describe something rather random or abstract: a décor style, dressing style, writing style, a particular brand of cigarette, the preference of cats over dogs, or simply some sort of unexplainable blues. While the most common English translation describes it as Chinese hipsterism (Tan 2012), the translingual gap determines that certain cultural implications are inevitably be lost in English translation.

In these definitions, the term has differed drastically from what it originally meant as preserved in the absurd name of my major, which only produces obscurity and confusion in contemporary times. Instead of a notional reference to clearly defined concepts, *wenyi* has become an adjective of affect — a floating reference with implications submitting to changes as well as the shifting of the context and the interlocutors. This affective turn cannot be understood without situating it in the context of the postsocialist condition since the contemporary implications of *wenyi* are constructed in tandem with the construction of the collective consciousness of postsocialist youth and the proliferation of Internet culture. As this chapter contents, the postsocialist term *wenyi* describes a structural digital affect of China's postsocialist youth.

With the various ways Chinese people utilize and interpret the term, two common grounds remain untethered. First, the affect of *wenyi* is generally seen as an antisocial and noncollective sentiment of postsocialist youth with little to no proactive



political advocacy or congregated aspirations. Different from the original intimate connections with leftist nationalist politics in its traditional meaning, the term in its postsocialist-turn dissipates most of this political interventionism. Instead, as a term always tied to sentimentality, narcissism, unrealism, and idealism, *wenyi* usually provokes notions of antisocial self-indulgence, neoliberal individualism, and the social ethos of de-politicization.

The second common ground shared by the popular discourse regarding *wenyi* ties the concept to a particular digital space, namely the interest-based website Douban. Not only is Douban generally considered the base camp for *wenyi* youth in China but the content from the website is also labeled with the affect, such as “*wenyi qizhi*” (*wenyi* temperament), *wenyi qing huai* (*wenyi* sentiment), “*wenyi fan'er*” (*wenyi* style), “*wenyi diao diao*” (*wenyi* tone), etc. It is nearly universally known in China that Douban and *wenyi* are almost synonymous to each other.

At first glance, the two common grounds of popular knowledge about *wenyi* align with each other. As a website mainly collecting individual users' opinions about cultural commodities by asking them to rate these items, the online social practices encouraged by Douban match the general impression of what a *wenyi* youth would do — indulge in his or her own interest. Expressing personal preferences about cultural works, as one would imagine, is much less politically sensitive than the topics discussed in other social media spheres such as microblogging, where social injustice issues are exposed and debated on a daily basis, since a two-digit grade and a short

sentence for comment are rarely common tools for people to express their political opinions online.

However, this assumption is not always true. On July 27, 2017, a few days before the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the construction of the CCP's army force, a main melody (*zhu xuan lv*), or propaganda film, called *The Founding of an Army* (*jian jun da ye*), premiered in China to celebrate the event. As people visited Douban to give their grades of and comments on the film as usual, they found that the Douban page of the film was entirely locked down. In addition to showing unchangeable basic information about the film, every other interactive feature of the site was deactivated, preventing visitors from using them. A similar situation had occurred before during the releases of two other films from the so-called "founding trilogy" as well as many other main melody films, particularly films endorsed by the official cultural authority as special occasion tribute films and films made to honor historical figures in the Communist Party's history. The "freezing" of these Douban pages, which indisputably is a sign of intentional prevention of Douban users from expressing their opinions on these films, whether directly coming from censorship officials or as an internal self-censoring concern of Douban, prevented content coming from Douban that might contradict the official glorification and celebration. Therefore, the *wenyi* space of Douban is far less apolitical than the popular discourse has described it.

Intrigued by the conflict between the popular belief about the apolitical nature of the postsocialist *wenyi* affect and the sheer fact that the digital archive of this *wenyi* affect has recurrently generated political effects, this chapter digs into the cultural

logic that constitutes this conflict. I ask what is the trajectory of the shifting implications of *wenyi* as it transforms from a concrete and stable concept into an unstable adjective for ambiguous affect. What is the role that digital space, in particular the Douban website, plays in this process, considering the widely shared common belief about the instinctive intimacy between this particular digital space and the postsocialist *wenyi* affect? In what sense is the *wenyi* affect produced and elaborated in the Douban digital space, conjuring up profound political implications that are more intricate and aspirational than the self-indulgent depoliticization of postsocialist youth? Or to state it more specifically, in what sense can what are considered as merely “*wenyi*” things actually contain profound meaning for our understanding of the structure of the feeling of the postsocialist youth and their ideas about the political future of China?

In detail, the chapter is composed of three sections. In the first part, I provide a genealogy of the concept of *wenyi* and situate the affective turn of the term to the social experience of the postsocialist youth. The second section scrutinizes the pivotal role played by the digital space of Douban in shaping the production and construction of the *wenyi* affect as a postsocialist digital affect. The last section provides two close-up studies of the politicization of the *wenyi* affect circulated on Douban, through which I contemplate the political aspirations embedded in the *wenyi* affect’s preference for nostalgia and banned films. As I argue, instead of a neoliberal individual sentiment with a tendency to dissociate one’s private life from a larger society, the *wenyi* affect in fact carries radical political utopianism. This utopianism,

felt as the presence of an absence, can be grasped through the digital ephemerality of the Douban space or in the excessive production of trivial and repetitive data from the digital space.

### ***Wenyi*: A Postsocialist Affect**

Etymologically speaking, “*wenyi*” in ancient Chinese is a composite word that combines “*wen*” (letter or character) and “*yi*” (art) to include a variety of cultural forms of literature, literary art, and visual and performing arts. During the late Qing and early Republican era, namely between 1890 and 1920, the term was introduced to China from the Japanese Kanji “*文藝*” (*bungui*) with a modern update. Chinese intellectuals, such as Liang Qichao, used the term to designate translated foreign literature, particularly Western and Western-style literature, and cognate genres such as fiction, poetry, prose and drama to differentiate it from ancient-style Chinese literature, which was usually called by the single character “*wen*.”

This notion of *wenyi* has been retained in the CCP’s adoption. In Mao’s canonical speech, “Talk at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” *wenyi* is modified through class discourse and used to refer to literature and art that belong to the “truly proletarian” (1942). This official definition has continued to be valid today, although only in official documents and expressions. For instance, the current President Xi Jinping stated in 2014 that “socialist *wenyi*, in its essence, is *wenyi* for the People.” In other conventional phrases, such as “*wenyi* worker” (*wenyi gong zuo zhe*) and “folk *wenyi*” (*min jian wenyi*), this conventional meaning of “a general term

for literature and the arts, sometimes specifically referring to literature or performing arts” (CASS 2003, 1319) is also preserved.

However, as I indicated in the introduction and further elaborate in this section, while the official definition of *wenyi* remains similar and consistent with its original meaning, as invented in the early twentieth century, in everyday deployment, the term has changed drastically from a definitive noun to a descriptive adjective. Generally speaking, while the conventional and official definition of *wenyi* simply addresses the combination of literature and art and emphasizes their positive influence on the broader society when used as a noun modifier in phrases such as *wenyi* youth and *wenyi* film,<sup>25</sup> in the postsocialist popular context and digital sphere, *wenyi* no longer obtains such a stable meaning but rather describes a feeling, an opinion, a sentiment, or an affect that does not have other supplementary words to express it. As I show in the following by tracking the transitioning meaning of *wenyi* in phrases such as *wenyi* film and *wenyi* youth, this “affective turn” of the term must be understood alongside of the shifting political economy and cultural politics of postsocialist China. In particular, as I indicate in the following discussion, the commodification of popular culture and the arrival of the Internet have contributed to the dissociation of *wenyi* from its original leftist political interventionism, and it has

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<sup>25</sup> As the following pages show, the Chinese characters “*wenyi*” have remained the same amid the shift in meanings. To accentuate the difference between the conventional implications of the term in both of the phrases “*wenyi* youth” and “*wenyi* film,” I use the translator term “literary” to replace the original term “*wenyi*” in scenarios in which the term’s conventional meaning, i.e., “literature and art” is applied, and I use the original term “*wenyi*” to preserve its affluent and affective implications in its application in the postsocialist context.

developed into a subjective and affective concept deeply related to the social experiences of postsocialist youth.

The meaning of *wenyi* film has developed along with the construction of Chinese film culture, although its original meaning for films with a literary tradition, or “literary film,” has remained intact. The phrase first appeared in a 1924 textbook to refer to “film works that were transformed from literature and art,” specifically Western literature and modern urban Chinese novels, such as *Mandarin Duck and Butterfly* literature (Xu 1924; See also Yeh 2013). Film companies at the time also started to use the term as a marketing label (Yeh 2012). In addition, critics advocating for film’s equivalent importance with literature also used the term to theorize that film is the “fourth sub-genre of literature,” and they argued that good scriptwriting would be able to “reflect the spirit of the nation” just like a good literary work (Tam 2015). The concept of “literary film directors” was also applied to designate budding auteur directors like Fei Mu (Yeh 2009).

In the latter half of the last century, as vocabulary, the term lost credibility in mainland China due to the dissociation of “*wenyi*” from the mainstream official ideology for its “petit bourgeoisie” sentiments. However, the concept remained valid in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In Hong Kong, left-wing film companies continued to make literary films developed from left-wing literature to “criticize things from feudal ethics to despotic oppressions, from feudal exploitation to imperialism” (Liao 2011, 191). In the 1960s literary film, specifically defined as films that “do not focus on action as temptation but accentuate human emotion, social reality, and critical

thoughts,” was an important part of the cinematic empire of Hong Kong film moguls Shaw Brothers, Inc.

In Taiwan, the term “*wenyi* film” was transformed into a commercially viable genre in the 1960s and designated film adaptations of the romantic novels of the pop novelist Qiong Yao. This film genre, later known as the genre that generated the so-called “Qiong Yao fad” in both Taiwan and mainland China during the late 1970s, features films imbued with dramatic love stories, theatrical dialogue and exaggerated expressions. The observable difference from the progressive ideology behind the leftist *wenyi* film tradition caused some scholars to suggest renaming Qiong Yao film “erotica film” (*yan qing pian*), rather than literary film (Tam 2017).

Although this seemingly ostensible disparity does not erase the common similarities between Taiwanese literary film in the 1970s and the left-wing films made in the early days and in Hong Kong: all of these definitions of literary film address the incontrovertible literature-based roots of the films. In terms of commercial success, literary films, by these conventional definitions, are known for their popular bases and commercial profitability. Most importantly, considering the uplifting political environment of post-martial law Taiwan and the post-Cultural Revolution PRC, it is not difficult to see that the popularization of the hyper-sentimental and stylistically exaggerated Qiong Yao films was a *de facto* representation of the liberating political atmosphere of the historical conditions (Lin 2010). In this sense, these conventionally defined literary films affiliated literary films with progressive political implications.

However, when the phrase *wenyi* film re-emerged in Chinese popular discourse in the early 2000s, this explicit commonality and the concrete definition of *wenyi* film as literary film had drifted away since they were no longer used to calibrate the films' literary roots. Instead, *wenyi* film in the postsocialist context describes a subjective feeling, or an affect, toward certain films. In the beginning, during the 1990s, influenced by the historical process of “the integration of art film and *wenyi* film” (Tan 2017, 14), the phrase developed into a negotiated concept for a loose range of films filling the gap between market-oriented commercial films and pure art house films that do not cater to commercial success or the gap between the sometimes oppositional metric of “artistic discovery” (*yi shu tan suo*) and “commercial value” (*shang ye jia zhi*) (Zhang 2007, 71). During the early 2000s, PRC films had only started to explore outside of the state-owned studio system and reached the global stage. Hollywood films also started to enter domestic theaters. With the sprouting of cinephile culture incubated by the pirate and sharing economies, the fracture between the formal, mainstream film market and the informal, underground film circle also created a distinction regarding taste (Wang 2003; Pang 2004; Li 2013; Wu 2013; See also Bourdieu 2012). The conceptualization of “commercial film” (*shang ye pian*), or those films made solely for the purpose of box office revenue, and “art film” (*yi shu pian*), or those films made solely for artistic exploration (Kong 2017), combined with a clear distinction between the theater-chain films, or films that obtain official permission for public screenings, and non-theatre-chain films, or films that fail to obtain such permission, feeds the oppositional



structure of Chinese film culture (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006; Chu 2010). *Wenyi* film is rearticulated into the rather ambiguous and flexible concept of films that are not as highbrow as art films but are also distinct from commercial films, the material of which is accessible to anyone.

Although some scholars have offered definitions of what the implications of *wenyi* film mean to contemporary Chinese film culture (Teo 2001, 2006; Yeh 2017; Guo 2018), the scholarly efforts to define *wenyi* film as Chinese melodrama and to stabilize an ambiguous term like this one are unsatisfying in terms of capturing the contingent meaning and affect that the term generates in daily usage. Instead of giving *wenyi* film a concrete definition, I here emphasize the subjective interpretability of the phrase since it is applied in the context of postsocialist China contingently, and people usually adopt it to describe a feeling or an opinion rather than a stable concept. For instance, in a popular online discussion post (Maggie 2011), one user mocked *wenyi* film as such:

*“Wenyi film is like this: you have no idea what it talks about when you watch it. The scenes are all still life or landscape. The characters all look beautiful, fresh and pale. There are always too many monologues. But there are also patterns that are either too loud or too quiet to set off leading characters, supporting characters, and villains by contrast ... It is that kind of film that no one really understands but suddenly are enlightened about only when you read the film review.”* (yang Vv)

None of those descriptive phrases, such as “beautiful, fresh and pale characters,” “still life or landscape pictures,” and “too many monologues,” strictly

provide a definitive description of what really counts in *wenyi* film, but they also abstractly express an attitude about certain films as such, as the poster describes subjective feelings about certain films as condescending and self-righteous (a complaint read from the mocking rhetoric of “being enlightened”).

While some use *wenyi* film to note these aspects of obscure and pretentious filmmaking, others simply characterize it for its drowsy and boring quality: “you just cannot resist falling asleep every ten minutes or so. And when you wake up, you find out that you didn’t miss anything” (xu chen). While both obscure and boring describe very subjective and personal feelings about certain films, for those who hold a positive attitude about *wenyi* film the definition also changes accordingly. Instead of being obscure, “*wenyi* film expresses sentiments that are unexplainable in words,” and such films are “not for this fast-paced society but are only suitable for those people who want to explore themselves ... most people cannot enjoy *wenyi* film because their frivolous characteristics make them unable to calm down and feel other people’s states of mind” (*bang de xiao jie*).

The subjective interpretation, sometimes even with randomness, of the understanding of what counts as *wenyi* film can be captured in the list of “top-rated *wenyi* films” provided by Douban, which as I pointed out above is considered an authentic *wenyi* digital space in the common knowledge of Chinese society. Table 2.1 lists the top twenty films on the list. Only half of them are adapted from literature, rendering the conventional definition of *wenyi* film as literary adapted works irrelevant. Large studio-produced films, such as *Forrest Gump* and *Roman Holiday*,

are, by all means, irrelevant to art house or independent films. Rather, their heterogeneities outweigh their homogeneity: *Farewell My Concubine*, a historically dense film that concentrates the entire twentieth century in China into the life vicissitudes of a homosexual Peking opera performer, has only the slightest similarity to *A Little Thing Called Love* and *You Are the Apple of My Eye*, both of which are heterosexual school romances set in modern-day Thailand and Taiwan, respectively. Additionally, it would be too sloppy to say that *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*, an animal-themed movie that eulogizes the loyalty of puppies, actually belongs to the same category as *The Shawshank Redemption*, a long-time top-rated film on IMDB, with its profound contemplation of human dignity. In terms of style and genre, it is daring to say that *Amélia*, a dark satire, has ostensible similarity to *Flipped*, a warm-hearted family comedy. It is also too difficult to argue that there is some commonality between *Let the Bullet Fly*, a period drama famous for its bullet-speed editing, and *Life of Pi*, a pioneering IMAX-technique movie known for its slow and mesmerizing shots. Needless to say, the sheer temporal gap between *Roman Holiday*, which was made in 1953, and *Pegasus*, released in 2019, also complicates the effort to define equivalently.

What becomes clear from this miscellanea of films is how loose and open-ended is the concept of *wenyi* film that is deployed in everyday communication in postsocialist China. The film critic taotaolinlin recognizes the impossibility of providing a stable and clear definition of the lexicon: “Nowadays, the range of *wenyi* film is so loose ... it seems that, as long as the film is about emotion, romance, or

love, it can be counted as a *wenyi* film. There are no restrictions in terms of topic, style, character, or period. As long as the themes are in general accord with that, they can all be called *wenyi* film” (2014). In other words, *wenyi* film does not necessarily reveal any positivist quality of a film but rather describes the audience’s subjective perceptions. The three definitive characteristics of the conventional definition of *wenyi* film, i.e., the relation to literary tradition, commercial accessibility, and the positive relationship with progressive politics, are all either refuted or dismissed in this postsocialist re-invention of the term.

1	<i>Léon</i> (1994, France)	11	<i>The Chorus</i> (2004, France)
2	<i>The Shawshank Redemption</i> (1994, U.S.)	12	<i>You Are the Apple of My Eye</i> (2011, Taiwan)
3	<i>Forrest Gump</i> (1994, U.S.)	13	<i>A Little Thing Called Love</i> (2010, Thailand)
4	<i>Farewell My Concubine</i> (1993, China)	14	<i>Amelie</i> (2001, France)
5	<i>Let the Bullet Fly</i> (2010, China)	15	<i>Pegasus</i> (2019, China)
6	<i>Flipped</i> (2010, U.S.)	16	<i>Roman Holiday</i> (1953, U.S.)
7	<i>Hachi: a Dog’s Tale</i> (2009, U.S.)	17	<i>Youth</i> (2017, China)
8	<i>The Legend of 1900</i> (1998, Italy)	18	<i>Hidden Man</i> (2018, China)
9	<i>Your Name</i> (2016, Japan)	19	<i>Malena</i> (2000, Italy)
10	<i>Life of Pi</i> (2012, U.S.)	20	<i>Love is Not Blind</i> (2011, China)

Table 2.1 Top 20 of films tagged “*wenyi*” on Douban film page

While the implications of *wenyi* film developed from a definition of a film genre into an open signifier of the feeling that certain films provoke that can be submitted to subjective interpretation, the shifting meaning of *wenyi* youth also transforms a political youth identity into de-politicized self-indulgence. In its

conventional sense, the notion of *wenyi* youth straightforwardly refers to “literary youth,” i.e., young people who participate in the production of or are interested in literature and art. It was adopted by leftist intellectuals to mobilize educated urban youth to participate in patriotism and revolution. In 1928, Guo Moruo, later the first chairman of the PRC’s literary federation, used the term to encourage young people to align their passion for literature and art with passions and enthusiasm for revolution and mass empowerment. In 1933, the Maoist literatus Hu Qiaomu founded a literary magazine directly named for the phrase, the purpose of which was to introduce advanced and avant-garde modern Western art and literature to Chinese youth to help them weaponize their consciousness and intelligence (Luo 2010).

While during the high socialist era, the phrase was abandoned for its petit bourgeoisie class disposition, it resurged in the 1980s with a spinoff of “literature youth” (*wen xue qing nian*), in which the close relationship between youth politics and literary activities were preserved. The 1980s, described by Chinese scholar Yin Hong as a time when “Chinese people awoke from the medieval period of obscurantism” (1997) in the post-Cultural Revolutionary social ethos and cultural atmosphere, generated enormous popular enthusiasm for literature and art that differed from the rigid revolutionary culture sanctioned by the radicalized Communist Party over the previous three decades. During the decade, the mass importation and translation of Western culture, particularly the works of Nietzsche, Sartre, Kafka, Marquez, etc., arrived in tandem with the rise of “cultural idols” generated from local cultural movements, particularly the poets Haizi, Gucheng, Beidao, and Shu Ting

from the “Misty poetry” movement (Yeh 1996) and novelists such as Yu Hua and Wang Anyi from literary movements such as the neo-realistic novel, as well as the iconoclastic essayist Wang Xiaobo (Duke 1985; Wu 2005; Huang 2007). Participants and advocates of these cultural movements were generally called “literature youth” for their enthusiasm of literature and artwork, and they cultivated consciousness of the direct relationship between culture and their tendency to use cultural works for social criticism.

The transition from *wenxue* youth to the current popular term “*wenyi* youth,” as Chinese scholar Wang Xiaoyu (2009) observes, happened around 1995, as a direct consequence of the development of mass media technology and the proliferation of commodity culture, which ultimately led to the “rise of the motion image” in tandem with the “decline of literature.” As Wang noted, “in terms of time, reading classic literature usually require three to five days, sometimes even longer; watching classic cinema, instead, usually took two to three hours. Literature has been gradually professionalized, while motion pictures obtain a more public quality” (ibid.). Under the general trend of the visualization of Chinese mass culture was an alternative underground trend connected with the arrival of mass informal pirate culture, in the form of the proliferation of pirate VHS tapes and DVDs, which brought affluent and affordable pirate copies of nonmainstream cultures, particularly Chinese underground and independent films and non-Hollywood European art films. The early postsocialist *wenyi* youth, as a categorical name of certain postsocialist youth, was greatly influenced by this pirate film culture. In cultivating enthusiasm for these

nonmainstream films by visiting informal commercial sites such as DVD corner shops, underground online discussion forums, and informal film fan clubs, a group of urban elite youth constructed communities called *wenyi* youth for their “alternative” cultural taste. Although the alternative status preserved these *wenyi* youth’s countercultural keynotes, it nonetheless drifted away from the politically imbedded youth identity in its most conventional sense.

The arrival of the Internet and the proliferation of social media and digital culture in the 21st century dissociated the contemporary postsocialist *wenyi* youth from both its political roots and countercultural keynotes and transformed it into a hyper-commodified hipster-like culture (Maly and Varis 2016), a process very similar to the “hipster capitalism” of the U.S. (Scott 2017). The arrival of Internet culture efficiently decreased the distinction between alternative cultural consuming behaviors and mainstream behaviors since information that once belonged to the “insider’s knowledge” that allowed *wenyi* youth to leverage cultural elitism was now accessible to the majority in general. The sharing economy of the Internet allowed for accessing alternative cultural products much more conveniently, and online communities and social media accelerated and popularized the dissemination of nonmainstream cultural works — it is much easier and more common for an ordinary netizen to learn about a non-theatre-released film on social media and find pirate resources by searching online than to learn about it from a cinephile magazine and digging up a pirate copy DVD from a dim and crowded corner shop. Additionally, the inherited “coolness” of *wenyi* youth and their alternative cultural styles had now become a

reproducible fashion or “commodified rebellion” (Arsel and Thompson 2010). The once authentic cultural identity of *wenyi* youth developed into an “insincere culture of imitators” (Nordby 2013). For instance, a widely circulated document entitled “Quick Guides for *Wenyi* Youth” numerated many copiable labels that composed the general opinions of *wenyi* youth: particular kinds of books (Haruki Murakami and Marguerite Duras), music (European Nordic Folk and post-rock), cigarette brands, apparel, and commodified social practices, such as drinking cocktails instead of beer (except craft beer), attending live house performances rather than large concerts, etc.

Under this hyper-commodification of *wenyi* youth as a “countercultural commodity” is persistent rhetoric that differentiates the superficial *wenyi* youth as a branding label and a copiable commodity from the authentic *wenyi* youth as a sincere temperament and personality. However, instead of invoking the leftist definition of *wenyi* youth for their political participation or increasing its alternative countercultural element, the “plea” of authentic *wenyi* youth explains it as an introvertive, antisocial, and individual sentiment that is best described as a feeling of “unbelonging” or the orientation of dissociating oneself from certain social norms and existing structures and imbues such tendencies with feelings of dejection, exile, and abandonment. This sentiment of unbelonging is best epitomized in a video commercial released by Douban (2016), entitled “Our Spiritual Corner” (*wo men de jing shen jiao luo*). Adopting a first-person narrative, the commercial is considered a manifesto that Douban offers for its primary users, i.e., the *wenyi* youth — and of



course the image of the *wenyi* youth that is described as authentic rather than the commodified spin.

The video is a first-person point of view monologue of a *wenyi* youth's solitary spiritual odyssey. It begins with a monologue from the young male protagonist: "Other than a small secret, I'm just an ordinary person." The small secret that distinguishes him from an ordinary person is, it turns out, his failure and refusal to integrate into the outside world and his yearning for isolation. When sitting in a small room, the young man dials 911 but then does not speak. When he walks out to answer the door, an ambulance is already waiting outside. Two men are holding a straitjacket. The monologue continues, "I embrace the world with open arms, and the world embraces me," and he opens his arms to let the men put him in the straitjacket. After he steps into the ambulance, his journey begins. The metaphor of willingly being sent to an asylum as the beginning of a life journey clearly sends an antisocial message since the young man is considered a madman by the outside world and sees the outside world as an asylum itself.

Audiences then follow the young man's point of view as it shifts and drifts from one time space to another— a metaphor of his life journey. Because his arms are restricted, he can only be dragged and pushed by others before being abandoned by them and drifting on to the next time space. His passive status implies his inability or voluntary reluctance to participate in the world outside of his spiritual self. For instance, in one scene, the young man is standing next to a group of children around a bonfire— a scene that suggests childhood— before he is dragged down by them like

Gulliver, a symbol of being an outsider, and placed in a glass coffin. In the next scene, he is in a hospital bed. A middle-aged woman, possibly his mother, is pushing the bed and looking at him tenderly. However, it only takes a few seconds before the woman pushes him out of the window, which reinforces the feeling of being abandoned and excluded from a normative life. Finally, after he is left by a young woman, a symbolic figure for romantic love, in a claustrophobic cubicle, the cubicle launches like a rocket, flies toward outer space and connects to a spaceship. The young man finally steps out of the cubicle and marches through the spaceship alone. The monologue states, “If I do not make any contact, friends will have no idea where to find me.” The status of being disconnected and desolate is strengthened by this monologue, and outer space is a metaphor for social detachment and exile.

In the end, he eventually enters a room, which turns out to be the exact same room that he left in the beginning. He uses a knife that he hid under his shirt to cut off the straitjacket. Although he had the knife the whole time, that he waited until this point to use it indicates his voluntary rejection of connection and interaction. While the spaceship continues to fly into space and away from the mundane world, the young man sits and starts to read a book. The ending monologue says, “Sometimes, I embrace the world with open arms. And sometimes, I hope to leave the world behind.” As a full circle, the video depicts the typical *wenyi* youth as an unsocial and solitude subject who is voluntarily isolated and detached from the larger society.

Considering the above elaborated shifting of fields of significance of the term *wenyi*, it becomes clear that the once-stable definition of the term has become a rather

unstable and contingent term in the postsocialist era. The contemporary adaptation of *wenyi* in phrases such as *wenyi* film and *wenyi* youth alleviates the once clearly perceived political implication in these phrases and instead signifies a rather subjective affect that usually involves introverted feelings and antisocial sentiments. However, with its ambiguity and contingency, or to state it another way, exactly because of its ambiguity and contingency, the term has been widely adopted in various contexts in postsocialist China, especially in the digital sphere, as a term deployed by postsocialist youth to express their opinions and describe their collective experiences characterized by a structural feeling of unbelonging. Nevertheless, instead of an individualistic and introvertive feeling about oneself, this affect of unbelonging preserves dense political connotations that are only revealed by digging into the surplus archives of the *wenyi* affect preserved on the digital site that participates in the production of the affect in the first place.

### **Digital Archive of Affects: The Infrastructure of Douban**

In articulating what he meant by “structure of feeling,” Raymond Williams addressed how the term is used to capture culture and society as “the undeniable experience of the present” or the formative process of culture and society (1958). The term therefore is deployed to compensate for the epistemological restriction of human consciousness that tends to perceive culture and society as being in the past tense, the tendency to summarize and abstract a living culture into an already existing framework received from previous experiences, and the habit of recognizing society

in static terms. The structure of feeling, in contrast, emphasizes the ongoing experience of shaping things that will later be considered the culture or social ethos of the time and addresses such a process in a progressive tense.

One of the most salient features of the structure of feeling is its quality of a solution: the ongoing social experience, as Williams further elaborated, consists of “the social experiences in solution” that are “distinct from other social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available” (ibid.) This chemistry metaphor is worth further consideration. Typically, a solution would contain two components: a solute and a solvent. The solute is the minor substance that dissolves in the major substances of the solvent. Although lesser in terms of portion, the solute is the essential factor that defines the qualities of a solution. Precipitation is the process of the creation of a solid form from a solution through which the solute that was once dissolved is sedimented and formed into a more concrete and discernable state. In other words, the structure of feeling is translucent, if not transparent, without the process of precipitation. And it is only through precipitation can such social experiences become ostensible, enunciable and articulated.

In its contemporary re-articulation, the concept of *wenyi* can no longer be understood literally. Instead, as the above section indicates, it has developed into an adjective to describe certain widely shared affects that have no better word to further define them. Bearing Williams’s conceptualization in mind, I argue that the *wenyi* affect is one such structure of feeling for the postsocialist youth, in the sense that it

indicates a collectively felt, structurally constructed social experience in solution, as vividly felt however ambiguously enunciated. Furthermore, the digital space of the Douban website, as I will elaborate in this section, serves as a site at which the precipitation of such structure of feeling can be found — from what I call the digital archive of affects.

Before I move onto further discussion of the digital space, it is necessary to first expound on the connection between the digital space of Douban and the cultural discourse of *wenyi* in contemporary China. Although common knowledge about digital topography recognizes Douban as the base camp of Chinese postsocialist *wenyi* youth, this common knowledge would be easily rebuked if considering from a positivist viewpoint. It is very easy to dismiss it by showing the imaginative aspect of any social consciousness – such as that not all users identify themselves as *wenyi* youth, not all self-identified *wenyi* youth are on Douban, and not all *wenyi* films are acclaimed. From this perspective, the notion of the instinctive equalization between Douban and *wenyi* is off the mark. However, as I contended in the previous section, rather than a concrete concept of a notional entity, *wenyi* in the postsocialist context signifies rather subjectively and loosely defined opinions, feelings and perceptions. Therefore, it would be reductive to understand the notion of *wenyi* youth as a social identity and the *wenyi* film as a film genre. Instead, both phrases suggest that the common understanding of the instinctive connection between Douban and *wenyi* is a matter of social consciousness. In other words, it matters more if Douban is recognized as the primary *wenyi* space than if Douban is actually *wenyi*, since both

the concepts of *wenyi* youth and *wenyi* film, as well as the connotation of *wenyi* itself, are subjectively and contextually constructed right through the production of contemporary discourse that recognize such connections. In other words, it is through perceiving what is produced in the digital space of Douban that the structure of feeling of *wenyi* is configured and the common sense of *wenyi* is constructed — the mutual referentiality between Douban and *wenyi* suggests that the digital space not only embodies the structure of feeling but also produces it. It is in this sense that a closer look at the discursive production in the digital space would offer us a lens to discern that for which the *wenyi* affect really aspires.

Douban was launched in 2005 in Beijing, named after the hutong coffee shop where the founder, software engineer Yang Bo (aka. Abei), spent time coding the primary site infrastructure. Originally, Douban was designed as an online book club, where readers could post about and share their reviews and afterthoughts. Later iterations of the site gradually incorporated other “hobbies and interests,” such as films, TV shows, music, theater, art and live concerts, and it allowed users to build discussion groups based on their own choices of topics. All of these topics are considered hobbies and passions of a typical *wenyi* youth, and the website was labeled with the term to attract those young people who self-identified as *wenyi* youth to join the website as a subcultural community in the beginning. However, since its launch, the website has attracted more than 200 million registered users and gathered 5 million active users. Most of them are postsocialist youth, as the primary users are made of people younger than 35 years old (Douban 2013). The large quantity of its

users determines that the site can no longer be simply considered a subcultural online community of those self-identified *wenyi* youth but rather a popular digital sphere for postsocialist youth in which the structure of feeling of the *wenyi* affect is configured.

In three ways, Douban develops into a digital archive of affect. First, the incorporation of grading and short-comment features allows ordinary people without the necessary skill for cultural critique to express their perceptions in a straightforward and simple manner. Second, fundamentally a rating system, Douban provides effective ways to structure individual feelings and preferences into collective opinions. Last but not least, beyond the rating system, Douban also incorporates a social networking site (SNS) as its basic infrastructure and prioritizes cultural connoisseurship over self-exhibition as the primary way for individuals to build their online avatars. In the following, I consider Douban film, the most active subspace of Douban, which is designated for online reviews, comments, and discussions of films and TV shows, as an example to examine the ways in which archives of the postsocialist *wenyi* affect are produced.

First, the digital archive is based on ordinary users' nonprofessional and intuitive contributions. Each film entry has a separate independent page on Douban, through which registered users can mark the film as "watched" (*kan guo*) or "want to watch" (*xiang kan*),<sup>26</sup> add tags, share the film on other social media platforms, and leave comments. Generally speaking, a registered Douban user could express his or her perceptions of a film in three ways: ratings, short comments, and lengthy reviews.

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<sup>26</sup> For TV shows, there is a third button labeled "am watching" (*zai kan*).

The rating system is based on a five-star scales. Five stars indicate a full score, translating as the reviewer “strongly recommending” (*qiang lie tui jian*) the film. In a hierarchical top-down manner, a four-star rating means that the film is “recommended” (*tui jian*), and three stars constitute a threshold, indicating that the film is “not so bad” (*hai xing*) or “just so-so” (*yi ban*), implying a mediocre appraisal. A rating of less than three stars is usually considered a negative review: two stars mean “relatively bad” (*bi jiao cha*), and one star is “very bad” (*hen cha*). Every time a user clicks the “watched” button on a film’s page, he or she is asked to choose to fill the blank pentagram icon next to the film’s title to indicate his or her rating of the film (Figure 2.1). When the user places the cursor on each grade, the textual explanation of what the number of stars represents appears to aid the user in making a better decision.



Figure 2-1 When a registered user clicks the “watched” button on a film page

Although with imaginable arbitrary and random characters, the sequential rating system of Douban nonetheless provides an efficient and intuitive way for users



to visualize their perceptions. The relatively subjective explanation that interprets the star scales as ambiguous terms such as “very good” and “very bad” encourages users to make straightforward decisions rather than attempting to build their own system of reference for the five-star scale. As I further discuss in the following, these subjective ratings are gathered by Douban to translate into exactly calculated grades to represent the collective opinion about a certain film.

In addition to the rating, users can also add a short comment at the same time or add a lengthy review by scrolling down the page and clicking a button labeled “I want to write a film review” (*wo yao xie ying ping*). While both features allow users to leave textual comments about a film, the infrastructural design of the digital space encourages users to make short comments quickly rather than produce lengthy reviews with more sophisticated considerations. While users can simply leave their short comments once they have added the film to their profiles, they are required to perform further scrolling and clicking to reach the editing page for lengthy reviews. Additionally, compared to the flexibility of short comments, which have no minimum requirements and allows a maximum of 350 Chinese characters, providing sufficient space for a person to elaborate a relatively comprehensive argument or statement, the lengthy reviews require more energy and time investment since it is requested that the user write at least 140 words, approximately the length of five average-length pages of formal literature writing in Chinese (Zuo 1992), plus a title. The relatively complicated procedures and limitations of publishing a lengthy review therefore essentially guide users to choose short comments as their major means of expressing

opinions. In this sense, the numbers of short comments always supersede lengthy reviews in exponential scale.

The prioritization of straightforward rating and quickly written comments over sophisticated written reviews of Douban's user-generated content (UGC) reflects a more general trend brought about by the rise of digital media since Internet interlocutors tend to produce shorter, more concise, and more rapid responses than interlocutors of traditional media, although the design is more profound in the sense that it allows for a more egalitarian structure of discourse in the field of film critique – an area once dominated by professional and elites. By translating individual subjective feelings into quantifiable data and prioritizing sporadic thoughts over well-articulated opinions, the digital archives on Douban preserve the less-decorated affects of ordinary people.

Second, essentially a rating system, or an artificially engineered, large-scale, word-of-mouth network that enables individuals to share opinions and experiences for each other's reference (Resnick et al. 2000), Douban also participates in the process of translating individual affect and feeling into collective and public opinions. As I discussed above, individual user-generated content replaces professional opinions to be the main source for achieving such “digitalization of word-of-mouth” (Dellarocas 2003). It therefore requires the optimization of content produced by individuals into quantifiable, measurable, and calculable data that can be incorporated into algorithmic calculations and redistributed to other users for the purpose of offering advice and making recommendations. In this sense, the infrastructure of Douban

enables what Alison Hearn called “structuring feeling” or a cultural construction of public intimacy, in which the public displays and mediates personal emotion and affect (2010).

Since the beginning, Douban regularized the digitalization of word-of-mouth. The front page of the beta version of Douban film is divided into three major segments. On the top is a search bar that allows users to find “film introductions, audience reviews, and comments and discussions” by searching film titles (a feature was added later that allows users to search the names of filmmakers and actor/actress, or an IMDB number). On the right side is a grid chart of twelve films that have been recently reviewed by users at the time the page is loaded. By clicking on a film title, the user would enter a separate page for a single film. Below the search bar is a list of previews of the four most recently posted film reviews in chronological order. In addition to the basic information, the rating score given by the reviewer is also included in the preview.

Individuals’ five-star ratings are directly calculated into a numerate score based on scale of 0.0 to 10.0: each five-star scale rating is doubled and add together, and the result is divided by the number of user ratings and becomes the film’s score. While the five-star scale rating for individual users encourages subjective judgment, the final numeral scores listed on the film’s page are used as objective evidence of collective opinions of Douban users to compare and evaluate perceptions of the film among Douban users and to set principles for Douban to give recommendations to users (Abei 2015). In the early stage of the site, the digitalization of word-of-mouth

was rather mechanical since both the recommendations of “recently reviewed” films and the list of “Douban Film 250” are generated simply based on mechanic calculations such as the chronological order or accumulative number, and neither of them caters to individual needs but rather presents similar or even the same results to every individual user.

Later, Douban added new grammars to further diversify its recommendation logics. One of them allows for the recommendation of the top-six films that have been discussed most frequently over the past seven days. Another grammar incorporates tags as guidance for recommendations, in which users are provided with the most popular tags used by other users, also during the same time period of the past seven days. Compared to simply displaying most recent reviewed films in chronological order, these new features provide users with more accumulative, as well as content-sensitive, results. Later, status-indicating buttons were added to single film pages to allow users to mark films as “watched” or “want to watch.” Based on the different status that individual users relate themselves to each film entry, Douban also curates a new recommendation list, i.e., “the most wanted films on Douban” to its front page, further complicating the ways in which individual users’ desires influence the results of how collective opinions are produced.

Other than the recommendations provided in the forms of generative lists, users are also guided to receive associative recommendations as they visit single film pages, in which sections such as “People who like this film also like ...” (*xi huan zhe bu dian ying de ren ye xi huan...*) efficiently lead individual users to follow the trends

of the collective opinions and contribute to the production of the trend— as they click other films and act on these pages as led by these recommendation sections, their activities are also counted as part of the data that contribute to the associative recommendation programming. In 2007, Douban finalized its word-of-mouth rating system by incorporating a machine-learning function that introduces algorithmically curated content (Thorson and Wells 2016), or content customized to each single user according to the backstage tracking and calculation of their activities on the site. A section called “Douban guesses you might like...” (*dou ban cai ni xi huan*) was added to the front page of Douban film. The section, as it claims, is a recommendation generated solely based on each individual’s tastes, defined by the data produced from their activities on the site. In this sense, by quantifying user-generated content and providing algorithmically curated content, Douban efficiently translates individual preferences and feelings into collective opinions and guides individuals to produce certain feelings and choose certain preferences.

The last but not least way in which Douban archives individual affect is through its prioritization of cultural connoisseurship over self-exposure and exhibition as its principle for social networking. Usually, a typical SNS would encourage its users to transform their interpersonal connections in the offline space into virtual social connections, and this mode has been adopted by SNSs such as Renren, a Facebook spinoff in China, as well as WeChat, which is based on users’ mobile phone contacts and interpersonal connection. Otherwise, social media platforms such as microblogs or photo- and video-based platforms encourage users to

invent their online avatars as alter-egos, pivoting through interactivities and feedback between users and embodied in practices such as “likes” and “replies.” Douban’s social networking logic, in contrast, downplays such interactivity and connectivity and encourages users to build a profile based on their cultural connoisseurship, which does not require or intend attracting attention from others.

A typical Douban profile includes three components. Usually, on the left, a categorized collection of the user’s connoisseur trajectory and status is listed, i.e., the books that they want to read and have read; the films and TV programs that they have watched, want to watch, and are watching; and the music that they want to listen to, have listened to, and are listening to. While all Douban user profiles contain these three sections, labeled “I watch,” “I read,” and “I listen,” which constitute Douban’s basic database of cultural works, the displaying of other genres of cultural commodities can also be added if the user has added the entry of the genre to his/her profile, such as “I play” for video games, “I participate” for off-line or on-line cultural events, and “My theater” for theater productions. In addition to this exhibition of a user’s virtual personal collection is a component with which users can produce more personalized content, such as a blog-like “diary” and “photo album,” where they can upload written posts and photos and set the limit of authorized viewers. The third major component of a profile page, usually on the right of the page, includes the user’s profile photo and bio; the section of “my broadcast,” where the user’s activities of adding collections and posts are displayed in chronological

order; and the section of “my follow,” which lists other accounts that the user follows or who follow the user.

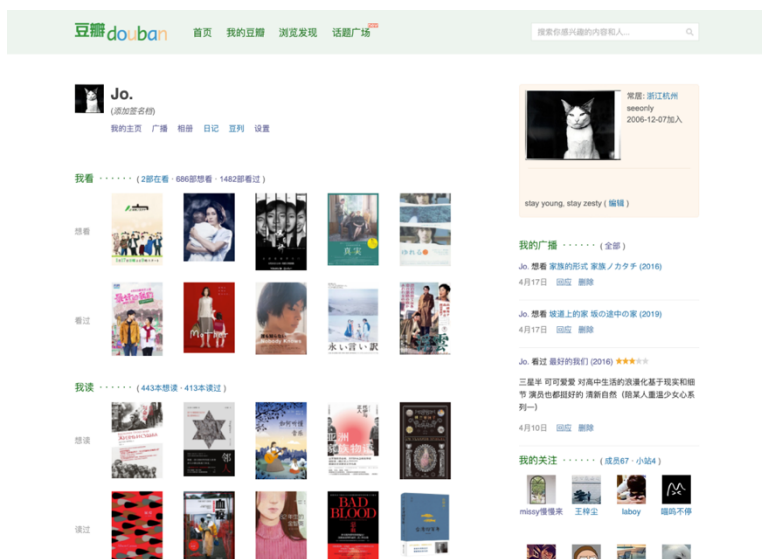


Figure 2-2 The author's Douban profile page (full screen mode)

From the screenshot of my personal Douban profile (See Figure 2.2), we can discern that the display of my cultural connoisseurship, as listed on the left side of the page, occupies 2/3 of the space, and the patterned display of images of film posters and book covers attracts the majority of one's visual attention. In contrast, the right side of the page, where my recent activities are sandwiched between my profile picture and the list of my followers with its all textual formats, is not as conspicuous. Although Douban allows users to change the display arrangement of the profile page, these basic patterns, which prioritize the agglomerative display of the cultural commodities that a user relates to than the chronological timeline of the user's activity, is prevented from changing—the top right section, i.e., the profile block, the “my broadcast” block, and the “my follow” block, cannot be changed in their sizes and

locations— therefore, regardless of which collection category a user chooses to place on the left top of the page, the right side is larger and becomes the focal point of the profile page.

While the profile page setting appears to prioritize building one’s cultural connoisseurship by tracking one’s instant activities as the primary content for creating an individual user’s online avatar, the ways in which social networking connections are made in the space also suggest its advocacy for antisocial sociality since it depends on indirect connection through mutual cultural tastes rather than through direct interactions. When a registered user clicks on another user’s profile page, a section of “your common interests” is placed at the very top of the page, showcasing the number and a dragging list of the overlapped entries that both users have in their collections. While later in this section I discuss how shared interests between individual users provides the primary algorithm logic of Douban, at this point, it becomes explicit that in the Douban space, inter-individual sociality is mediated through cultural commodities, which define the online avatar of the user through the practice of cultural connoisseurship.

It was comparatively quite recently, in late 2011, that Douban normalized an interactive front page in which users could post texts and photos, recommend external websites on their timelines, and interact with their followers’ timeline activities. Before this version of “broadcast” was finalized, Douban restricted its front-page timeline to an old-style news feed in which users could only view the automatically generated activity logs of the users whom they follow, such as what films they added



to their collection, what books they finished reading, what new comments they added to an entry, etc., but it allowed for very little interactivity and flexibility in terms of content creation.

In this sense, cultural connoisseurship becomes the primary way in which the Douban user builds his or her online avatar in the digital space of Douban. Instead of using self-exhibitive materials such as selfies, original posts, videos, and other self-invented content, it is more common for Douban users to deploy connoisseur activities such as adding an entry to one's profile collections, tagging certain entries, and creating a list of entries (known as the dou-list) with certain themes, topics, etc., to invent their virtual identities. Through a discussion of the second set of case studies in the following section and examining these practices, we can find evidence of the ways in which individual affects are expressed and preserved in the digital space.

In conclusion, Douban is a crucial digital space in which the structure of feeling of *wenyi* gets precipitated. Through three ways, i.e., the prioritization of intuitive and sporadic grading and short-comments to record individual feelings, the rating system that structures individual feelings into collective opinions to further provide ways of expressions for individual feelings, and the encouragement of cultural connoisseurship avatars to transmit individual affect through repetitive practices, the digital space provides affluent archives for us to look at the ways in which the *wenyi* affect is recorded, circulated, and embodied. In the last section of the chapter, I move on to scrutinize two productive sites where the *wenyi* affect is

perceived most affluently and explicitly. By examining closely the digital archives produced at these specific sites, I provide a radical critique of the political implications of this digital affect of postsocialist youth.

### **The Utopia in the Ephemeral: Digital Archive of the Present Absence**

In critiquing the structuring binarism between potentiality and actuality, Agamben (1999) recognizes the former as a certain mode of nonbeing that is nonetheless eminent or as something that currently exists but does not actually exist in the present tense (178). In other words, potentiality, as a mode of futurity, describes the perpetuating status of a future arrival, for which the present time always indicates the absence of things that will eventually arrive. However, in further elaborating the philosophical roots of potentiality to Aristotle, Agamben acknowledges that the existence of potentiality does not simply rest on “the potential to do this or that thing,” but rather on the “potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality” (ibid. 180). In other words, potentiality does not simply exist in anticipation of a future but also in conditions where such a future might not eventually arrive. In this sense, potentiality is a temporal status that is much more than simply linear progressive time that leads the present to an affirmed and determined future. Rather, what potentiality inflicts is a vivid feeling of the present as an absence or a void, and the things needed to fill this void may or may not occur.

The absence of a future that may or may not occur in the present tense, which Agamben calls the metaphysics of potentiality and which Bloch (1986) terms the

“not-yet-consciousness” or “a blankness or horizon of consciousness formed not by the past but by the future” (Jameson 1971: 129), is essentially utopian; however, such utopian feelings can only be ephemeral. This absence in the present is utopian in the sense that it promises a possible futurity or something that does “not quite really exist, but could to various extents” (Shields 2002: 25) and therefore enacts an anticipatory illumination of a better or alternative future. However, it is also ephemeral in the sense that the not-yet arrived futurity, which alludes to the metaphysical uncertainty surrounding the fact that a potential may or may not be actualized, constantly reminding the present of the absence of such a future and inflicting a haunting feeling of the present as a ruined time in which that future may never arrive.

In this chapter, I argue that the *wenyi* affect shared by Chinese postsocialist youth reflects such an ephemeral utopianism in the sense that it illuminates a form of futurity wherein the present cannot afford to envision its actuality. In other words, the structure of the *wenyi* affect of unbelonging is a political aspiration, although its aspiring future can only be observed in ephemeral moments and especially in those moments where discontent towards the present is expressed in the pursuit of something that cannot be found in the here and now. In the following discussion, I offer critical interpretations of two collections of digital archives of affect in Douban film in which the feeling of the present as ruin is expressed in an eminent manner. Specifically, nostalgic sentiment towards films made in the recent past elaborates a futurity of Chinese film in the no-longer consciousness, and the spontaneous

preservation of a banned film reflects a desire for Chinese film culture in the should've been consciousness. In either case, a utopia is illuminated in these ephemeral imaginaries of a futurity anticipated in its present absence.

### ***Nostalgic sentiment and no-longer consciousness***

On December 28, 2016, *People's Daily* published an op-ed criticizing Douban film reviews for producing “vicious reviews that will harm the domestic film industry” (Zeng 2016). The controversy started with a post published by “blaspheme film” (*xie du dian ying*), an influential Douban film critic, on its other social media account, in which it claims that “Zhang Yimou has died” (*zhang yi mou yi si*) in commenting on the director's recently released work, *The Great Wall*. The op-ed criticizes the work as an “imprecation of Chinese film,” suggesting that the film's low scores can be interpreted as a malicious manipulation and intentional destruction of the domestic film industry. In describing negative reception of Zhang's film and of two New Year's films (*he sui pian*) as part of an unfair attack by hostile forces, the op-ed posits that “under the misguidance of these low scores and vicious reviews, many audiences might be disappointed and even refuse to watch any domestic films anymore (ibid.).”

Among various voices emerging in responding to the op-ed, one of the most pertinent ties the negative review to Douban's well-known *wenyi* aesthetic. This opinion suggests that the op-ed is an overreaction and even delusional since Douban is known for its disinterest in commercial films, and even good commercial films rarely receive a better review on Douban than non-commercial *wenyi* films. While the op-ed

suggests a theatrical conflict between Douban and its counterpart, the “general audience,” the responsive voice nullifies this conflict by differentiating opinions published on Douban from those of mass audiences. Either way, intensified friction between the general and national film market and culture and indifferent, even refractory attitudes towards the former reflected through the prism of Douban discourse is perceived as a known fact.

Such a conflict becomes especially eminent when films such as *The Great Wall* are under Douban “attack,” as they are considered to represent the successful incorporation of nationalism into film production and the thriving of Chinese national cinema on the global stage. First, New Year’s films refer to Chinese films released during the New Year’s holiday and Spring Festival. These films are considered to serve as appropriate cultural entertainment for Chinese people in celebrating the holidays, cultivating their national identity, and enhancing their social cohesiveness. Typically, only those films with presumably prolific potential and high popularity are released during these time periods. Films of this category therefore reflect an official endorsement of such films to satisfy people’s needs and represent the nation’s popular culture. Moreover, Zhang Yimou’s work is endorsed by its script, which showcases prosperous nationalist pride. It is the first English-language Hollywood film made by Zhang Yimou, who is one of the most famous Chinese directors in the world, known for his award-winning cinematography and stunning direction of the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Zhang’s outstanding achievements have made him a point of national pride and afforded him the title ‘National Master.’

Furthermore, the film, coproduced by Chinese film studios and a major Hollywood studio, stars both Chinese stars and Hollywood insiders such as Matt Damon and William Dafoe and is considered by the Chinese mainstream media to be a film that “tells the world the Chinese story” and “uses the form of a global blockbuster to deliver the image and value of Chinese people and Chinese culture” (Yang 2016).

In contrast to excitement for the film’s representation of Chinese nationalism on the transnational stage, collective opinions reflected on Douban film show a great deal of indifference and even dismissal of this mainstream culture and nationalist sentiment. All three films mentioned by the cited op-ed received low scores. Among them, *The Great Wall* only scored 4.0/10.0 when the op-ed was published—a score reflected by more than 100,000 individual user reviews. More than three-quarters of individual ratings given are three stars and lower, and nearly 42% of low score reviews give the film one star. Whether these results are a manipulation or an authentic reflection of people’s opinions, judging from the *wenyi* standards of Douban users, it is clear these films cannot be considered great works or sources of national pride.

A glimpse of comments made further reveals a dissatisfaction with the present that overwhelms Douban’s pages. The most “liked” short comment reads, “I used to believe that Zhang Yimou could still be cured, but he keeps proving that he can make an even worse film” (*xuruo cheng*). The comparative syntax expresses a perception of the director’s decline. Another reviewer comments, “I don’t really understand how Zhang Yimou ends up with these commercial stunts. With them, he is all showy, superficial and flaunting with no substance. He cannot even tell a good story. This

director, who is from Shannxi, a place that represents significant facets of ancient Chinese culture, used to be simple and unpretentious. Now he is a capital embarrassment” (*shen mi wai xing ren xiao bao*). Stark comparisons between Zhang’s past and present, discontent with the latter, and nostalgia for the former are explicit. Additionally, the commenter named “blaspheme cinema,” who aligns with this nostalgic sentiment by saying “Zhang Yimou is dead,” further posts on the film’s Douban Film page that “I have no intention to curse him in person. I just think his art life is almost over. He was once the director of *Red Sorghum* and *To Live*. The films he has made over the past few years are nothing but disappointments.” Two particular films are cited as representation of Zhang’s impressive past. This disappointment in Zhang’s current work is also reflected in another popular short comment: “Excellent, Zhang Yimou finally leaves behind his burdens as an artist this time and makes a magnificent decision to say farewell to his old self” (*le shan xiao fo*).

This nostalgic sentiment not only appears in Douban opinions on Zhang Yimou’s cinematography but also in a general tendency to prefer Chinese films produced in a slightly earlier period, specifically those made in the 1990s, seeing them as a stronger representation of Chinese national films than films made in recent decades. This is especially evident in declining Douban reviews of directors whose careers started before or after the 1990s. For instance, both Zhang Yimou and his classmate Chen Kaige achieved their “peak” Douban scores in the 1990s and their “lowest” scores in the 2000s. Feng Xiaogang, who developed a reputation in the 1990s from his successful New Year’s films, received his best review in 1995 and was relentlessly

criticized for his 2013 reboot of the same film. Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) is undoubtedly a classic of the postsocialist generation, but none of his later films have received a comparable review. This decline over time is also observed among younger directors. Jia Zhangke, an icon of sixth-generation directors, has never had a film surpass his 1998 debut film. The 1990s, without exaggeration, are thus considered the "golden era" of Chinese film in Douban discourse.

Whether certain films are better than others are beyond the point that this chapter seeks to make. What I examine in the following discussion is the strong nostalgia expressed in these reviews and the generational consciousness this reflects. This nostalgic sentiment idealizes the recent past, specifically the 1990s, as the golden age of Chinese film and amplifies a fervent discontent with present conditions as a failure to preserve the future of that recent past as potential. In other words, this nostalgic sentiment precipitates the current absent temporality shared by postsocialist youth, casting an ideal national culture as lost in the past and sensing an absence and inadequacy in the here and now. Through an examination of the trajectory of Douban perceptions of the works of two Chinese directors, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, I contemplate and elaborate on the no-longer consciousness expressed through nostalgic sentiment.

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, early filmmakers revived the film careers that they had previously abandoned due to the totalitarian banning of cinematic production during the Cultural Revolution. However, the de facto genesis of postsocialist film in China only arrived once the so-called fifth generation of



filmmakers appeared.<sup>27</sup> Including most of the Beijing Film Academy class of 1982, the fifth generation is a new generation of filmmakers shaped by their adolescent memories of the Cultural Revolution. This cohort, especially through their early works, efficiently saved Chinese cinematic culture from the trap of the rigid revolutionary aesthetic of the Cultural Revolution, which tended to be imbued with “simplification and absolute clarity” (Clark 2005: 3). The aesthetic exploration of the fifth generation has instead fundamentally changed what it means to be Chinese and served as “a major component in the reinvention of contemporary Chinese culture in a brief moment in the 1980s” (ibid.: 9). Among these filmmakers, Chen and Zhang are most commonly mentioned for their contributions to a “New Wave” of Chinese culture with a refashioned aesthetic style and symbolic order. For instance, Chen’s *Yellow Earth* (1984) adopts a unique minimization of dialog and an aesthetic of quietness and stillness that contradicts the revolutionary aesthetic (ibid.: 83). Zhang’s early cinematography applied the “primitive passion” of ancient China beyond the revolutionary narrative (Chow 1995). While the fifth generation peaked in the 1980s in terms of cinematographic exploration and aesthetic breakthroughs, the 1990s is usually considered to reflect the decline of these primitive and autonomous reinventions of the new China and the regularization and institutionalization of the Chinese film market. In particular, political turmoil, i.e., the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protest, “signaled the end of the cultural liberalization in

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<sup>27</sup> The term “fifth generation” can be traced to the 1920s, when the “first generation” of Chinese filmmakers began to make feature films. The first generation was active in the 1920s and earlier. The second generation was active in the 1930s. The third generation was active in the 1950s and constituted the first cohort of filmmakers in the newly found P.R.C. The fourth generation of filmmakers was active in the 1960s, and their careers were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution and reactivated in the late 1970s. See Ni 2016, 188-190.

which the fifth-generation filmmakers emerged,” and the aftermath of the traumatic catastrophe “added further political caution to the financial problems hitting the film studios that had become obvious over two years earlier” (Clark 2005: 86).<sup>28</sup>

However, for postsocialist youth, the chronology of postsocialist film is incongruent with the aforementioned scholarly assessment: the peak era of postsocialist film is the 1990s rather than the 1980s. This is felicitously reflected in Douban reviews of the fifth generation in general and of Chen and Zhang’s cinematography in particular. Table 2.2 visualizes Douban scores of their feature-length films across time. The horizontal axis is arranged in chronological order, and the vertical axis indicates the Douban score for each film. The overarching trendline indicates a general trend of Douban perception weighing films made in earlier decades more heavily than those made in later decades. Additionally, although the filmmakers’ 1980s films receive numerous positive reviews, it is the 1990s that witnesses the climax of these two directors’ film careers. For Chen, *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) has the highest score of 9.6/10.0. Such a high score renders the film one of the top-scored films in the entire Douban database, second only to *The Shawshank Redemption*. For Zhang, *To Live* (1994) has a score of 9.2/10.0, making it the 27<sup>th</sup>-highest ranked film on Douban 250 based on the same algorithm that ranks *Farewell My Concubine* in second place. A search of the top-rated “Chinese” (*zhong wen*) films positions Chen’s work first while Zhang’s ranks 8th among films with more than ten thousand ratings. In contrast, both directors receive their lowest Douban scores for works made in the 2000s. Chen’s *The*

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<sup>28</sup> See also my discussion of the historical debate on entertainment film in chapter one.

*Promise* (2005) has the astonishingly low score of 5.3/10.0 while Zhang's *Curse of the Golden Flowers* (2006) has the second lowest score after the notorious *The Great Wall* and the lowest score of its decade.

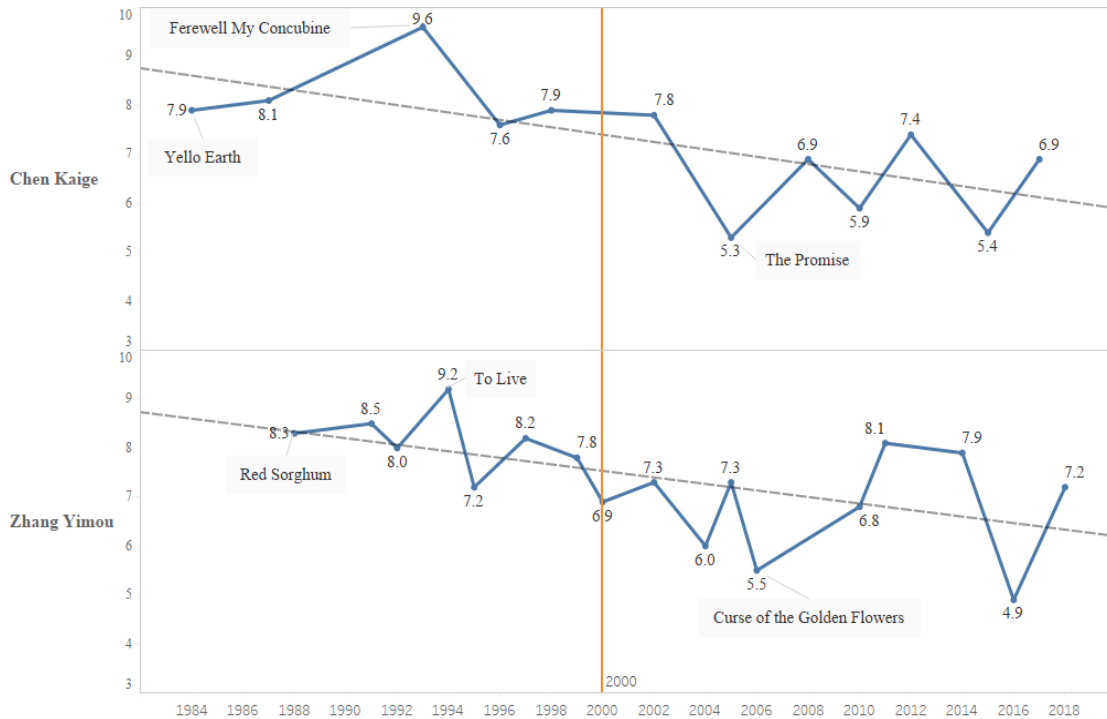


Table 2.2 Douban scores for Chen and Zhang cinematography by year

These polemical perceptions are no coincidence. Rather, they reveal a collective film viewing experience that defines the structured social experiences of postsocialist youth. Cohort-wise, the postsocialist generation lived through the 1990s and retains little memory of the 1980s. More importantly, in living through the decades of the 1990s to the 2010s, film cultures from the two decades also vividly depict different visions of Chinese national cinema to postsocialist youth. On one hand, the canonization of the two 1990s films among postsocialist youth cannot be separated from the historical process through which memory of the socialist past has been

constructed in postsocialist time, specifically the construction of cultural memories of the nation's recent catastrophic past, i.e., the Cultural Revolution. For postsocialist youth, the two most highly rated films made in the 1990s represent authentic reflections of views of the past and ideals of national cinema as consciously profound, affectively cathartic, and historically reflective. In other words, the two films have become part of a second-hand cultural memory of the Cultural Revolution shared by the postsocialist generation. In this sense, both films are often labeled by Douban users with the tag "Cultural Revolution" (*wen ge*). In other words, for young people born long after the end of the Cultural Revolution with little to no visceral memory of the revolution, these two films and those similar to them provide the primary and most accessible cultural memories from which to imagine and understand the socialist past.

Indeed, the politic of memory affects generations differently. For the socialist generation that directly experienced historical events, memories about the Cultural Revolution are visceral, direct, and vivid. For younger generations with no such vivid living experiences, memories about the past are always mediated and only felt in vicarious manner in the form of stories, fiction, metaphors, and symbols. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the production of cultural memories about this period has developed along with the proliferation of mass media. Films have gradually replaced official literary texts as the main sources through which younger generations can understand and perceive the decade.

In 1981, after a few years of rehabilitation and correction, the CCP gradually resolved remaining debates about the Cultural Revolution by providing a monolithic

negative description of the event as a historical mistake (Li 2016: 8-9). The official document released that year, the “Resolution on Certain Questions on the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China,” defines the decade as “internal disorder wrongly launched by the leader who took advantage of a reactionary clique and caused severe disaster to the Party, the nation and People of all ethnic groups.” In contrast, the time after the decade has marked a “great turning point of history” from which the nation has embraced “a new era of historical progress” (CCP Central Committee). In the wake of the political turmoil of 1989, Party authorities further stress that “any attempt to rehabilitate the Cultural Revolution in any way runs counter to the will of the public, the party, and the army,” substantially dissuading any discussion or representation of the Cultural Revolution as unnecessary and undesired, if not inappropriate and deviant.

Against the backdrop of this official resolution was the thriving of literary memorialization of the Cultural Revolution derived from its social and psychological aftermath. Immediately after the Cultural Revolution, a wave of cathartic literary practice referred to as “scar literature” (*shang hen wen xue*) took center stage in China’s recovering public sphere (Louie 1983; Lu 2001). The lengthier process of film production led to the comparatively late arrival of a similar catharsis in cinema, which did not occur until the 1980s. The first film directly representing a scene of the Cultural Revolution, *Evening Rain* (Wu Yigong & Wu Yonggang), was made in 1980, in which the memory of violence is represented in the narrative of “an invasion of the invader”

(*ru qin zhe de ru qin*, Cui 2006).<sup>29</sup> Among all Cultural Revolution films made in the 1980s, Xie Jing's *Hibiscus Town* (1986) in particular adopts a cathartic tone similar to that of scar literature and gained broad public attention during its time. Compared to the proliferation of Cultural Revolution films or films with representations of the Cultural Revolution of the 1980s, the 1990s witnessed a decline in the production of such films. As Chinese film scholar Cui Weiping observes, "Since 1990, there have been barely enough films about the Cultural Revolution, and we cannot expect at least one film each year that is about the Cultural Revolution anymore" (2006).

While the 1980s provided a larger number of films on the Cultural Revolution, with few exceptions, such as *Hibiscus Town*, these films have rarely influenced the postsocialist generation's cultural memories about the period as indicated by the minimal attention that these films have received on Douban. Most Cultural Revolution films of the 1980s have received at most one to two thousand ratings in the last two decades, which is negligible compared to the viewership of later films with easily over one million ratings each. A few factors have led to this outcome. The majority of Douban users were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s and came of age years after these 1980s films were made. Additionally, most 1980s films were produced as conventional films and in limited copies. It was not until the mid-2000s that government-sponsored film restoration started to make these earlier films accessible to contemporary audiences. During the 1990s and 2000s, very few of these films were

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<sup>29</sup> Other films made in the early 1980s with representations of the Cultural Revolution include the following: *A Handcuffed Passenger* (1980, Yu Yang); *Narrow Street* (1981, Yang Yanjin); and *A Narrow Lane Celebrity* (1985, Cong Lianwen) etc. See Cui 2006; Berry 2004, 77-100.

offered in formats more suitable for mass circulation (e.g., as DVDs and digital copies), preventing younger generations from revisiting them other than for special occasions or particular reasons.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, even though the 1990s produced fewer Cultural Revolution films, these films have directly formed the cultural memories of postsocialist youth. Not only have Chen and Zhang's works of this era remained the most viewed and commented upon on Douban, but a quick search of the database using the tag of "Cultural Revolution" and sorting results in order of number of tags, ratings, and overall attention shows that by all accounts, films made in the 1990s are ranked first in the catalogue, indicating the unshakable significance of this batch of 1990s Cultural Revolution films in the cultural memories of postsocialist youth.<sup>31</sup>

For Douban users, *Farewell My Concubine* and *To Live* are considered legitimate cinematic works for their historical authenticity and profoundness in representing the history of the Cultural Revolution. One comment states: "One is *Farewell My Concubine*, the other is *To Live*. They tell the history of modern China, and no other film within one hundred years can supersede them" ("Bono"). In one of the most-liked short comments on *Farewell My Concubine*, "kai se ling xiao jie" writes that the film "genuinely and profoundly reflects those people with miserable fates

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, a large number of Douban users learn about *The Maple* from *The Three Body Problem*, a 2008 sci-fi film (book?) in which the protagonist mentions the former film. The most "liked" short comment on the film's page makes a direct salute to the book. When the director of *Evening Rain* passed away in 2019, the China Film Archive screened the film as a memorial, and nearly 100 new ratings were posted on Douban that same day.

<sup>31</sup> Besides *Farewell My Concubine* and *To Live*, other major Cultural Revolution films made in the 1990s include *Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang 1993), *In the Heat of the Sun* (Jiang Wen 1994), and *Xiuxiu: A Sent-down Girl* (Chen Chong 1998).

during that historical period, which ran from the period before the war to the period of the Cultural Revolution” and emphasizes that the film “displays the conditions of the Cultural Revolution in which people disowned their families and humanity was distorted to their extreme.” In this comment, the historical profundity of *Farewell My Concubine* rests on its ability to thoroughly reflect the misery of the Cultural Revolution in extremely authentic detail. In describing *To Live* as a “sci-fi film” for “people who live in our era,” “dou yun zhuang qing” stresses the film’s realistic representation of the Cultural Revolution in vividly displaying “the absurdity of that time.” User “Sophie Z” laments that the film shows us that “most stories starting in the Republican Era became the toughest during that period,” as “that period” unequivocally refers to the period of the Cultural Revolution. Lines from the films are quoted as testimony of the cruelty of the history. For instance, a statement made by Cheng Dieyi, protagonist of *Farewell My Concubine*, “such a precious national treasure that even the Japanese knew to protect it, you just burn it down without even a second thought,” referencing the Red Guards’ brutal sabotage of traditional cultures such as the Peking Opera, is quoted several times.

The two films are therefore distinguished by their thorough and profound representation of this difficult period in Chinese history. Their depth, profundity, and genuineness in the sense that they authentically reflect history are repeatedly mentioned as strengths of these films by Douban users. In fact, keywords such as “era” (*shi dai*), “history” (*li shi*), and “authentic” (*zhen shi*) are the most used words in short comments about the two films. One top-liked short comment on *Farewell My Concubine* even



considers the film's historical authenticity to outweigh the caliber of its artistry: "rather than being touched by the vicissitudes of the story itself, it is more appropriate to say that [audiences] are touched by the history of the Chinese people's collective memory behind the story. Without the historical background of ups and downs, it cannot reflect the genuineness of humanity..." ("zan shuo").

For film scholars, the historical narrative adopted in 1990s films on the Cultural Revolution is problematic. For instance, Cui (2006) notes that the protagonists of these films "know nothing about the revolutionary discourse and never enter and fully understand the implications of those revolutionary vocabularies ... in the midst of the turmoil of the time, it seems like they are always innocent." However, paradoxically, this historical innocence is perceived as very much sincere to the younger generation since for this demographic, a lack of identification with revolutionary discourse and direct memories of historical turmoil would justify their historical view of the Cultural Revolution from an entirely innocent perspective. However, rather than rebuking youth canonization of 1990s films of the Cultural Revolution as insensitive to its actual history, repetitively applied and abstractedly associated meta-narratives reflected in terms such as "history," "era," "suffering," and "trauma" might show that what captivates younger generations is not the films' factual representations of the Cultural Revolution. Rather the traumatic symbolism and tragic aestheticism adopted in these films may very much reflect the younger generation's historical views of the period. As Xudong Zhang (2003) observes in his critique of 1990s films on the Cultural Revolution, these films "mark and culminate in a cultural and intellectual trend of

pursuing a cinematic narrative of a traumatic experience of the past, or more precisely, a visual reconstruction of the national memory through a post-revolutionary catharsis of trauma” that finds resonance among postsocialist generations in the sense that the narrative of trauma “deconstructs History with a capital ‘H’, and a new somewhat ontological meaning of personal, ordinary, or aestheticized life emerges to fill the vacuum of a past without history, so to speak” (624).

In other words, by idealizing films made in the 1990s as films with historical profundity and authenticity, the digital archives of Douban film actually express users’ understandings of what a national cinema representing national history should look like. The interrogation of the tragedy caused by political turmoil from the perspective of innocent but suffering individuals is generally seen by these youth as an authentic historical viewpoint that Chinese national cinema should pursue and indeed was pursuing in the 1990s.

These cultural views of national cinema become even more apparent when comparing them to perceptions of post-2000s films created by the same group of directors as reflected on Douban. In stark contrast to 1990s films of the Cultural Revolution, Chen’s *The Promise* and Zhang’s *Curse of the Golden Flowers*, the low points for each director, belong to a postsocialist exploration of Chinese film in the 2000s known as the “Chinese blockbuster” (*Zhong guo da pian/Zhong shi da pian*), a trend in filmmaking initiated in the early 2000s, peaking in the mid-2000s, and presented in limited capacity in the last decade. In reviewing translingual practices of the “blockbuster” and “*da pian*” (big film), Chris Berry (2013) notes that while the idea

of a “blockbuster/big film” is often tied to what is “American” in the term “the American big film,” it has been “de-Westernized” and “appropriated into local critical discourse to refer to not only American blockbusters but also to local productions considered blockbusters.” The 2000s Chinese blockbuster is an exploration in constructing a grand nationalist narrative of Chinese film in competition with American film.

The 2000s witnessed a group of Chinese mostly prestigious fifth-generation directors keen to explore commercially viable, globally appealing film genres reflecting Chinese ethics and national traits. Arguably, this exploration of genre was inspired by the global hit of Taiwanese American director Ang Lee, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), which achieved both commercial success and professional appreciation in the global film market. The film manages to balance the ethics of swordsmanship, Oriental artistic conceptions, and Hollywood stunts and transforms the martial arts film “from international cult genre to international sensation” (Zhu 2015, 205). Lee’s film thus shows Chinese filmmakers a successful and reproducible means of making films that are both Chinese and universal (in this context, universal always means viable in Hollywood). Not long after this, Zhang Yimou released the first made-in-China blockbuster, *Hero* (2002), which “broke Chinese cinema through into the global mainstream” (Berry and Farquhar 2006, xxiv). Later, Zhang made two additional films: *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). Other films include Chen Kaige’s 2005 *The Promise* and Feng Xiaogang’s 2006 *The Banquet* and the most recent explorations represented by *The Great Wall*.

All of these films, sharing similar aesthetic and narrative features in choosing ancient over modern China as their historical contexts and using excessive “Oriental” or Chinese ornamental styles, have eventually characterized the invented genre known as the Chinese blockbuster. For instance, Zhang’s blockbusters developed his obsession with a strong color scheme to the extreme and present stunning visual impressions. *The Promise* showcases Chen’s preference for bright and glamorous color combinations and costume designs, which are amplified in his later films. *The Banquet* also adopts a stylish visuality by applying maroon, beige and black combinations to exaggerate the emotions of the depressive imperial family. Moreover, the excessive incorporation of the “big scene” (*da chang mian*) as a visually attractive money shot and the multiperspective, technique-endorsed, and stunt-implanted sequence that requires disproportionate expense to produce separate these films from lower-budget films using limited camera positions, extras, wire stunt effects, and expensive visual effect techniques. In retrospect, these films have indisputably driven the Chinese domestic film market to prosper and thrive since the turn of the new century.

However, all of these films receive relatively low scores on Douban film precisely for constructing Chinese cinema through the use of these blockbuster strategies. Those who praise them highlight the formalities and ornamentality of these films, but none mention anything positive about their content. For instance, one comment about *Hero* praises the film as “the peak of Zhang’s imagination and aesthetic creativity” (“ne zha nan”). Another five-star comment also admits that “the camera shots are meticulous,” and “the use of color is supreme” (“liang shui”). However, these

distinguished achievements in visual and sound effects do not prevent the film from being considered “an unsuccessful piece” other than having influence in the West, as the film contains “no emotion” and does not “touch people” (“wenzeeer”). In a similar manner, Zhang’s second blockbuster, *House of Flying Daggers*, has received praise for its visual qualities and criticism for its lack of storyline. For instance, one user comments that “Zhang Ziyi’s ancient outfits are gorgeous. The dancing is a highlight. It amazed me... but the plot is kind of...” (“meng meng meng meng”). The intended omission of a concrete comment on the plot suggests the user’s disappointment. Another popular short comment similarly mocks the film as an “X-rated film” (*san ji pian*) for its lack of profound content and obsession with overt visual sensationalism.

A similar pattern prevails on the Douban page for *House of the Cursed Flower* with a more severe criticism of Zhang’s overt obsession with visual elements of what he considers “Chinese” and of his discernable failure to tell a captivating story, rendering the film his least favorably received: “The costumes are glamorous. As for the plot, it is not even slightly attractive to me” (“babeileye”); “The scenery is grandiose, the colors are rich... but all these features cannot make up for the weak storyline” (“yuan bao bao”); “All I remember was the shining gold; all I felt was visual dazzlement” (“yi qi chi di gua”); “The costume design is flamboyant, and I gather no meaning from this film” (“shield”); “To be honest, it is terrible to watch. The staging must have cost a lot. This money should have been used to develop the screenplay and for casting...” (“meng meng meng meng”). One of the most popular negative comments even directly calls the film “another luxurious trashy film” (“ji di”).

Therefore, the obsession with expressionist costumes and scenes used in these films to exaggerate “Chinese” aestheticism is what Douban users mainly castigate. A word analysis of the first one-hundred short comments made on the two lowest-rated Chinese blockbusters shows that words such as “frame” (*hua mian*), “special effects” (*te xiao*), “spectacle scene” (*da chang mian*), “color” (*se cai*), and “visual effect” (*shi xiao*) are most frequently used by Douban users to describe these films. Therefore, audiences distinguish these films by what Yomi Braester (2015) describes as “digital manipulation” or “the blockbuster heavy in computer-generated imagery (CGI) that encourages spectatorial consumerism, disregards local film practices and flattens historical perspective” (29). For Douban users who have found these films shallow and empty, this digital manipulation distracts from what is considered more important to the essence of Chinese films. While their high production standards, global accessibility, and commercial viability seem to suggest that these films have achieved and proven the global visibility and influence of Chinese aesthetics and culture, these digital images of Chineseness are considered an impoverished version of what national cinema should and could accomplish.

This bitter view of Chinese blockbusters leading to a decline in Chinese film culture is expressed in Douban users’ relentless sarcasm surrounding Zhang Yimou’s more recent works as a repetition of his propaganda works. Examples include his directorship of the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and his “Impression” projects, through which he collaborates with local governments in directing live music dramas to help the Chinese government boost local tourism and

economies and enhance the government's public image. These efforts are viewed as evidence that Zhang and the fifth-generation filmmakers he represents are "selling out" to political authority. These fruitful records of Zhang's propaganda-focused projects are considered a disastrous injury to his cinematic talent and style. In these rebukes, Zhang's films are considered nearly indistinguishable from his propaganda work. In commenting on *Curse of the Golden Flower*, one user mocks that "those last few shots with fireworks could have been taken directly from the opening ceremony of the Olympics." Zhang is also viewed as corrupt as a mouthpiece filmmaker who tends to make films into "massive chorus and group performances," for which he is "the head of decoration" while dictators such as Kim Jong-ill serve as "art directors" ("bu neng mie jue").

In juxtaposing these films with the 1990s films about the Cultural Revolution, young people bemoan the corruption of directors and lament the collapse of the golden era of Chinese film. In commenting on *The Promise*, user "SundanceKid" harshly criticizes that "the director who made *Farewell My Concubine* has gone on a crazy path since (this film)." Confusion over how a director as talented as Chen could make such a disappointing film is clearly expressed in voices criticizing *The Promise* on its Douban page. For instance, "kinfish" writes, "How can a person who made this film also have made *The Promise*?" Other users confess that "it is hard to imagine that the same director made this film and *The Promise*" ("Rapunel") and that "I cannot believe this was made by the same Chen Kaige who crafted *The Promise*" ("lanca"). One user laments that "Chen has used up all his talent for this film, so I kind of forgive *The*

*Promise that came after* (“shi zhuo zhuo”). In commenting on *To Live*, user “zhang chun” expresses the following doubts: “I was always under the illusion that Zhang Yimou made *House of Flying Daggers* and *Hero* in irony. After all, he made *To Live*.” Others express their indignation about Chen’s inability to sustain the excellence of *Farewell My Concubine*. The most liked short comment on the film mockingly states, “If Chen Kaige died after this film, he would have been immortal. Unfortunately, he has made a handful of films since then” (“wu sheng”). Another popular comment further regrets the destructive impact Chen’s transition has had on Chinese film: “I thought this was the start of Chinese film. I didn’t expect it to actually mark the end of Chinese film” (“ren yun yi yun”).

In these ways, nostalgic sentiment about films made in the 1990s have become so eminent in Douban users’ laments of the loss of the authentic selves of directors such as Zhang and Chen. For these users, 1990s films on the Cultural Revolution represent a no-longer consciousness of what a national cinema could have developed into, a potentiality that is no longer a present reality in the midst of 2000s Chinese blockbusters.

### ***Reclaiming the disappeared and should have been consciousness***

On November 28, 2014, *Blind Massage*, the ninth feature film of Chinese sixth-generation film director Lou Ye, premiered in Mainland China, nine months after its global premiere at the 64<sup>th</sup> Berlinale. On the film’s Douban page, fans gathered and discussed a missing part of the film: one minute of the film’s overseas version is



missing from the mainland-released copy. One user wrote agitatedly: “Even if it is shown in the mainland, it will be the castrated version. Let’s wait for the online version!” (“cai hua”). Those who had watched the full 115-minute version felt that the deleted one-minute scene was not central and contained only “some erotic and violent shots” with no impact on the storyline. However, after the film left movie theatres, posts requesting the “full version” or “uncut version” continued to appear on Douban. One user insisted: “I don’t know what has been deleted, but I think that if bloody and erotic parts have been deleted, this has likely hurt the film” (“wang xiaoke zins”).

Such conversations and exchanges regarding a film’s different versions, deleted scenes, and “full versions” are common among discussions on Douban film and symbolize the cultural connoisseurship of *wenyi* youth: how can a missing minute from a film have such a significant impact that an ordinary audience can perceive it? It seems that only those who consider themselves unique would make a large fuss about such issues. However, what lies behind this ostensible obsession with trivial matters is a sense shared more broadly across the postsocialist generation about the complicit relationship between state political authority and market pursuit for profits in repressing free cinematic expression. To fully grasp the ways in which this sense is constructed, it is first and foremost important to understand the dual postsocialist political economic conditions and their influences on the social experiences of postsocialist youth, i.e., the cultural politics of the “theatre-chain film” (*yuan xian pian*) and youth cinephile culture based on piracy.

Strictly speaking, China's current domestic film market did not emerge until 2002. Chinese Film Corporation, a state-owned administration, took charge of all film exhibition and distribution affairs nationwide with the end of the Cultural Revolution. In 1993, this monopoly was lifted, and responsibility for film exhibition and distribution was assigned to provincial and municipal exhibition and distribution companies. In 2002, the "theatre-chain" reform replaced geographically constrained government heteronomy entirely by regularizing the cross-location theatre-chain system, an exhibition system based on the unification of several film theatres in different locations managed by one exhibition and distribution company (either state- or private-owned). In this way, the power of market competition and the drive of capital aggregation eventually took control of the film market. This reform also directly accelerated market expansion. In less than a decade, the number of screens in China increased from 1000 to over 4000. The general population, particularly the urban population, has gradually acquired the leisure habit of watching films in movie theatres, which in a certain sense has been cultivated by the increasing number of screens in cities. In turn, the increasing number of moviegoers has increased box office revenues for theatre chains. In this system, films screened at movie theatres are termed "theatre-chain films." In contrast, films not appearing at movie theatres are referred to as "non-theatre chain films" (*fei yuanxian pian*). Although ostensibly this differentiation rests within an economic concern, youth discontent with the two related political structures has led them to interpret the failure of certain films to reach theatre chains as a sign of political unfreedom.

One such mechanism is rooted in the CCP's monolithic control of film exhibition and refusal to incorporate film ratings into public exhibitions. A complete, well-structured rating system has never been successfully implemented in China despite having been advocated for years (Wang 2014). Such reluctance is closely tied to an ideology regarding the purpose and responsibility of film as promulgated by the CCP. That is, by definition, films are tools for mass entertainment and education and must be available to all regardless of age, class, and sex, particularly under the leadership of an avant-garde and progressive Communist Party. In the absence of a rating system, a theatre chain film becomes a monolithic category evaluated based on a single unified criterion. As a result, Chinese audiences are repeatedly provided the same type of film, i.e., one selected based on being available and suitable for all, which indiscriminately embodies an infantilized and protected image of young people as vulnerable to unfiltered content considered inappropriate or dubious.

The second mechanism is the state-enforced “fail-safe mechanism in the system” (Latham 2007, 158) of film censorship, which refers to the complex process of censorship employed prior to a film's theatre-chain release. In cooperation with the monolithic exhibition system, this censorship mechanism, epitomized by the so-called dragon label (*long biao*) and by a short sanction video played at the start of all officially released films to endorse films as legally distributed and exhibited, efficiently prevents certain content from being seen by the general Chinese audience. Formally known as the “Certificate for Public Screening” (*gong ying xu ke zheng*), the dragon label is a permit issued by the SARFT as authorization for films to be legally released in

Mainland China after passing rounds of censorship. For any film, whether domestic, foreign or a Chinese-international collaboration, it constitutes the prerequisite to theatrical release and to a film reaching the Chinese general audience.

Structured by these two political mechanisms, i.e., a monolithic exhibition policy that applies the same standards to all theatre-chain release films and the prior censorship system that omits potentially controversial or dubious content from public screenings, theatre chain films in China are closely monitored under the cultural authority of the central government. Theatre chain films therefore represent a sanitized popular film culture whereby the likelihood of a film endorsed at such a level of popular accessibility to provoke any political non-conforming consciousness is unlikely.

The second political economic condition contributing to postsocialist youth's perceptions of a film's political nonconformity with its popular accessibility is the close intimacy between youth cinephile subculture in particular and movie watching experience in general, and the proliferation of the shadow film economy based on pirate culture in China. In 2016, social media account *cinematik (qi yu dian ying)* launched a posting serial called "Once Upon a Time of Disc Digging" (*tao die wang shi*) inviting netizens to submit their memories of "disc digging" and contribute to the "collective memory writing" of the generation. The editor writes: "From the VCD that became popular beginning in the mid-1990s to the DVD of the 2000s, these formats gave Chinese movie fans an underground film education that was 'eye-opening.' In the two decades before that, such education was absent. It breaks elitism, breaks authority... For post-70s and post-80s people who grew up in the era when the Internet was still

dominant, everything was just starting; it was a carnival, a feast, and an unforgettable collective memory.”

The term “disc digging” is metonymic for searching for and watching pirated copies of films, a collective experience widely shared by postsocialist youth. VCD technology was introduced to China in 1993, resulting in television broadcasting no longer being the only source of private home video. Relative to the SARFT’s meticulous restriction of theatre releases at the time, the Cultural Department was relatively lax in the area of disc importation. As a result, Chinese audiences grew accustomed to the private and individualized space of home video watching. Thus, even with relatively loose regulations, slow and tedious procedures and timelines for legal VCD (and later DVD) distribution could not satisfy audiences’ increasing desires for films. The pirate market was born at the right moment to accommodate such needs and metamorphosed Chinese cinema “from a collective public event to a piracy-privacy activity, from a highly controlled mode of production and distribution to a completely underground operation” (Zhang 2007). According to the International Intellectual Property Alliance’s 2001 report, China at the time presented piracy levels of over 90 percent and was considered “the piracy capital of the world.” Among pirated cultural goods, pirated DVDs represented the majority of the shadow market.

With the sweeping effects of digitalization, the analog pirate market was gradually replaced by a digital sharing culture starting in the mid-2000s when free Internet downloading became increasingly common. Online pirate sharing and watching entered Chinese youth’s everyday lives in early 2003 when VeryCD, similar

to the p2p downloading tool emule, and Thunder, a downloading software program based on multisource hyperthreading technology, become popular tools used by savvy Chinese netizens to search for and share pirated resources of mainly illegal film copies. Since the popularization of cloud services after the 2010s, cloud storage sites such as the Baidu Cloud have proceeded as the primary sites for pirated media sharing. In approximately the same period, fansub culture grew rapidly along with the proliferation of pirated foreign TV resources (mostly American, British, Japanese and Korean) on the Chinese Internet. Large fansub communities such as YTET, YYeTs, Fengruan and Ragbear also developed into major hubs through which netizens could navigate these resources. In recent years, amid increasing government pressure and control over illegal pirate sharing, multiple social platforms such as Weibo and WeChat have been applied as tactical media for sporadic, on-demand sharing.

Since the late 1990s when pirated VCDs and DVDs appeared in corner shops and underground markets to the present where pirate torrent downloading is a rather quotidian practice in digital space, the informal pirate market and sharing economy have encouraged cinephile subculture to emerge in postsocialist China and have extensively defined the movie watching experiences of postsocialist film audiences more generally. Pirated copies of films have specifically become a cultural enclave for postsocialist youth and “an effective vehicle for evading the state quota and censorship, thus offering a precious ‘free zone’ outside of China’s tight cultural control” (Li 2013: 550). As watching pirated films becomes a quotidian practice among postsocialist youth, this audience can leverage an alternative public sphere and cultural space to

negotiate, bypass, or confront the hegemonic pseudo-public controlled by complicity between state censorship and the commercial industry. Postsocialist youth can then retrieve cinematic representations prohibited by the state without subordinating to state power suppressing these representations in the first place. In this sense, “by organizing spectatorship...through the shadow system of piracy, this alternative public sphere provides an inclusive, heterogeneous, and non-controllable social horizon for organizing collective experiences and identities” (ibid.).

While the hegemonic cultural politics of the theatre-chain film system eliminate films with politically non-conforming connotations from the popular cultural field, the shadow economy of pirate culture allows young people to find alternative ways to retrieve these exiled and excluded cinematic dissents. Situated under the dual political economic conditions mentioned in the beginning of this section, the insistence on finding the deleted minute of a publicly screened film on Douban film expresses a critical politically dissenting opinion against the hegemonic cultural politics of *wenyi* affect. What lies behind these scripts is a utopian vision of film politics in China that builds on a should have been consciousness or on a consciousness of the absence of something precious that has not been brought to life. This utopian affect is expressed through widespread feelings of scarcity, urgency, and crisis in preventing political disconformity in films from disappearing. That is, through this acute sensitivity for the short-lived presence and then omission of something that should have been and that has disappeared, is disappearing, or will disappear, the digital affect of *wenyi* is precipitated. A closer review of Douban film digital archives focused on Lou Ye’s sixth

feature film *Summer Palace* (2006) provides a trope from which we can discern this utopian affect in the should have been consciousness.

The Summer Palace (*yi he yuan*) was once an imperial garden used by Qing feudal emperors and has now become a popular tourist site known for its scenic beauty, architectural aesthetics and historical value. Showing no explicit connection between themes of the film and the historical meaning of the site, the film is simply named for a scene in which the two protagonists meet in this space. The film tells its story from the personal narrative perspective of the female protagonist Yu Hong, a literature lover who comes to Beijing from a town in northeastern China to attend college, and depicts a bold vision of China's post-socialist transition from the 1980s to the 2000s. The film intermixes Yu's exploration of desire and sexuality and her triangular love affair with schoolmates Zhou Wei and Li Ti with the famous 1989 student protest held in Tiananmen Square and the melancholic aftermath of the ensuing catastrophe. Additionally, as arguably the first Mainland Chinese film to feature scenes with full male and female nudity, *Summer Palace* includes bold sexual and erotic scenes.

The film was nominated for an award at the 59th Cannes Film Festival and was scheduled to premiere on May 18 in France. However, by that time, it had not yet obtained official approval for overseas release from China's Film Bureau. Without official approval, Lou attended Cannes as an independent. Such a bold decision led to a five-year banning order against Lou from making films in Mainland China and a complete ban on the film's release in any format in China.



Immediately after the film premiered in Cannes, news of the banning order circulated on the film's Douban page. On May 22, a few days after the film's Cannes debut, "njhuar" reposted a news article stating that "the film is the first feature film that touches upon the topic of the June 4th student movement" and that "Lou Ye restores the scenes of June 4th in his film through the lens of the protagonists' college student identity and documentary clips." The article concludes: "seeing this content, anyone can assume that the film will be definitely banned in Mainland China." News of Lou's violation of film policy was also uploaded to the page with user "mente" reposting an article noting that "because its content involves sensitive topics, the film did not receive approval from the SARFT before it arrived at Cannes" and that due to his violation, Lou "might be punished for this, although no clear announcement has been released by the Film Bureau."

While the SARFT quickly explains that the five-year punishment was simply applied for Lou's violation of procedural correctness and that the film was banned due to "technical failings," no Douban users appear to accept this explanation. Nearly all early posts refer to the film as a bold and direct depiction of the June 4<sup>th</sup> movement. The tag "1989," which refers to the year of the incident, appeared on the site three days after the news about the banning became available to Chinese netizens. Later, the tag "64," a numeric symbol for the date of the incident, appeared on the film's front page to directly associate the film's fate with its political disconformity. The latter tag remained one of the top 10 most-used tags for the film for the following year and a half.

When the film was banned from popular viewing, the desire to see it incrementally increased accordingly. One Douban post insinuates that the film's political connotations are the only features that make the film intriguing: "Only because of its background do I want to watch the film" ("hu er jin xia"). A desire to defy state power is also expressed explicitly: "the more [the state] prevents people from watching the film, the more [I/we] want to watch it..." ("Gore Wayne Kahn") and "the more [it] is banned, the more [I/we] want to watch..." ("isabelting"). In both posts, subjects are omitted, which could be interpreted as a view of the film as a victim of state oppression of free speech acknowledged in discursive space.

However, rather than wanting the ban to be lifted, Douban users suggest that it may be even better for the film to retain its banned status: "It might be good for the film to remain banned, as this will prevent it from becoming unrecognizable and passing censorship. As a result, we can still watch the complete version via pirated copies" ("he sheng sheng"). In this sense, popular accessibility and political integrity are used as the determinants of a zero-sum game where securing one leads to the loss of the other.

While it was only a matter of time before the banned film could be viewed, anticipation of the film was considerable. The first twelve lengthy Douban reviews of the film were left by overseas audiences who had watched the film at Cannes or other overseas screenings. Impatient mainland users complained underneath these reviews: "I am so bummed. There are people who have watched the film, but no CAM version is available for us whatsoever. We have been waiting for almost a year!" ("ye he na la

shei shei”). More than nine months after the film’s premiere, its trailer became available on Douban along with word-of-mouth news that it was to be released to DVD, which was a relief since: “this means that we can download another ‘banned film’ again!” (“fivex”). After another nine months, the film’s Douban page posted “Good news! The DVD will be released next year on January 24!” (“hondy”), as a France-based DVD distributor had finally announced an official statement about the DVD copy.

The film’s zone 2 DVD copy was released in France on January 28, 2008. In less than two weeks, the number of Douban users who marked the film as “watched” jumped from less than 200 to 1641 as of February 2008. While it took a year and a half for less than 200 hundred people to watch the film, 1500 people watched it from January 28 to February 8, 2008, reflecting a ten-fold increase. On April 2009, as the last available record posted on the film’s Douban page, the “watched” number reached more than 20,000, equivalent to that of a mildly anticipated theatre chain film’s Douban reception at the time.

This unusual pattern reveals an indisputable fact: the availability of the pirated copy of the France-released DVD directly led to an exponential explosion in viewership. However, the eventual availability of the banned film led to the suppression of online discourse about it. Immediately after the pirated version became available on the Chinese Internet, all short and long review features and forums on the film’s Douban page were disabled. Thus, while the number of Douban users who had watched the film increased for another fourteen months, this number serves as the only accessible digital record of the conglomeration of individual practice into collective experience.

However, Douban users developed several inventive ways to make the film's connection to the June 4th Incident as explicit as possible. After discussion functions were disabled, more than 250 users managed to use the tag "64" when adding the film to their personal collections before the tag was removed three months later. While users can no longer post individual comments, the user-generated synopsis of the film was updated two months later. The original synopsis included only 90 Chinese characters and described the film as "a romance of love and hatred and including ambiguity, betrayal and crazy sex" without reference to its political background. The revised version included 295 characters. At first glance, the longer version merely provides more details about the romantic struggles of the protagonists as it chronicles how the two protagonists meet, fall in love, drift apart and find closure. A closer look, however, shows that the sensitive date "June 4th" is included, and the synopsis states that the two protagonists experienced a "year-long exile and migration" after the incident. While reticent, the synopsis not only draws a connection between the vicissitudes of love affairs and the cited political situation but also implies an analogical relation between the diasporic status of the protagonists and their political exile after the incident.

The film's page remained semi-banned for another fourteen months. In June 2009, the twentieth anniversary of the June 4th Incident, the page was removed entirely. The original link led to an error page stating, "the page you want to visit does not exist." The search term "summer palace" led users to a list of books with the same title focused on the historical architectural site in Beijing. The film's title was also removed from

Lou Ye's filmography page. Three years after the film was banned, its Douban page, where the film was revitalized and remained vital, disappeared as well.

With the dismantling of this digital archive, Douban users have found alternative ways to further revitalize their memories about the film. In 2010, an entry titled as the film's name appeared on Douban. The entry refers to a six-episode documentary produced by Chinese Central Television featuring the history and architecture of the royal garden and cultural anecdotes regarding the actual architectural site in Beijing. The documentary aired on CCTV on December 26, 2010. Three months later on March 13, 2011, a short comment appeared on the site: "Announcement: what I watched was not this one, but the one performed by Hao Lei. You know what I mean" ("franco gu tou"). While Hao Lei is the well-known actress performing as the protagonist in Lou's Summer Palace, in speaking to unspecified audiences who "know what I mean," the comment calls on a collective of a similar consciousness. Six months later, the documentary site had gathered more than 600 "watched" records. Most directly address Lou's film instead of the CCTV production. Of the four most-liked short comments, three focus on Lou's film: "Of the five stars, half are for Hao Lei, and half are for Lou Ye" ("wo ai yang guang"); "What can I say? Zhou Wei and Yu Hong are like two birds slowly flying through their lives. Other than this, I cannot say anything else" ("yasu"); "The hope, desire, and desperation in the loss of youth..." ("xiao jing"). In addition, two longer reviews posted on the site refer to Lou's film. Later that year, Douban disabled the site's discussion functions. In the following years, Douban users continued to mark the entry as "watched" and added the documentary to

their collections using tags such as “Lou Ye,” “Hao Lei,” “Youth,” and “*Wenyi*.” One user directly used the tag “Who I am giving the star to, everyone knows” (“mars”) when adding an entry on July 16, 2012. In the following years, the site remained a primary site for Douban users to “incorrectly mark,” as one user terms it, the removed page. In late 2016, the following explanation from the Douban film team appeared in the site’s synopsis section: “This entry refers to the six-episode documentary made by CCTV and not the *wenyi* love film of the same name. Please use caution when marking.” Nonetheless, prior to 2017, the site was removed entirely, and users were no longer able to mark the documentary or add it to their collections.

After user interaction with this documentary site was disabled, Douban users immediately found an alternative site from which to construct their collective memories of the banning incident. Beginning in March 2017, users started to transform another page into a memorial site for Lou’s film in a more direct and sweeping manner. The site technically refers to a 2001 book published by the Architecture Academy of Tsinghua University and printed by China Architecture Publishing. As a niche book targeting mainly gardening and architecture students and professionals, the site received only three short comments in the first sixteen years after the book’s publication. From March 2017 to the present, 274 new short comments have been posted, 246 (90%) of which explicitly refer to Lou’s film. Of these comments, more than half (123) directly use the phrase “substitute marking” (*jie biao*), “wrong marking” (*cuo biao*), or “for the film” (*gei dian ying*) as indicators of the poster’s actual focus.

At the time of this writing, the book's site remains a substitute memorial site for Douban users to commemorate the violent disappearance of the film and as a digital archive of their conglomerated collective affect. In preventing these memories from disappearing, the making, losing, and remaking of these digital archives provoke a strong interrogation of present conditions as the antithesis of an ideal place where such political non-conformities can be preserved. Put differently, the film's inevitable disappearance from public sight, the subsequent disappearance of records of Douban users' lived experiences with the banned film, and the prevention of those memories from being preserved in the future have provoked a should have been consciousness that discloses the present as a time that cannot precipitate a more desirable future that should have been offered by an alternative political imaginary that the present currently suppresses.

### Chapter Three — Livestreaming Reality: Nonhuman Beauty and the Digital Fetishization of Ephemerality

In early 2019, Leung Man-Tao, a well-known writer, spoke of a recent experience in his podcast:

*“A few days ago, I was attending an event in Hangzhou. Next to my venue, there was a bigger event organized by Taobao... Basically, it gathered those most popular wanghong (Internet celebrities or influencers) on Taobao’s platform from all over the country. As I entered the place, just as I expected, I basically had no way to recognize the individual difference of these ‘wanghong look’ (wanghong lian, or people with wanghong facial features), as they would probably be called.”*

Later in the episode, Leung reiterated his takeaway from that experience: “Yes, they (the *wanghong* look) all look the same.” In this episode, which is titled “aesthetic indolence,” Leung listed the uncanny identical *wanghong* look as one of the examples of such indolence. In his view, the popularity of the *wanghong* look among Chinese young women shows the corruption of the popular aesthetic; young people no longer pursue individualist beauty or beauty with personality but scramble for this monolithic, standard, and identical look. Disagreeing with the prevalence of such indolence, Leung self-mocked, “Maybe I am too old to understand.”

It is possible that the event Leung entered was the third Taobao Livestreaming Gala (*Taobao zhi bo sheng dian*), an annual event organized by the largest C2C (customer to customer) e-commerce platform in China. This gala is dedicated to



Taobao's livestreaming platform, a space where the practice of watching livestreaming, or real-time telecast communication through mobile networks, replaces self-guided searching as the primary shopping method for customers. The young women Leung encountered and despised were likely the most popular livestreamers, or hostesses (*nv zhu bo*), on the platform for their excellent "selling goods" (*dai huo*) ability, i.e., selling as many commodities as possible to viewers in their livestreaming booths. Later that year, the top livestreamers broke a record by selling 300 million yuan worth of goods (approximately 48 million U.S. dollars) during a four-hour livestream.

Livestreaming, or the practice of using a mobile phone to stream live video feeds through a device's front-facing camera on a publicly accessible livestreaming platform, usually a smartphone app, has undoubtedly developed into the most ambitious digital self-entrepreneurship and lucrative investment in China. As a local manifestation of the global rise of livestreaming (Zhang and Hjorth 2019), China's livestreaming industry exceeds its foreign counterparts in scale and differs in variety. Taking the U.S. case as a comparison, in 2016, more than 200 million viewers watched livestreaming content every night on more than 200 livestreaming platforms in China and produced revenue of approximately 5 billion U.S. dollars (Mosinsky), a number that observers of the U.S. livestreaming business did not expect to reach until 2019 (Hershey). A glimpse of the daily active users of each livestreaming platform further reveals the disparity of the development scale and speed of livestreaming in China and the U.S. In 2019, Kuaishou livestreaming surpassed its

competitors and obtained thirty-five million daily active users, more than twice the fifteen million users of Twitch, the world's largest livestreaming platform of its kind, which is blocked in China (Wang 2019; Iqbal 2020). Beyond game livestreaming, more than half of the most-watched live content in the U.S. is breaking news (56%). Conferences and concerts tie for second place (43%) (Golum 2017). Comparatively formal content and public events held by authorized agencies compose the major livestreaming content. In contrast, Chinese viewers of livestreaming crave real-time individual performances (51.5%) and lifelogging, i.e., livestreaming of mundane activities (34.4%), more than news (20.6%) (Chang and TMpost 2017; see also Lu et al. 2018). This trend indicates that livestreaming activities have developed into a prominent component of the everyday lives of Chinese netizens, predominantly young netizens, and constitute part of their life experience.

Since Facebook launched its livestreaming features in 2016, Silicon Valley has mainly marketized it as a side project for businesspeople and self-entrepreneurs to “showcase an event to people who couldn't attend in real life,” “connect with audience in the most genuine, human way possible,” or simply “answer questions in real time” (Whitney 2018). In contrast to this “supplementary” or “auxiliary” narrative, since its early days, livestreaming in China has become an indispensable node, if not the epicenter, of the entire digital economy based on the *wanghong* (influencer) ecology. At the individual level, livestreaming has quickly developed from a hobby to a common full-time job pursued by a great number of young people. News stories about how ordinary people become millionaires in one livestreaming

session encourage more people to enter the field every day. Commerce relies on the livestreaming industry to thrive. Nearly all major digital media platforms in China have developed their own livestreaming features to compete with companies that specialize in livestreaming apps and platforms. Livestreaming agencies and *wanghong* incubators make a good fortune by brokering between individual *wanghong*-wannabes and platforms. The government also endorses livestreaming as an expanding part of the national economy and public culture. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism recognizes livestreaming as a formal occupation for young people by “offering them platforms to demonstrate talents, pursue a productive life, and achieve personal goals.” Provincial and municipal governments also take advantage of the livestreaming space and livestreamers’ influence to publicize local tourism and events and promote cross-regional commerce. A few well-known livestreamers are even honored by provincial party authorities as “positive youth ambassadors” due to their success stories of self-entrepreneurship that inspire fellow Chinese youth.

Shadowed by the vigorous enthusiasm and excitement of this digital economy is an unsettling discourse lurking in the popular discourse in China, perpetuated by intellectuals such as Leung and amplified by some ordinary netizens in a more blatant manner that criticizes an “ill-perceived” consciousness and practice that accompanies the thriving of livestreaming. According to such discourse, a particular type of young woman, usually imagined and described as the “livestreamer hostess” (*nv zhu bo*) or, as Leung calls them metonymically, the “*wanghong* look,” is ignorant and self-

destructive in incorrectly pursuing an ill-formed beauty standard as a way to gain attention on the Internet. In other words, this discourse warns that in the influencer culture, especially in the livestreaming economy, there exists an ill-shaped beauty standard, called the “*wanghong* look,” which is extremely rigid, homogeneous, and unnatural. Young women labeled as having this look are stigmatized and patronized for being “obsessed” with pursuing the look and developing a “morbid” mentality. They are expected to be ultimately “destroyed” by this ill-formed pursuit (Hou 2017; Fu 2018; Jianqian 2019).

This unsettling discourse reveals an infrastructural inequality of the livestreaming economy that both enthusiasts and supporters of livestreaming are reluctant to address, which is the fact that the livestreaming economy is fundamentally a gendered economy that is built on the objectification of the female body under the male gaze. While only a few individuals can be endorsed with social recognition and given titles such as “postsocialist youth ambassador,” the majority of these gendered laborers are despised, discriminated against, and disposed of. This is reflected in the fact that instead of continually digging into the systematic injustice of gendered labor, these criticizing voices simply blame individual young women for not being able to do better.

In this sense, this opinion does not differ significantly from similar gender discrimination against left-over women, or single women who are considered unmarriageable because they are “too demanding,” and insults to sexual violence survivors for not defending themselves or even “wanting it.” These gendered

discourses all share the gender subordination logic that stigmatizes women for being victimized by an oppressive gender hierarchy. In stigmatizing women with the so-called “*wanghong* look” for pursuing ill-formed beauty standards, these voices exempt the erotic gaze behind the politics of beauty that objectifies women in the first place. While young women are victimized for making the wrong choice, the gender power that fetishizes and commodifies the female body is acquired. In other words, if the young women who participate in livestreaming practices pursue a particular kind of beauty standard that is considered problematic, what needs to be interrogated is heteronormative power, the institutionalized male gaze, and the commodification of the female body that make a particular look attractive and desirable in the first place.

What makes the stigmatizing discourse of the *wanghong* look drastically different from other gender subordination discourses is its excessive deployment of tropes with explicit implications of dehumanization. Simply speaking, women who are labeled as having the *wanghong* look are considered nonhuman; they are considered soulless, robotic, and grotesque. Their faulty pursuit of an ill-formed look makes them nonhuman, as the rigid beauty standard of the *wanghong* look deprives them of a personality and makes them into soulless, perfect beauties. The homogeneous standardization of the look makes them unrecognizable from each other, identical creatures made on a robot assembly line. The lack of natural facial features due to the dependency on beauty acquisition techniques makes these women’s faces grotesque and stiff, causing them to lose the vital energy of an ordinary human being.

To fully grasp the non-enunciated undertone behind such tropes of dehumanization of these young women, I propose a radical feminist critique that combines the critique of gender subordination with a critique of digital power to reveal the structural gender inequality in which women are often made into the grounds for debates about structural economic and social transformations. The dehumanizing of women in the discourse of the *wanghong* look ironically serves as the means through which social anxiety toward the digitalization of analog humanity is expressed. As I argue in the following pages, the popularization of the beauty standard of the *wanghong* look is the consequence of complicity between two things generated by the livestreaming economy. On the one hand, the premise of a gendered historical inequality based on China's postsocialist condition has subordinated young female livestreamers under the digital erotic gaze in the livestreaming space. On the other hand, the livestreaming space commodifies the experience of virtual coexistence, which is experienced as short-lived randomness, intermittent abruptness, and disjointedness. The temporal logic of the digital presentism of livestreaming therefore craves the homogenization and artificialization of analog bodies to better accommodate the digital reality. In other words, what is reflected in the dehumanization of the *wanghong* look is a deeper structural collapse of analog humanity that is perceived as organic, coherent, and consistent in favor of digital humanity, which is short-lived, intermittent, and disjointed.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part provides a general overview of the development of the livestreaming economy in China, with special

attention to the political economy and gender politics behind it. The second part turns to a scrutiny of the gender-discriminatory discourse of the *wanghong* look generated in the Chinese public sphere with an emphasis on its tropes of dehumanization. The last part returns to an examination of the livestreaming economy by focusing on how the livestreaming temporal space craves and fetishizes the short-lived, instantaneous, and disjointed digital presence of its gendered labor as its basic commodity. I contend that the craving for such fetishization of the ephemeral coexistence of the livestreaming space produces anxiety about the digitalization of humanity, which ironically dehumanizes the bodies of young women as the site to vent these anxious feelings.

### **Livestreaming in China: Gendered Labor in the Postsocialist Digital Reality**

Generally, Internet livestreaming (*wang luo zhi bo*), usually abbreviated as livestreaming (*zhi bo*), refers to software and mobile app-based, high-definition cameras and high-speed network-dependent, real-time and cross-modal (video, text and image) interactivity between individuals. Individuals who engage in the activity of streaming are usually called livestreamers, or hosts/hostesses (*zhu bo*). The interface and virtual space through which livestreaming activities occur is usually referred to as a “livestreaming booth” (*zhi bo jian*). In addition to watching livestreaming feeds in the booth, viewers can interact with streamers while maintaining their anonymity.

In the following, the political economy of livestreaming in China is examined through three aspects. First, the unfolding of livestreaming practices in China that gradually regularize IRL (in real life) livestreaming as a layer of digital reality is examined. Second, the key mechanism of the livestreaming economy, i.e., the user donation and virtual gift system, is scrutinized. Finally, I consider the political implications and stakes of the imbalance in gendered labor in the economy by situating them in the context of China's postsocialist condition.

***Digital reality is the new reality: The prospering of IRL livestreaming***

As a form of self-expository culture (Harcourt 2015) and a way of making mundane life visible online, livestreaming can track its genesis to the early days of webcam culture at the turn of the new century, when webcammers updated live but silent and still images captured by Internet-connected digital cameras every five minutes or so (Senft 2008). However, in terms of strict formality, the contemporary form of live-transmitted audio and video content can be traced to Justin.TV, a platform launched in 2007 geared toward "lifecasting," which essentially "meant providing a website for people to pipe out their live video to others" (Taylor 2018, 53). In 2011, this precedent of a social live cam site evolved into Twitch, a broadcast platform dedicated to gaming as a spinoff of the former's gaming channels. Since then, with Twitch's own expansion and the proliferation of competitors, game livestreaming has led to what scholars recognize as the "third way of the game industry's development through the power of the Internet" and has changed sports products into a media



entertainment outlet. In addition to the production of professional content of esports is the proliferation of so-called “variety” streamers, or non-esports broadcasters, who livestream either a wide range of games that do not belong to any alliance, circuit, or tournament or content not necessarily associated with gaming culture, which “transform[s] their private play into public entertainment” (ibid., 6).

Similar to the U.S. trajectory, livestreaming started in China to serve the esports and game industry. The first generation of Chinese livestreamers were also esports gamers. Esports were included as a formal sports category in China in 2003. The following years witnessed the emergence of television channels dedicated to esports, featuring live broadcasting of esports tournaments, gaming skill sharing through live transmitted feeds of gamers’ gaming interfaces, and special features dedicated to different games. In the midst of social concern about youth Internet addiction and a pathologizing disciplinary discourse that defined youth Internet over-usage as a juvenile addictive disorder (Bax 2014), SARFT forbade such programs and required television stations to make pedagogical programs to propagate the negative influence of computer games and guide youth to cultivate a “healthy hobby.” It was not until 2008 that the Internet company JOYY launched the first gaming platform, YY Voice (YY *yuyin*), later known as YY Video, a computer-based software for instant audiovisual communication that allows gamers to engage in team-based battles and real-time communication, which later become the archetype of livestreaming platforms in China and remained the largest game livestreaming site in the following decade.

Although it has functions similar to Twitch, the development trajectory of YY Voice has led in quite the opposite direction from its U.S. counterpart. As an esports spinoff of the lifecasting Justin.TV, Twitch professionalizes the more general and mundane content from the latter to the specialization of game livestreaming. In contrast, YY Voice expanded from a platform specializing in esports and gaming to a livestreaming space that allows users to livecast more general content. An increasing number of users use the software to broadcast their performative activities. The so-called “showroom performances” of singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, and giving talk shows by individual streamers from their bedrooms have proliferated in YY Voice and other platforms, such as the 6rooms showroom (2009) and Doyu livestreaming (2011). In 2010, YY Voice first developed user donations and virtual gifts for “entertainment livestreaming content,” which later became the predominant monetization method for both livestreamers and platforms.

Later, livestreaming platforms featuring monetizable “pan-entertainment livestreaming” (*fan yule zhi bo*) and “life livestreaming” (*sheng huo zhi bo*) marketized the idea of “livestreaming everything” and promoted livestreaming as a salient part of social life, particularly for young people. For instance, Inke livestreaming was launched in 2015 and branded itself as “pure mobile livestreaming” to provide better speed and quality of motion livestreaming, livestreaming in outdoor scenarios, or livestreaming in moving conditions. Momo livestreaming integrates with the parent company’s social network message service and incorporates the geo-location technique in its feature of “finding nearby

livestreaming” to allow users to interact in both the online and the offline world. By 2017, which was known as “the year of a thousand troupes” (*qian tuan zhi nian*) due to the sudden explosion of livestreaming platforms, only 17 of the more than 900 platforms in the Chinese digital sphere specialized in game livestreaming. The majority were categorized as IRL livestreaming due to their specialization in more generic and diverse content of performative and lifestyle livestreaming.

While they differ in terms of taxonomy, IRL livestreaming platforms usually feature a variety of nonprofessional genres of livestreaming, including singing, dancing, social eating, make-up tutorial, and talk shows as the most popular genres. Although different from game livestreaming, which restricts livestreamers to presenting specialized content, IRL livestreaming platforms usually establish no particular regulations or requirements for livestreamers in terms of the content and style of livestreaming.<sup>32</sup> There are also minimal technology requirements for IRL livestreaming: technically, a mobile phone connected to high-speed Internet would be sufficient to start livestreaming with decent transmission quality. Additionally, people are invited to be inventive in making the livestreaming space a social space, and different livestreaming platforms offer various features to enhance the interactivity between livestreamers and their viewers and between livestreamers. For instance,

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<sup>32</sup> There are certain prohibitions. For instance, content such as smoking, gambling, and drinking are prohibited on livestreaming platforms due to fear of “creating bad influences.” Pornographic content has been censored since the beginning of the popularization of livestreaming, and soft pornography has been regulated and prohibited by both the livestreaming platforms and government officials. For instance, ASMR content, a popular video genre on YouTube, is considered pornographic and banned in Chinese livestreaming spaces (Abraham 2018). Some platforms also make specific regulations for the outfits of streamers (see Zhang and Hjorth 2019).

“wiring” (*lian xian*) features were added to most IRL livestreaming platforms in late 2018, which allow livestreamers to connect with one to three other streamers by combining their livestreaming booths. Their viewers are able to watch all of them on the screen and hear their voices overlap with each other. Additionally, some livestreaming platforms, such as Inker, enable “multi-conversation” (*duo ren tan hua*) features, in which viewers can activate the audio-capturing function of their devices and join the livestreamer in live vocal conversations. By making everyday lives watchable and enforcing the socializing aspects of livestreaming space, the proliferation of IRL livestreaming in China has efficiently created a digital reality within its space that overlaps with (or supersedes) offline realities.

### ***Monetizing virtual presence***

In her research on the first generation of cam girls in the U.S., Senft (2008) predicted the monetary potential for home camming as dim. The primary source of income for home camming during Senft’s field research (in the early 2000s) came from subscription fees, i.e., the small sums of money fans gave camgirls to gain access to exclusive content. Compared to the considerably expensive investment (e.g., buying equipment, broadband bandwidths, and domain services) required to start and maintain a camgirl career, this income provides little sustainability. The possibility for even the top camgirls to make a large fortune from home camming, as Senft concludes, “is hard to verify.” With “fewer viewers and more free content elsewhere on the web,” as she predicted, there would be “far less money from subscribers” (19-

20). Judging from the development trajectory of multichannel network video business in the U.S., particularly the case of YouTube, Senft's prediction is overly conservative. Subscription fees remain a main source of income for YouTube channels and YouTubers to monetize their creative content. However, add-on revenues, specifically, ad income, or advertisement placement distributed by the Google AdSense algorithm based on the virality of the video; ad sponsorship, or the creation of promotional content for brands and commodities and commissions from promotional links; and direct sales of self-owned merchandise, have created more profit than conventional subscription fees and made YouTubing a lucrative influencer profession (Miller 2011; Cunningham and Craig 2016; Postigo 2016; Pottinger 2018; Elango 2019; Paharso and Irwansyah 2019).

Although Senft's prediction is nonetheless partially true, considering the fact that most of the revenues for individuals from a multichannel network such as YouTube come from these add-on values, i.e., revenues obtained by directing viewers to alternative sites that are not necessarily relevant to the video content produced within the channel. The opportunity to make money directly from the video content or by solely making a video is rare, especially for livestreaming videos. YouTube does offer direct monetization features such as Fan Funding for its livestreaming feature, which was turned off in 2017 and replaced with Super Chat. Similar functions are enabled in platforms such as Twitch's "cheering" and Periscope's "super-likes." However, these features are by no means dependable or regular ways to make money

and merely serve as supplemental income while enhancing interactions between fans and creators (Webster 2016; Garun 2017).

The situation in China is very different. In fact, the “gifting” (*da shang*) system regularized in Chinese livestreaming platforms inspired Western counterparts to imitate and add similar features (Sway 2017 A, 2017 B). As mentioned above, YY Voice launched a virtual gift function in 2010 to allow livestreamers to earn money directly from their livestreaming activities. This function is inscribed in nearly all other livestreaming platforms and has become their default setting and major source of revenues. According to a livestreaming consultant agency, during the first six months of 2019, the top seven livestreaming platforms in China created a record for day-to-day accounts of more than 15 billion Chinese yuan (nearly 2.2 billion U.S. dollars) (Today’s *Wanghong*, 2019). Among these accounts, 45% are attributed to livestreamers and the rest belong to the platforms. In terms of single livestreamers’ incomes, the top ones earned 27 million yuan (nearly 4 million U.S. dollars) in half a year solely through the monetization of virtual gifts (*ibid.*), which was nearly forty times higher than the average income of Chinese people in 2018.

A gifting system is a built-in function that allows viewers to give virtual gifts to livestreamers in real time. Viewers can access the virtual gift store during a livestream or through prepaid purchases. The gift store offers a selection of virtual gifts of varying prices. Some only cost a little, while others are quite expensive. Although all virtual gifts are purchased in real currency, livestreaming platforms usually change the cost of the universal equivalent within the system to downplay the

realistic weighting of prizes. For instance, Doyu livestreaming uses “fin” to replace the basic currency unit of the yuan. While some gifts cost 10 or 100 fins, the most expensive gift in the app’s 2018 version was a “super rocket” that cost 2000 fins, i.e., approximately 2000 yuan (\$286 U.S. dollars). In some cases, the equivalence of the virtual gifts and their monetary value is further blurred. In the internal universe of Inke livestreaming, the basic currency is called “diamonds,” which can be bought in a pack of seven with one yuan, so each diamond is worth 0.14 yuan. In 2019, the most expensive gift on the platform cost 150,000 diamonds, so the actual price was 21,428 yuan (3,200 U.S. dollars).

The gifting revenue is split by three parties: the streamer, the platform, and the livestreaming agency, if applicable. Although there are other ways for livestreamers to make money, such as commercial ad income, sponsored links, and basic salaries provided by livestreaming agencies, some livestreamers also maintain other forms of creative content channels, such as Sina Weibo, short video channels, and vlog channels. Gifting revenue serves as the primary and the most direct and fast source of income for most streamers, even for those who signed with an agency, which only guarantees a basic salary. Gifting revenue also composes the major component of livestreaming platform revenue. More than half of the gifting income is allocated to the platform’s account book, which creates innumerable profits for these platforms.

The three stakeholders involved in this business mode, i.e., the livestreaming platform, the livestreamer, and the viewer all contribute to the process of making the virtual present interactive space of livestreaming remunerative. Livestreaming

platforms are primarily responsible for formalizing and encouraging competition for gifting revenue from both streamers and viewers. Most platforms provide promotions for streamers who receive more gifts over a designated time period. Awards include medals and virtual badges that are shown on a streamer's profile to indicate his or her distinguished status: front page promotion, i.e., listing a streamer's booth on the platform's main webpage to encourage more viewers to watch the channel; and bonus rewards, or additional income the platform awards a distinguished streamer for receiving a large amount of gift income. Some platforms have also designated special sections to showcase ranking lists of top-gifted streamers as well as top-giving viewers., i.e., viewers who give the largest number of virtual gifts during a designated period. These top givers are often referred to as "rural tycoons" (*tu hao*), an online reinvention of a socialist term to refer to the newly rich who have little social discretion and who spend money easily. Although the term was initially reinvented to express discontent toward the new rich, in the universe of livestreaming, it is taken as a compliment, which vividly reflects the money worship ethic of the industry.

For livestreamers, receiving as many gifts as possible is the top priority for an ordinary livestreaming session. Jargon is invented for streamers to promote gifts. For instance, the idiom "old iron, brush a wave" (*lao tie, shua yi bo*), a Northeast dialect-style phrasing, was once the most popular jargon in livestreaming space. The term "old iron" means "old fellow" or "dear friend," and "brush a wave" figuratively means "filling the screen with gifts." Such phrasing expresses the direct desire for gifts and is usually used as a pet phrase for livestreamers or brought up during the



intermission of their performances. Performative activities with more entertaining effects are usually conducted on demand. Livestreamers may require viewers to “brush a wave” to a certain amount before a performance. Particular performative activities are also invented with the direct purpose of collecting gifts. For instance, a “yell mic” (*han mai*) performance involves shouting rhyming sentences into microphone, which has become popularized as one of the most commonly used performances for livestreamers to attract viewers and encourage them to send gifts before the “formal performance” begins.

For viewers, especially “rural tyrants,” giving gifts incites a feeling of superiority and power through the privileges offered by the platforms and streamers that they support. Those who have the ability to give expensive gifts typically have more leverage in interacting with livestreamers. Not only do they have more power to ask livestreamers to do certain things (e.g., sing a certain song, answer a certain question, or perform a certain dance), but they also receive more attention from livestreamers for being the “major donors.” “Rural tyrants” are honored not only inside the livestreaming space but also in media outlets. News about how a “rural tyrant” spent a large fortune in minutes hits social media headlines and flabbergasts ordinary netizens. The livestreaming platform also collaborates with tech blogs and the media to announce lists such as “rural tycoon rankings” for the top givers of each platform; their ID and the rocket-high value of their gifts are listed to invoke a “wow” effect on social media.

The regularization of this gifting revenue system normalizes the ethic of commodity culture in the virtual space of livestreaming. A livestreaming platform is fundamentally transformed into a virtual marketplace in which trading relationships between livestreamers and viewers are normalized and encouraged through the exchange of virtual currency. The presence of livestreamers in the virtual livestreaming interactive space, therefore, has become the ultimate commodity for trade. Through the regularization of this monetization of digital labor, the livestreaming economy in China has quickly developed and expanded reproductively and profitably, and the lucrative promise of gifting income continually attracts numerous postsocialist youth to the industry.

### ***Gendered labor, gendered gaze***

A few statistical analyses conducted in the early days of livestreaming economy in China provide a vivid profile of who participates in livestreaming activities: young women from small towns and relatively rural areas contribute the primary labor of the livestreaming economy, while young men, also from similar geographical demographics, compose the primary consumers. More than half of the livestreaming population is composed of people born after 1990. According to some research institutes, the average age of livestreamers was approximately twenty years old in 2016, and the majority of them were of college age or even younger (Today's *Wanghong* 2016). While more than half of them do not have a college or equivalent degree, this group does not dominate the majority of the top-tiered streamers in terms

of income. According to Momo livestreaming's data, among the livestreamers who obtain an above-average monthly income, more than 90% have a college degree or higher, and only 9.2% of them have less education (2018).

Overall, two-thirds of streamers are women, and the majority of viewers are men (Today's *Wanghong* 2016 and 2017). In some livestreaming platforms, the gender ratio can be as high as 1:5, which means that female streamers are five times more common than male streamers (Momo 2018). The newest data released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) indicate that more than 83% of professional streamers, meaning individuals for whom livestreaming is their only or primary career, are female (2019). This gender ratio is inverted on the viewer's side. Male audiences surpass female audiences not only in terms of sheer numbers but also in terms of their economic contributions. According to a report from Today's *Wanghong*, a data agency that specializes in tracking big data on livestreaming platforms, in 2017, nearly 60% of audiences were composed of men, who also contributed the majority of the gifting revenue (2017). Research conducted by the Titanium Media and Social Science Academy also shows that in general, male viewers tend to spend more money than female viewers; while a majority of female viewers never spend money while watching livestreaming, half of male viewers frequently do so (2017).

Furthermore, geographical disproportion is also pertinent. Only twenty percent of top-ranked professional streamers and less than 5% of top-contributing users come from the four "first-tier" cities, i.e., Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and

Shenzhen (Today's *Wanghong* 2017), while more than fifty percent of streamers come from small towns and rural areas (Song and Zhao 2018). In terms of geographical specificity, Sichuan Province has the largest number of livestreamers, while streamers from Northeastern China, specifically Heilongjiang, Jiling, and Liaoning Provinces, are the most productive. According to Momo livestreaming's data, nearly 15% of streamers from the region livestream more than 8 hours a day (2018).<sup>33</sup>

While none of these statistics can provide a panorama of the livestreaming economy throughout China, considering the sheer amount of data and the multiplicity of livestreaming platforms of all sizes, these quantitative records nonetheless reflect a general picture of the economy. In fact, these statistics coincide with, if not reinforce, the stereotypes that circulate on Chinese social media about both livestreamers and typical viewers as less educated “small town youth” from second- or third-tier cities and rural areas, with a clear gender distribution in their different roles. This stereotypical imagery, which I describe as the “postsocialist leftover youth,” cannot be separated from the political economy of postsocialist China.

First, the geographical profile of livestreamers cannot be separated from the regional economic discrepancy that is exacerbated by postsocialist economic policy (Han and Pannell 1999; Liu and Lu 2002). The series of reformist economic policies

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<sup>33</sup> At the time of this writing, the newest reports of for the 2019 livestreaming economy were just released. An obvious shift is observed in the geographical demographic. East coast China became the epicenter of the livestreaming business. This was predictable considering that the e-commerce mogul Alibaba is located in the area, and since 2018, the e-commerce oligarch has invested in its livestreaming business, a move that has gradually attracted the conglomeration of livestreaming professionals to East coast China, specifically the city of Hangzhou.

launched since the end of the Cultural Revolution, such as the household responsibility system, corporatization, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises, were accompanied by an intended emphasis on particular regions and populations. Under the concept of “letting some people get rich first,” coastal regions, especially the eastern and southeastern coasts, developed at a steadily rapid pace with preferential economic policies. The four “first-tier cities,” a term first popularized by the real estate industry in the 1990s to signify a hierarchy of economic topography in China (Zhang et al. 2016; Wu and Bian 2018), are all in the coastal region. In comparison, the inner land, including the majority of China and represented by the relatively inaccessible Northwest and Southwest regions, has continued to be left out of this process and has remained relatively less developed (Yong 2011).<sup>34</sup> Northeast China, once situated as a key position in the development of heavy industry in the first half-decade of the PRC’s nation building, has witnessed a drastic decline in the postsocialist era due to the emergence of light industry and the service sector as well as the proliferation of the commercial economy in the coastal regions (Long and Gao 2019). Both regions have also witnessed massive population losses, especially caused by labor and educational relocation (Qin 2010). The vibrancy of livestreaming culture in these regions might be a direct consequence of the relatively slow or declining economic condition. For instance, in a study of the shrinking urban scene in Northeast

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<sup>34</sup> Although western China prospered in the history of China, it has been on the periphery of the national project throughout the history of the PRC. In the 1960s, the Third Front Movement (*san xian jian she*), a massive industrial development project, was launched in this region with consideration for military and national defense. At the time, the Vietnam War was escalating, followed by the Sino-Soviet split. See Naughton 1988; Fan and Zou 2015.

China, Wang (2019) observed the vibrancy of livestreaming culture among Northeastern youth as a rejection of and an alternative to finding a job in conventional heavy industry factories that are no longer considered a guarantee of a better life.

Second, the evident activity of male viewers of livestreaming cannot simply be reduced to a particular example of the universal gender domination of the male gaze but needs to be situated in the historical context of the state biopower of postsocialist China. Specifically, the eugenic one-child policy that was strictly practiced between 1979 and 2015 produced a large number of postsocialist young bachelors, or the so-called “barestick” (*guang gun*). Record shows that more than 70% of the male-dominated viewer population of livestreaming are unmarried young men, and bachelordom has become a main driver for these young men to seek emotional companionship by watching women livestreamers (Song and Zhao 2018). In the public sphere of contemporary China, the anxiety of male bachelordom has caused the stigmatization of unmarried women as so-called “leftover women,” or unmarried women who were considered past “marriageable age,” as being overly demanding and dismissive of heterosexual partners (Yin 2014; Zhang et al. 2015; Fincher 2016). While the rising number of single women and increasing female economic empowerment have indirectly caused the increase in male bachelordom, it is arguable that the biopolitics of the one-child policy directly led to the generational-based gender disproportion among postsocialist youth, with a high ratio of unauthorized gender selection for childbirth and female infanticide (Hong 1987; Jimmerson 1990; Zhu et al.; Ebenstein 2010).

Finally, the highly gendered bodies exhibited by the majority of female streamers cannot be simply interpreted as a universal objectification of the female body under the male gaze but rather needs to be contextualized within the rise of the beauty economy (*mei nv jing ji*) in postsocialist China. The term beauty economy emerged in China after China's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) to explain the increasingly ubiquitous phenomenon of the commodification of lookism and images of women's bodies, from beauty pageants, modeling competitions, advertisements, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery to tourism, TV and cinema (Xu and Feiner 2007). To a certain extent, the proliferation of images of women's bodies in the postsocialist period, especially in post-2000s popular media and commodity culture in China, celebrates the triumph of individualism over totalitarianism and the market over the state and demonstrates China's shift from Communist nationalism to consumerist nationalism (Brownell 1998, 37). In this sense, the beauty economy both liberates and commodifies women's bodies through the allegory of emancipating women's agency and makes images of women's bodies the site for the formulation of the new body regime. As I further discuss in the last section of this chapter, women's bodies submitted to the digital erotic gaze of the livestreaming space perform as a site for reconfiguring the postsocialist body regime in the era of digitalization.

### **The Anxiety Towards the *Wanghong* Look and the Tropes of Dehumanization**

In tandem with the prospering livestreaming gender economy is the rise of an anxious discourse that criticizes certain gendered labor, i.e., young women who participate in the activity of livestreaming, for causing their own self-alienation by pursuing a monolithic and unnatural beauty. This discourse is an anxious reaction to the ostensible tendency toward the homogenization of the appearance of young women, especially those who participate in the influencer economy such as livestreaming, and the “unnaturalness” of their homogenized facial appearances. The stigmatized title of the *wanghong* look (*wanghong lian*) has been used to blame these young women for incorrectly fetishizing ostensible lookism and alienating themselves with false consciousness. By magnifying the artificiality, unrecognizability, and grotesqueness of these young women, the discourse alleviates social anxiety over the homogenizing human in the livestreaming economy and disperses this anxiety by making these women abnormal, or not human.

As an invented term, the *wanghong* look appeared on the Chinese Internet around late 2014 and early 2015, slightly earlier than the proliferation of livestreaming activity, to describe the facial appearance generally seen on these female influencers. In the beginning, the term had few ostensible negative connotations but rather was a neutral term that distinguished acquired beauty, mainly through the use of cosmetic makeup, from natural beauty. In a 2014 online discussion post, a user, self-identified as a man, asked, “Do you think that *wanghong* looks are good looking in real life?” While he explained that by the “*wanghong* look” he



referred to women who wear very heavy makeup, he also confessed that “as a man, I would say although I prefer a more natural look, I nonetheless think *wanghong* looks are indeed good looking” (deleted account: 89891036). The distinction between the *wanghong* look and a more “natural” look rests on the application of makeup. It seems that a *wanghong* look appears less “authentic” or “real” since the beautiful appearance is due to external aids. In this sense, one user responds, “I’d be convinced (that *wanghong* looks are good-looking) if they are still beautiful after taking off the makeup” (jia guo qiang xiao niu). Additionally, the *wanghong* look is interpreted as a mediated appearance, in comparison to the non-mediated real look; one user notes that “the *wanghong* look would never look like that in real life” (qiu ku shao nian). In other words, it works well when viewing a *wanghong* look on the screen, but this beauty might not have the same effect in the offline world: “If someone wears makeup like that in real life, I find it much less attractive” (xi feng hua shan). Therefore, since the early invention of the term, although it has provoked certain controversies in terms of its “unnaturally made” characteristics and its lack of consistency when switching between virtual and real contexts, the implication of the *wanghong* look nonetheless refers to a generally neutral assessment of a woman’s body that is mainly characterized by its formation; the appearance is acquired rather than switching between virtual and real contexts.

Since 2017, the concept has been used negatively to criticize the tendency that appeared in the influencer culture, especially in digital economies with highly gendered structures such as the livestreaming economy, toward the observable

homogenization of the appearance of female livestreamers as a result of the popularization of beauty acquisition techniques in the livestreaming space and other social media sites. In using the term as a trope to exaggerate the lack of individuality, recognizability, and vitality of these young women, the discourse makes them dehumanized subjects upon whom to vent anxiety about homogeneous and artificial humanities.

The first trope applied in the discourse of the *wanghong* look describes it as a disharmonious aggregation of beauty standards that is ostensibly flawless but essentially lacks coherency and consistency. The young women who aspire to “make” (*zheng*) themselves into the *wanghong* look are therefore abandoning their individuality to cater to the beauty miscellanism and become “soulless.” In 2017, the *wanghong* look was first included in Baidu Baike, a Wikipedia-like Chinese website, in which a popular description of the facial features of this look is presented:

*“Wanghong look is the facial appearance that gathers the general characters of an influencer. The look is very commonly a result of cosmetic surgery, so they look very similar to each other. In general, they have large eyes, a pointed chin, and a high nose bridge. They like to pucker their lips and act cute. They always retract their chin when taking selfies... People refer to a woman with such facial features as the ‘standard wanghong look’” (zuojunchuan 198).*

From this “official” definition, we can see that cosmetic surgery is the primary technique that makes a *wanghong* look. The resemblance among individuals, interpreted as a direct consequence of this beauty acquisition, is disassembled into

detailed facial features, such as large eyes, a high nose bridge, and a pointed chin. This accentuation of the artificiality and resemblance of the look is repeated in another popular definition, in which the facial features of the typical *wanghong* look are enumerated in further detail. Accordingly, a *wanghong* look has the following facial elements: “Korean style straight eyebrows” (*han shi ping mei*), a flat and bold style of eyebrow popularized in China by K-pop girl idols and K-drama actresses; “European-style wide double-fold eyelids” (*ou shi da shuang*), or two-layered eyelids that create a deep crease above the eyes, which is usually considered a Caucasian facial appearance in comparison to the perceived Chinese traditional single-fold eyelids; the “lying silkworm” (*wo can*), a literary metaphor for plump bottom eyelids, or undereye bags, that is perceived as good fortune in conventional physiognomic culture and refashioned by the contemporary cosmetic surgical industry; a “cherry-shaped small mouth” (*yin tao xiao zui*), an literary term invented in the Tang Dynasty to refer to the traditional appreciated female beauty of small size and crimson color lips; medical terms such as the apple muscle (i.e., the risorius), a muscle that forms a certain facial expression when drawing back the angle of the mouth; and large eyes, a high nose, a thin and narrow chin, and a white complexion (ww71338ww 2018).

In studying the configuration of the female beauty standard in postsocialist China, scholars have tracked the process by which certain foreign facial features, particularly features that are considered Caucasian, are constructed along with a more culturally specific standard of beauty as desirable among Chinese women (Hua 2013:

8). The facial features of the *wanghong* look, as described above, are a miscellany of these appreciations of beauty. The double-layered eyelids, high nose bridge, and white complexion are perceived as composing a Western, particularly Caucasian, beauty ideal, reflecting an alteration (if not simply an imitation) of the “global standard of white beauty” (Miller 2006). While the first two features of this perfection usually involve cosmetic surgery alterations (Hua 2013), the latter has generated decades-long fascinations with whitening facial care and cosmetic makeup products (Mak 2007; Xie and Zhang 2013). Similar to the enchanted Caucasian beauty, the popularity of the “Korean-style flat eyebrow” provokes the reconfiguration of the Chinese beauty standard through transnational influence (Shim 2006). This style, which was popularized along with the pan-Asian influence of Hallyu, drastically contrasts with the conventional appreciation of Chinese beauty as lanceted eyebrows, characterized by a slim and curved shape.

In parallel with this idolization of foreign beauty, the conventional Chinese aesthetic of body image is also incorporated to configure the beauty assemblage of the *wanghong* look. Features such as the lying silkworm refashion what Katherine Zane termed the “yellow eyes” as a reconfiguration of conventional Chinese corporeality (2003). The appreciation of a small mouth reflects a consistent fetishization of a particular kind of image of women with a history extending to ancient male-led literati traditions.

Additionally, while these exotic or conventional beauty features could be achieved by cosmetic makeup or minor cosmetic surgeries (*wei zheng*), such as

double eyelid blepharoplasty or rhinoplasty, the perfection of the *wanghong* look, which also involves changing the face shape, involves deeper “colonization of women’s bodies” by taking further “hard-core” (*dong da dao*) or even “head-changing” (*huan tou*) cosmetic surgeries, including augmentation of the temples, chin augmentation, and mandibular angle reduction, which achieve the perceived perfection of a standard face shape by dissecting or removing parts of bones to alter the structure of the face.

Although the ideal standard of the *wanghong* look configures nearly every element that is perceived as ideal beauty for Chinese women, it is criticized for replacing heterogenous beauty standards with a unified miscellaneous eclecticism that is perfect but lacks personality. The women who are labeled with the *wanghong* look are therefore criticized for being soulless with a standard, assembled face that lacks individuality. Some of the most commonly used rhetoric for dehumanizing these young women as perfectly soulless includes analogizing them with “the beauty from the old times,” typically actresses from the 1980s and 1990s, an era that is described in these discourses as a time when “natural” and “imperfect” beauty was appreciated. For instance, a popular online post picks several celebrities “whose appearance, judging from the standard of the *wanghong* look, would definitely need to be altered” to prove the superior attractiveness of imperfection. A Taiwanese singer has a short and flat chin instead of the inverted triangle-shaped chin that is required by the *wanghong* look standard, but “her flaw gives her a boyish style.” Another actress’s plump and flat nose would definitely be considered ugly according to the *wanghong*

look, although “she preserves her girlish innocence because of her chubby nose tip.” Compared to these imperfect but vivid looks, celebrities who “have ruined” their faces into the *wanghong* look cannot evoke such impressions: “from their faces, I cannot get a sense of their temperaments, personalities, or characters. At first glance, I cannot see anything that is ugly and only the fact that their beauty is just empty” (qingque 2019). In other words, the *wanghong* look makes these young women’s individuality ambiguous and even soulless because they abandon their imperfect personality in the pursuit of a singular form of inorganic beauty, “molding themselves based on other people’s ideals” (ibid.).

The second trope of dehumanization ridicules the *wanghong* look for being uncannily unrecognizable. The lack of individuality and personality of these women’s appearances is exaggerated into a spectacular staging of their lack of recognizability as absurd and surrealistic. This trope can be traced back to the relatively early days when the term was adopted in entertainment media in late 2015. During that time, the *wanghong* look was widely adopted as a pejorative term to scorn a group of female influencers who were known for having relationships with male celebrities with considerable female fandom. In particular, during that time, paparazzi headlines were filled with news of a fiftyish singer’s public announcement of his new girlfriend, who was more than twenty years younger than him and who was considered “nobody” before becoming the “little girlfriend” of the singer, who had been known as one of the “four kings of Hong Kong pop music.” Calling the young woman a “young model with the *wanghong* look” (*wang hong lian nen mo*), entertainment media tied her to

other young women who also came to the public eye in the same way. The phrase implied that these women had a scheme to utilize their boyfriends/husbands' stardom for their own sake while flattening them into a reductive image of the *wanghong* look. In popular discourse, these young women were described as a threat due to their "prey and capture" nature. Thrilling phrases punctuate paparazzi articles, such as "Is the *wanghong* look going to rule the world?" and "How do they trap male celebrities one by one?" In a further threatening tone, the *wanghong* look is described as the bar set for ordinary young women to pursue their idols: "You and your idol are separated by a *wanghong* look face."

What underlies the demonization of these girlfriends is a repetitive trope that amplifies their homogeneity through uncannily identical and unidentifiable faces. For instance, one of the men who is perceived as too easily "trapped" by the *wanghong* look is Wang Sicong, the infamous "second generation rich" known to the public for his playboy personality. News about Wang's newest girlfriends always emphasizes the resemblance of the new girlfriend to his previous ones. Some online articles even list all fifteen girlfriends and state that these young women "will get me sick with face blindness."

This trope of face blindness has been repetitively deployed as one of the most commonly used popular rhetorical tropes to exaggerate the inhuman unrecognizability of the *wanghong* look, sometimes fueled by explicit sexism. For instance, a 2017 viral online joke jests that "(men with) face blindness should not marry a *wanghong* look" and quips, "If you marry a *wanghong* look, you may not be

able to find her if she is missing... your missing poster would not be helpful at all since people could not actually identify your wife... after all, everyone develops face blindness in this age when the *wanghong* look is popular” (bai qi tu 2017).

The trope of the *wanghong* look’s uncanny unrecognizability has not been as exaggerated as in a 2016 tech news story, which astonishingly made these young women into spectacles of a theatre of absurdity. In that year, the defeat of the human chess master Lee Se-dol by the artificial intelligence Alpha Go caused an uproar about the crisis of human intelligence superiority. In a similar manner, Alibaba’s fin-tech affiliation, Ant Financial, held a human-machine contest between the artificial intelligence they developed, named “Mark,” and a human man, the “Water Guy” (*shui ge*), who was known for his extremely keen attention to detail and unprecedented memory, such as identifying a single glass of water from a collection of 520 of them on an entertainment show called *The Brain (zui qiang da nao)*. The purpose of the contest was to test which brain would perform better in facial recognition tasks in terms of speed and accuracy. Contestants are required to match the real person and their portrait photos in a fast speed. The test sample includes 50 young women, who were described as “similar-looking standard beauties” and who were later labeled as having the *wanghong* look by all media reports and social media discussions, and a larger number of collections of female headshots. In each round of the challenge, the contestants needed to match a few numbers of randomly picked women with the photos. The first round required three matches out of 150 photos, and the second increased the base number to 300. In the third round, recent headshots



were replaced by childhood portraits, and the contestants needed to match two of them out of 80. The AI system won the first round, and the Water Guy triumphed in the last two.

The choice of using the *wanghong* look as the challenge itself indicates an intentional deployment of the theatricality of these women's unrecognizability as a challenge for both human and machine brains. By making all 50 women wear the same outfit and stand in a similar pose, it becomes easier to perceive them as identical rather than identifying their individual differences. The sheer number of women and even more photos overwhelm spectators while showcasing the excellence of both the human brain and AI technology in a hierarchical order: the defeat of "Mark" eventually vindicates the human brain's superiority.

However, in exaggerating the abnormality of the challenge, AI technology is not negated of its functionality but simply distinguished from the human brain as less intelligent. One tech blogger described "Mark's" failures in the latter two rounds as a matter of "data complexity" because the AI device only resembles human eyesight but cannot make discriminating judgments: "when photo collection recognition involves discriminating between a large number of beautiful women with similar features and makeup, it is not enough to depend on sight alone. The human brain's deduction and analysis abilities then become especially important" (meikewang 2018). Therefore, while AI could defeat a human in sheer speed with a relatively limited amount of data, as the first round indicated, the human brain's victory in the second

round shows that when the data are too similar to be distinguishable, the AI cannot make calculations as complicated as those of the human brain.

Another blogger further attributes the third-round result to the inconsistency of the *wanghong* look because “some ‘*wanghong* looks’ have gone through ‘minor adjustment’ (to their faces), and even their own moms cannot recognize them, not to mention ‘Mark’” (xinchuang 2016); only a superior brain like that of the Water Guy can truly make the miracle happen. In other words, the *wanghong* look does not abide by human biology and thus prevents machine learning from analyzing the images according to an algorithm based on principles of human facial appearance evolution. While the utilization of the *wanghong* look as an extremely difficult sample for recognition spectacularizes the extraordinary abilities of the human brain that remains transcendent to the AI, in return, the defeat of the AI further reinforces the trope of the *wanghong* look as uncannily identical and even nonhuman.

The third trope that is widely adopted in the anxious discourse on the *wanghong* look pathologizes the pursuit of the *wanghong* look as an obsession and demonizes women who pursue it for having an unnatural face that is not real and coherent and, more severely, a grotesque face that lacks ordinary human vitality and is incapable of expressing human emotion. Essentially, the *wanghong* look is considered to be made from unnatural beauty acquisitions that cannot last long. In the aforementioned definition of the term, these unnatural techniques are enumerated into the “four mysterious techniques” (*si da shen mi ji shu*). The first two are cosmetic surgery and thick makeup, both of which involve work directly performed on the

body. While the short-lived quality of makeup is ostensible, stories about how the effects of cosmetic surgery will eventually cause “face-collapsing” (*lian kua*) warn that the unnatural acquisition cannot produce long-term beauty. The latter two of the “mysterious techniques” are Photoshop and beauty cam; the former is software known for its photo editing function, and the latter is a mobile camera app with built-in facial enhancement and alteration features. Both simply change the body images virtually and cannot provide consistent and continuous appearance in the off-line world; therefore, they offer no “real” beauty.

Warning of the non-lasting effects of the *wanghong* look, various media articles use the term “obsession” (*yin*) to describe the impulse and aspiration of these young women to make themselves into a *wanghong* look. What underscores this term is the pathologizing of certain unwanted, socially constructed behaviors as individual or personal behaviors that can only be ascribed to the individual (Kang 2009). Even more so, the *wanghong* look is understood as a “chaotic form of sick beauty appreciation” that traps young women in an abyss of “self-destruction.” Even one feminist journalist describes the pursuit of *wanghong* beauty as indicative of a medical diagnosis of “mental trouble” (*xin bing*) that is infected by a “distorted aesthetic mentality” (Hou 2017).

This pathological tone in describing the aspiration for the *wanghong* look is best exemplified by a sensational media portrait of the *wanghong* look in a 2016 entertainment show episode that has been recurrently deployed in articles and online discussions that criticize and demonize the *wanghong* look (Wang & Qu). The

program features celebrity consultants providing advice to ordinary audience members and helping to address their daily troubles and concerns. In this specific episode, a mother seeks help for her daughter, who she describes as “obsessed with cosmetic surgeries.” As she states, her daughter had undergone more than 20 cosmetic surgeries and spent more than 800,000 Chinese yuan (approximately 115,000 U.S. dollars) over the past two years. Worried that this obsession would ruin her daughter, she believed that her daughter “now looks like a monster (*gui*).”

While the mother’s statement produced an uproar among the consultants and audience, the sudden spotlight on the daughter, who sat in the audience booth, added to the theatricality of the show. Before she is given a microphone, one of the hosts shouts to the mother, “I know which one she is without you telling me. I have noticed her for a while” which alludes to the unusual “monster-like” appearance of the daughter, as suggested by the mother, and easily distinguishes her from the more “normal” looking audience members sitting next to her. The grotesque nature of the *wanghong* look becomes even more astonishing when the young woman displays no regrets in reacting to her mother’s tearful statement. One host laments, “I have to criticize you. Your mom cries so hard, but you just keep smiling. I don’t know where this smile comes from. Are you capable of having a sad facial expression?” Others also interrogate her: “Aren’t you feel heartbroken seeing your mom like this?” The young woman responds, “I am heartbroken. I want to cry as well. I am not smiling. I have had surgery that lifts the corners of my mouth.” In other words, the surgery the women had, which lifted the corners of her mouth to maintain a smile, prevented her

from making ordinary and regular human facial expressions. Through such a public display of grotesque facial frigidity as a result of the obsessive artificial altered *wanghong* look, women who pursue this beauty standard are further dehumanized.

It is very important to distinguish between a phenomenon that is unfolding and the discursive configuration of the phenomenon through which people perceive and interpret it. While the phenomenon of the homogenization of beauty standards is ostensibly observable in the influencer culture constructed in gendered digital economies such as livestreaming, the discourse that formulates such phenomena through the lens of the *wanghong* look represents a particular way to vent social anxiety towards such ostensible and ineluctable tendencies. The stigmatic discourse of the *wanghong* look uses three tropes to dehumanize young women who pursue the beauty standard. The first trope describes them as subjects with false consciousness, who objectify their own subjectivity and lose their individuality by alienating themselves with a singular standard. The second trope exaggerates the uncanny unrecognizability of these young women and makes them less human because of this sameness. The last trope further makes these young women into grotesque subjects in both behavior and appearance by pathologizing their aspiration for the *wanghong* look as an obsession and demonizing their appearance as deprived of human attributes. The dehumanized young women therefore serve to disperse the social anxiety produced by the homogenization of a beauty standard that is perceived as

unnatural and lacking a persistent essence, as if it is the misbehavior and self-destruction of these young women that causes this crisis in the first place.

### **Fetishizing Ephemeral Coexistence: Digital Presentism and Digital Reality**

At midnight on a random night in 2016, a friend sent me a link and texted, “I am at the coffee shop that we used to go to all the time. Look!” I clicked on the link and downloaded the app the link directed me to. After signing up, an image of a young woman’s face appeared on my screen. It was daytime in Shanghai, and from the background, I could vividly see the familiar decorations of a local specialty coffee shop that I visited once or twice every month when I lived in Shanghai. The young woman did not look into the camera. Instead, she was talking to some friends about gossip that I clearly had no clue about. She held her device in her hand, and when she moved her hand while talking, I could intermittently see my friend sitting behind her next to the coffee bar and by the small coffee table where we used to sit. I was thrilled and immediately texted my friend, “Raise your head! I can see you!” I then watched my friend look at her phone, raise her head, turn her head left, look toward the direction of the young woman, and grin.

Later, my friend explained to me that she was just checking the app to pass time. She found the young woman’s livestreaming booth by using a geolocation service that allowed her to watch livestreaming booths near her. She did not expect to see herself on the screened reality or, to put it another way, the screen interface of a stranger who

sat just three meters away from her and whose screened reality was directly projected to her own screen.

What appears uncanny about this experience, not only for my friend but also for me, who did not expect to be suddenly connected with a close person thousands of miles away over a stranger's front-facing camera, are the abruptness, randomness and virtuality of this ephemeral moment of coexistence, when the virtual reality captures, encapsulates, and shares the analog reality among us. Although this anecdote is probably a small probability event made from numbers of coincidences that are unrepeatable, its uncanniness accurately discloses the basic structure of the digital space of livestreaming: as a virtual coexistence space in a disjointed isolated moment that is based on rather random coincidence.

As the following pages argue, such uncanny experiences reflect the very basic temporal logic of the livestreaming space, which is a digital presentism, or a digital reality-derived temporal experience of intermittently and randomly built moments of screen-captured coexistence in the very present now. This digital presentism fetishizes the digital presence of its gendered labor to produce these ephemeral moments of coexistence. Young women who participate in livestreaming are therefore expected to adjust their analog bodies into conditions with shapes and forms that feed this digital fetishism. I argue that because digital fetishization for ephemeral coexistence needs to be fed on the standardization of an aesthetic to assure the reproducibility of its labor, the homogenization and popularization of a particular kind of artificial lookism become an ostensible phenomenon. In other words, the digitalization of analog humanity

produces a great extent of anxiety about the homogenization and derogation of the humane subjectivity that lies behind the discourse of the *wanghong* look. Although the young women who are stigmatized as the *wanghong* look become the site for this anxious discourse about critical social transformation, in this case, the emergence of digital humanity is expressed via the dehumanization of women's bodies.

As a digital space provides instant virtual coexistence through screen devices, livestreaming platforms are one of the most recent developments of humans' imaginary of and craving for digital society, specifically the imaginary of frictionless human interaction through digital data. To be sure, the pursuit of distant connectivity emerged long before the arrival of digital media. Not that long ago, handwritten letter and post mail service served as the major tool for people to connect to each other at a distance in an always postponed manner. The arrival of print capitalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the first time made the imaginary of simultaneous coexistence among individuals in different locations culturally intelligible. The feeling of togetherness and connection of the "imagined community" was accomplished by building imaginary unity through print media such as newspapers, which allows individuals to imagine a co-eval other that does not necessarily connect with the individual empirically but rather ideally (Anderson 2006). This sense of coexistence has been further propagated by the later inventions of radio, television, and digital media. The obstruction for individuals to vicariously live in a larger community or public beyond their personal bonds has been technologically removed, despite the fact that the arrival of constantly virtual togetherness in spaces such as social media and streamlined news does not necessarily



promise the actual arrival of coexistence but rather further isolations, divisions, and conflicts (Warschauer 2004; Song et al. 2014; Turkle 2017).

Nonetheless, frictionless mediated human interactions have been further achieved by the development of audio-visual transmission technology. Among all its iterations and variations is livestreaming's idea of transmitting live audio-visual feeds captured from one person's camera to another's screen in an instantaneous manner—an idea of video-mediated transmission that has been laid out since the development of the video telephone in the second decade of the twentieth century (Finn et al. 1997; Schnaars and Wymbs 2004). The technological infrastructure of livestreaming involves basic video-mediated transmission technology built on a P2P network: data collection, during which streamed images and audio are collected through video acquisition software and hardware; preprocessing, which involves a series of back-end activities focused on videos gathered in the first step; coding videos into transmissible data; transcoding and plugging flows, through which data are transmitted under protocols from the livestreaming terminal to the server and then to the terminal of the fringe node and arrive at the viewers' device; and finally, distribution, a process that determines the quality and quantity of the video that appears on a viewer's device (Luo 2007).

By its essential purpose, digital platforms such as livestreaming, as well as many other mediated communication spaces, provide the virtualization of co-presence without actual togetherness. In contemplating the philosophical implications of the virtual, Pierre Levy (1998) defines it in comparison with the actual but not the real because “virtuality and actuality are merely two different ways of being” (23). As Rob

Shields (2003) notes, “The virtual is real but not concrete” (3). In other words, instead of a chimera of nonexistent and fabricated feelings of real-ness, as a wearable virtual reality viewing device theatrically functions by literally blocking the person who wears the device from his/her surrounding world to create an “immersive” virtual reality that feels fictional, “real” virtual reality indicates the actual presence of a phantasmal-like intangible existence that is by no means unreal. To put it simply, instead of an imaginative layer added to the real world, the virtual, either virtual reality or virtual connectivity, is itself a way of life.

In this sense, in video-mediated spaces such as livestreaming, what is produced in the digitally transmitted instant data of the living existence in analog space should not simply be understood as an unreal form of connection that fabricates a realistic feeling of watching a real person in real time. Rather, livestreaming should be understood as the real invention of a virtual way in which the nonconcrete social experience of coexistence that is nontangible is made tangible via the digital device. In other words, digital media directly act on the ways in which reality is produced and perceived. Given this notion of the realness of the virtual, an observation of the digital space of livestreaming, particularly its spatial structure and temporal logic, leads us to identify what kind of reality is made via the virtual coexistence space, where a unique temporal logic directly requires analog reality to suit and alter itself for digital reality.



Figure 3-1 The frontpage of Inke Livestreaming version 8.0 (acquired March 26, 2020).

A typical livestreaming app frontpage interface includes similar arrangements of banner bars and buttons on both the top and the bottom spaces of the interface to help users navigate the livestreaming content based on categories, chronological order, or familiarity. Take the interfaces of two popular livestreaming apps, Inke and Pepper, as examples (Figures 3.1 & 3.2). Inke’s top menu bar provides two categories, “recommendations” (*tui jian*) and “trending” (*re men*), on the left side. On the right side, three comparatively smaller icons allow users to search livestreaming booths by profile name and username, to view their watching history and to start their own livestreaming. On the bottom bar, the left channel “livestreaming” (*zhi bo*) is the default channel when users open the app. Next to it is the channel “nearby” (*fu jin*), which

allows users to use a geolocation service to find livestreaming booths near their location. The mid-channel “message” features interactive instant messages between users and systematic notifications. The second right channel “following” leads users to find updates posted by the livestreamers they follow about future livestreaming. When a user does not follow any livestreamers, this channel also provides recommendations based on the user’s viewing history. The right channel gives users access to their account information, including profile editing and account refilling for sending virtual gifts. Pepper livestreaming, in comparison, provides more subdivided categories on the top menu bar for users to navigate, such as “music” (*yin yue*) featuring livestreaming content of singing, “dancing” (*tiao wu*) featuring content of dance performances, “making friends” featuring livestreaming content tagged with “blind date” (*xiang qin*) or “casual chat” (*pei liao*); “newcomers” (*xin ren*), where newly signed livestreamers are featured; and other categories displayed when users swipe the bar to the left, such as “good-looking” (*yan zhi*), “outdoor” (*hu wai*), “game” (*you xi*), and “video hall” (*lu xiang ting*) Each provides recommendations based on the contents and tags of individual livestreaming booths.



Figure 3-1 The frontpage of Pepper Livestreaming version 7.2 (acquired March 26, 2020).

When a user enters an individual livestreaming booth, live audio-visual data captured from the streamer’s device are transmitted to the user’s device.<sup>35</sup> The live video stretches over the entire screen of the user’s device (Figure 3.3). All buttons for navigation float on top of the streaming videos. Taking the interface of Inke as an example, the top of the screen presents the streamer’s profile on the left. A “follow” button is placed next to the name. Next to the profile information are a few profile photos of the streamers’ top followers, i.e., the users who have given the largest number

<sup>35</sup> Basically, the input? microphone and front camera are enough to capture live video data for livestreaming transmission. For livestreamers who pursue professionalism in livestreaming, a disjunctive microphone and camera are usually used to enhance the effects and efficiency of their live feeds.

of virtual gifts to the streamer. The bottom 1/3 space of the screen is filled by the live feeds of livestreaming booth activities, including a fast-scrolling timeline of who is entering/leaving the booth and instant messages viewers post in the bottom texting box. Next to the box are a few function buttons that allow users to refill their account balance, send virtual gifts, repost the livestreaming booth to other social media platforms, check system messages, and quit the booth.



*Figure 3-2 Screenshot of a livestreaming booth from Inke Livestreaming (acquired March 26, 2020)*

Contemplating the ways in which the interactions and experience of coexistence are constructed in the livestreaming interface, we can discern that it applies a temporal logic that is characterized by randomness, abruptness, and disjointedness. This temporality, which I term digital presentism, embodies a feeling of the vivid liveness

of the present coexistence for livestreaming viewers and enables the fundamental mechanism of the livestreaming space, which depends on the reproduction of short-lived, disjointed moments of the digital reality of gendered labor to function. In the following, I examine how this digital presentism structures the livestreaming space. While looking at three characteristics of this digital temporality, I also note how this temporality leads to the fetishization of an ephemeral coexistence that is homogeneous, disjointed, and artificial.

First, the livestreaming space offers a multiplied and infinite selection of choices of “alternative universes” that happen at the same time. As users navigate between different recommendation channels, in the middle of the screen, there are always four to six photos of different livestreaming booths that users can click to enter the interface of the booth. While the width of each photo is adjusted to fit the screen with two booths in a row, the length of these photos always displays the photos on the bottom row, which invites users to scroll down to access the full display of the third row. As users continue scrolling down, an increasing number of livestreaming booths are displayed in an infinite manner. The infinite content feeds that cannot be exhausted are also afforded to users even at the interface of an individual livestreaming booth; users can scroll down or up to switch between different booths or swipe left or right with the same effect. This infinite scrollability, or sometimes swipecability, of livestreaming content provides users with experiences of infinite possibility and has the effect of enhancing user adhesion by feeding users the addictive satisfaction of endless choices (Pine II and Korn 2011; Barnes 2015; Karlsson and Larsson 2016). Although

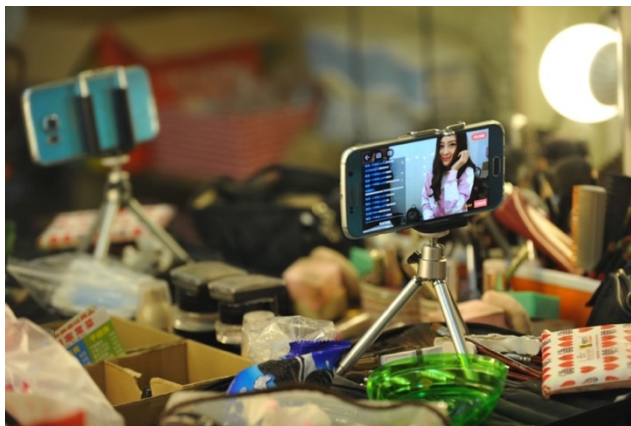
it seems that there are infinite options of livestreaming booths for users to choose on livestreaming platforms, this feeling of affluence is actually based on the recommendation algorithm that runs in the backstage of the platform to modularize and categorize individual livestreaming booths into similar genres, styles, or analogous contents. In other words, instead of providing multiplicity, the recommendation algorithm relies on resemblance and similarity to provide its users with ostensibly infinite choices.

Second, users navigate throughout the livestreaming space abruptly in the sense that they always enter a livestreaming booth in the middle of its happening. When users scroll and swipe between channels and recommendations, they only see livestreaming booths that are happening at the moment. Even though by following a streamer, the user can enable push notifications when the streamer starts a new livestream, only after the streamer starts the livestreaming activities can his or her followers access the booth. Users often enter and leave livestreaming booths without seeing the beginning or the end of a livestreaming session, as if they suddenly jump into another individual's moment without knowing the cause of this moment or the effect to which this moment will eventually lead. In other words, instead of building stable and consecutive coexisting relationships, users intermittently build suddenly formed coexisting experiences by scrolling and swiping between different livestreaming spaces. In this sense, the experience of coexistence is disjointed and intermittent.

Finally, but most importantly, the very fact that what is captured as the living moment of the streamer is transmitted through a framed screen cannot be ignored in



shaping the ways in which the liveness of this coexistence is carried out. In other words, the virtually real experience of the coexistence of the livestreaming space is essentially a screened reality. Because only parts of the streamer's corporeal body and surroundings in the analog space are captured, only these parts of the analog reality are developed into digital reality, and it is this partially represented part that constructs the entire virtual reality of the digital space. A certain hierarchical redistribution of different spaces is therefore constructed throughout the livestreaming space. On the bottom layer is the analog reality that is only partially captured in the digital space; the rest is "outside of the camera" and is either adjusted to aid in better representation of the digital reality or dismissed as reality that is not worth being seen. This hierarchical order is best depicted in the theatrical contrast presented in Figure 3.4: while on the screen the living space of the streamer looks clean and minimal with a whitewall background and a few decorative items behind her, what the front-face camera does not capture are the disorganization and lack of style.



*Figure 3-3 On-screen reality vs. off-screen reality (1) (Zou 2016)*

Another layer of hierarchy exists between the segment of the analog lives of streamers captured by the screen and the digital reality that is eventually displayed on users' screens thanks to a series of reality augmentation techniques inserted by livestreaming platforms, such as filters, special effects, and automatic or customized beautification. Taking the beautification technique in Inke livestreaming as an example, whenever a livestreamer prepares to start a livestream, the implanted beautification technique would set a degree-two beautification as the default. It also offers three other degrees of auto-beautification. Each degree differs based on the scales of four features: whitening degree (*bai xi*), skin smoothness (*mo pi*), eye enlargement (*da yan*) and face-lift (*shou lian*). The default degree two whitens the streamer's skin by 50% and smooths it to approximately 75%, although the size of the eyes and the shape of the face, as indicated, remain the same. In degree-four beautification, the face is whitened to nearly 100%, and the skin is smoothed to such a degree that the shape of the chin becomes less obvious. Additionally, the eyes are enlarged by 10%, while the shape of the face is altered as if the lower jawbones are removed thanks to the obvious enhancement of the "face-lift" effect. In addition to automatic beautification, streamers can choose to customize the scale of eleven beautification indexes, from adjusting the texture of their skin to altering a particular organ as well as changing the entire face shape.<sup>36</sup> The default scale of customized selection has already upgraded the degree-four auto-

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<sup>36</sup> The eleven indexes are whitening (*mei bai*), skin smoothing (*mo pi*), face-lifting (*shou lian*), chin (*xia ba*), eye enlargement (*da yan*), nose lifting (*shou bi*), mouth shape (*zui xing*), downsizing face (*xiao lian*), narrowing face (*zhai lian*), downsizing cheekbones (*shou quan gu*), and downsizing lower jawbone (*shou xia e*).

beautification: the most ostensible differences are the smoothness of the skin and the shape of the face.

While these beautification indexes precisely reflect an eclectic artificial beauty standard constructed through the discourse of cosmetic surgical beauty since the early 2000s (Hua 2013), their effects are represented on a two-dimensional flattened screen. Therefore, as the scale of beautification is enhanced, the shape of the face ostensibly becomes blurred: the whitening and smoothening effects on the skin tend to make it a solid palette of white with a very fictitious shape of shades surrounding the mouth, eyes, and nose. As the outlines of the face, defined by the outermost pixels of its shape, are moved towards the center of the image, the fringe of the outline is depicted by a series of clear-cut lines, as if the face is an image directly pasted on the screen. Additionally, when all the beautification indexes are increased to their maximum scales, the shape of the streamer's face and facial organs become even more geometric and flattened. In a self-testing experiment, I turned the shape of my chubby lower jawbones into two sharp-edged obtuse angles by increasing the indexes of "downsizing cheekbones" and "downsizing lower jawbones" to their maximums. The unnatural angles are obvious because the beautification augmentation pushes both the upper outlines of my face shape and the lower outlines that connect to my chin to the center of the image without aligning them.

The default setting for adjusting the auto-beautification to degree two suggests that the livestreaming space does not desire a truthful reflection of analog reality. Instead, the digital reality has already been set as an augmentation of the analog reality.

While this augmentation of reality easily makes natural faces develop into rather unnatural shapes, the submission of the analog reality to the digital reality has led to the alteration of the former into unnatural conditions that are better suited to the digital reality and make the digital appear more natural. Thus, in this sense, beauty acquisition techniques from cosmetic makeup to cosmetic surgery become common practices for young women who want to become livestreaming influencers and are listed along with digital visual augmentation techniques as the basic techniques for the *wanghong* look—all of which arguably offer a better appearance in the digital space. For instance, applying whitening effect foundation powder along the lines of the cheekbones and lower jawbones alleviates the flattening of shades on the face. A similar makeup skill can be applied to other parts of the face, such as the eye sockets and forehead, to help the beautification tool better detect the parts that need to be augmented or altered (see Figures 3.5 and 3.6). Additionally, while putting this thick, sometimes overdone makeup on one's face would probably work for livestreamers who primarily stream from their private space, cosmetic surgery that enhances the bone structure and skin tone are more feasible techniques for influencers whose reproduction of the digital reality involves capturing the analog reality in more social occasions (such as the young women scored by Leung in the anecdote introduced in the beginning).



Figure 3-4 On-screen reality vs. off-screen reality (2) (a zhu wu wang gao nai weng 2019)



Figure 3-5 On-screen reality vs. off-screen reality (3) (Zhang 2019)

Therefore, the experience of virtual coexistence in the livestreaming space is based on a screened reality of an abruptly constructed present moment that is more randomly than intentionally selected from an infinite collection of alternative moments in the present tense. With this randomness, abruptness, and modularity, the temporal logic of the livestreaming space caters to a digital presentism, interpreted as a temporality that builds on these characteristics to embody a vivid feeling of the liveness of the present moment for viewers. This digital presentism is the fundamental logic for the livestreaming economy to commodify the coexisting spaces it constructs. This commodification logic fetishizes an ephemeral digital lookism that craves short-lived, homogeneous, and artificial appearance as beauty. Simply speaking, the digital space

of livestreaming depends on a modular and categorical standardization of the individual livestreaming space to provide reproducible and replaceable laborers and requires the alteration of the analog existences of its fundamental laborers to better suit the reality produced on the digital screen. In other words, the pursuits of homogeneity and artificiality are not incorrectly desired by the young women who bear the stigmatized name of the *wanghong* look but rather are the consequence of the digitalization of analog humanity that feeds the prosperity of the digital economy like livestreaming.

## **Epilogue — Thinking of Digital Lives and Hopes in the Era of the Pandemic and Quarantine**

The 2020 Lunar Calendar New Year will probably become the most unsettling and unforgettable memory for Chinese people, especially postsocialist youth. By the time that I was finishing this epilogue, the novel coronavirus, officially known as covid-19, had rampaged through China and the world for nearly three months. By June 10, 2020 the havoc wreaked has taken over 400 thousand lives and infected over seven million people all over the world. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) admitted that the epidemic first expanded in central China had developed into a global public health crisis: a pandemic or “a worldwide spread of a new disease” (2010). However, for most Chinese people, the nightmare had started two months earlier. In early January, rumors of a “new kind of pneumonia” in Wuhan, one of the largest and most populated metropolises in China and a city known as the hub of the cross-national public transportation, were confirmed. On January 21, the chief expert of the National Health Commission admitted the disease’s capability of being transmitted between humans through airborne contact. At midnight on January 23, the day before the Lunar New Year’s Eve, the Wuhan government announced a lockdown order, effective at 10 a.m. that day. All public transportation inside the city, as well as all forms of travel to leave the city, was shut down. More than 11,000,000 people were blocked from physical contact with the outside world. In the following few days, as the epidemic continued to spread beyond Wuhan, more cities went into

lockdown or similar quarantine modes. Before the end of the seven-day holiday for the celebration of the Lunar New Year, an annual national holiday that usually involves travelling across the country, gathering to celebrate, and boosting consumption, a new norm of life under quarantine was established in the country. All nonessential production activities and commercial activities were shut down. Shopping malls, restaurants, and office buildings were sealed up. Educational institutions and working units postponed their return date to work and extended the seven-day holiday indefinitely. Staying home was mandatory, even compulsory. Restrictions to control mobility were enforced in a top-down manner and were practiced by local neighborhood committees and complex management. The once buzzing scenes of this populated country suddenly disappeared and were replaced by a ghostly silence. The analog landscape of China, accurately caught in drone-shot aerial images of the empty streets of Wuhan, is soundless, motionless, and even in a certain sense, lifeless.

In contrast to the impression of the vacuumed analog China is the noisy and bustling digital lives. Since a large number of people were privileged enough to be able to secure themselves and be “stuck” in their households — a privilege that only becomes possible by exposing others, e.g., medical workers, delivery workers, and “essential” retail workers, to precarious conditions, the Internet has become the most convenient amenity for them to keep communicating and interacting with each other and the outside world. Using various mobile phone apps and e-commerce-integrated social networking platforms, people order groceries, fresh food, and medical supplies



to their front doors. Virtual hangouts through social media replace physical gathering: people innovatively invent ways to play mahjong and drinking games via group video calls — people are saying that, at least in virtual ways, the Internet is basically making up for the dampened festival spirit. Life goes on in virtual space: schools adopt “cloud classrooms,” companies resume work while requiring employees to work from home and clock in virtually; television stations resume pre-quarantine entertainment shows by adopting cloud production. In fact, one popular singing competition show vividly captures the ways in which the virtual establishes norms by transforming its studio-based performance into a virtual concert: competitors, confined in their own home cities, perform from a nearby recording studio or even their own bedrooms, while the once studio audience of one hundred people also stays home, watches performance live, and submits votes via livestreaming platforms (Figure 4.1). In one way or another, events that had to be canceled in the physical world are taking place virtually: an open park music festival becomes a bedroom cloud music festival, a film premiere press conference becomes a midnight streaming premiere. The screens of digital devices seem to allow ordinary life to be preserved, or at least to be vicariously felt.

While lives under quarantine remain vicariously lived, the conflict between the state power of censorship and netizens’ desire for free speech has also become unprecedentedly fierce and violent. Questioning regarding accountability for this epidemic has fueled the Chinese Internet since the very beginning. News about government negligence, misconduct by charitable organizations, and the

incompetency of officials fermented quickly, infuriating Chinese netizens. A great level of discontent towards bureaucratism, information opacity, and government malfeasance charged Chinese social media under quarantine with popular indignation. Instead of treating popular discontent in a fair manner, the Chinese government reacted by intensifying Internet censorship and discourse control.



Figure 4-1 Singer 2020, episode 3. Television screen is divided into small screens.

The antagonism between netizens' collective will and state control reached a climax in the social media blast reacting to the death of Dr. Li Wenliang on February 7, the honored whistleblower of the pandemic, who was accused by the police of "generating false information" by warning friends through a social networking tool about the potential "SARS," later known as the novel coronavirus, weeks before the official recognition of the outbreak and whose life was also taken by the disease. The tragic death of Dr. Li and the government's refusal to dismiss the false allegation against him infuriated netizens and led to a subsequent massive online memorial and protest. In a short period of time, appeals for a government apology and freedom of speech overwhelmed the Chinese Internet. However, hashtags, memes, and popular

posts related to Dr. Li's death were deleted even more quickly. Social media accounts were disabled for circulating dissent and individual users were tracked down, arrested, and disciplined.

The state violence of compulsory disappearance, unprecedentedly more hardball than ever, did not suppress the collective insistence on defending the censored voices. Approximately one month later, *Renwu Magazine* published an investigative journalist report, titled "The Whistleblower" (*fa shao zi de ren*) featuring an in-depth interview with Doctor Ai Fen who first brought the potential threat of the newly emergent virus to her colleagues, who themselves became the eight whistleblowers, with Dr. Li being one of them (Gong, 2020). The article was censored on all social media platforms and online publishing sites in a draconian manner, potentially because of its undertone of criticism with respect to government negligence. To fight back against the states' intention to delete the article, Chinese netizens started a relay race, reordering, translating, and recoding the 8404-Chinese characters-long article into various formats with the purpose of bypassing the automated censorship system that senses keywords in Chinese characters. In the following couple of days, the article was revived on Chinese Internet in at least thirty formats, including foreign-language translations (English, Arabic, Italian, Korean, Vietnamese, Hebrew, Dutch, German, French, Japanese, Spanish...), dialects and ethnic language translations (Cantonese, Sichuan dialect, and Hakka), formats with specific calligraphic scripts (bone inscription, bronze inscription, Mao's handwriting style), classical ancient Chinese, a phonetic notation version, versions that were

encoded with special codes (telegraph code, hexadecimal programming code, bar code, Morse code, emoji, Mars script<sup>37</sup>), versions that shuffle the word order, and versions that change the sentence order and reading direction.<sup>38</sup> In spectacularly creative ways and in a solemn and stirring manner, Chinese netizens, with unprecedented cohesion and endurance, proved their unwillingness to be tamed.

While the defiant fight of ordinary netizens to resist state violence with regard to free speech has taken place, another struggle has also been played out. The protagonist leading this struggle is still ordinary Chinese netizens; however, the struggle is not against the state but, rather, against those “enemies” of the nation-state and the People, with a capital P. Nationalist condemnations of foreign allegations are foreseeable in the midst of the geopolitical conflicts escalated by the pandemic. However, the massive surge in populist hostility and the collective purge of the so-called “ass-slanting public intellectuals” (*wai pi gu de gong zhi*), a loosely defined imagined collection of a heterogeneous members of intelligentsia, writers, public speakers, media workers, and celebrities, were an unexpected occurrence, one that nonetheless developed drastically. The surge in hostility that emerged on the Internet is decorated by language related to the radical class struggle and anti-intellectualism that is highly similar to the language adopted during the high socialist period,

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<sup>37</sup> Mars script, or *huo xing wen*, a script style that is popular among teenagers in China. It is characterized by intentional misspells and replaces of common Chinese characters with rare characters that look like the original characters.

<sup>38</sup> While there are more alterations of the original article, all of the mentioned versions can be found in the shared Google Drive “relay whistle competition” (*jie shao sai*).  
[https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/13VYDD2H75x8ahge0vw\\_g50grJAhkG2kX](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/13VYDD2H75x8ahge0vw_g50grJAhkG2kX)

especially in the Cultural Revolution. For instance, Wuhan-based writer Fang Fang started to update her diary online on the first day of the Wuhan lockdown. With her blatant words about her experiences and her reflections of the everyday lives and crises she has gone through and witnessed during the quarantine, Fang's diaries received fierce attention from the Internet. On March 18, an open letter criticizing Fang's diaries hit Chinese social media. The letter adopts the tone of a 16-year-old high school student to criticize Fang for not being a writer who "propagates the main melody and spreads positive energy." The letter further interrogates her lack of patriotism for forgetting "who gave you clothes and food" and "making irresponsible allegations against us, just like those Western countries" (xilisheng, 2020). While the letter's explicit concocted tone is obvious to Chinese netizens, its criticism of intellectuals who do not spread so-called "positive energy" — celebrating rather than reflecting and glorifying rather than critiquing — nonetheless represents a widely shared accusation against Fang as well as many other scholars and intellectuals who basically expressed the "negative energy" as public intellectuals who "deliberately sing a discordant tune" (*gu yi chang fan diao*) (Leung, 2020).

Another example is the online purge of the video blogger account Paperclip (*hui xing zhen*), known for its specialization in making science popularization videos. During the early days of the outbreak, Paperclip's video, "Everything about the Novel Coronavirus" went viral on the Internet because it offered an easy-to-understand epidemiological explanation of the disease's spread. On March 21, Paperclip uploaded a new video on the excessive deforestation of the South America rainforest,

in which China's role in this process was pointed out — according to the video, China is the main buyer of soybeans in Brazil, and the planting of soybeans in the country partially triggers the excessive deforestation process. This segment of the video brought Paperclip the name of “insulting China” (*ru hua*) and led netizens to further scrutinize its other videos for more evidence of their anti-China scheme. One such piece of evidence is a video that Paperclip uploaded a long time ago about China's surveillance system. As netizens determined, a Chinese map that appeared in the video for less than a second includes Taiwan as a province in the version that Paperclip uploaded on Bilibili, while the same video on YouTube omits the controversial island from China's territory. Even though another version of the map of China appeared in another place in the same video, this time for more than 5 seconds long, with Taiwan included in both versions, the fleeting moment was nonetheless considered a the “solid hammer” (*shi chui*, or undisputable evidence) of Paperclip's agenda to divide China. Under its Weibo post explaining the inconsistency as a technical error, netizens vented their angst and rebuked Paperclip's explanation as chicanery or “useless washing” (*bai xi*) in front of the “solid hammer.” According to this broadly shared opinion, Paperclip's divisive behavior reflects the urgent danger of intangible ideological infiltration, carried out by public intellectuals, who “had slanted their ass to the Western anti-China force.”

Here we are, in the time of global pandemic and mass quarantine, a time when borders are closed, economies are halted, state power is intensified, and scenes of everyday life have vanished, living on the support provided by the ubiquitous and

omnipresent digital power, directly on top of the vacuum of analog lives. In this time, the virtualization of social lives, regardless of how unsettling and apocalyptic it feels, endorses a feeling of security and normalcy for some and makes life precarious for others. In such a time, when surviving and tackling the pandemic becomes the ultimate task, enemies, allies, and heroes have never been so easy to differentiate and label, even though the celebration and glorification of heroic sublimity look more like a disillusioned carnivalesque than a futuristic revolution, especially when the relentless attacks on those “enemies” share too many similarities with the radical and violent revolutionary language that Chinese people have been estranged from for more than four decades — a language that once made, and obviously is making some people grotesque and others afraid.

Writing the epilogue amid the shadow of the pandemic and quarantine, this dissertation would like to close with a proposal for a continual critical interpretation of the radical political potentiality and stakes of digital ephemerality in the context of this abruptly arrived new norm. It is said that this condition is only temporary, that everything will be back to “normal” once the pandemic and the quarantine are over, that the “special condition” is only ephemeral, transitory, for it occurs only once and will probably never happen again. However, if what is happening in the world, as Alain Badiou (2020) informs us, is “not particularly exceptional,” then in what ways do we need to situate ourselves to look at these living moments that nonetheless feel so surreal? More importantly, if what is felt, perceived, and experienced as ephemeral, as the hundreds of pages above try to argue, is in fact so pounding,

illuminating, recurring, and haunting, on what grounds can we be at ease with neglecting what appears at present to be so apocalyptic, disillusioning, and fearful as simply a temporary condition that represents a break from normalcy? Instead, it might be more conscientious and necessary for us to continue to ask the following questions: Is it possible that even after the pandemic and quarantine, we will never return to normal, assuming there was a normal that we can distinguish from the present? In what sense might all those conditions that are perceived as merely ephemeral during this pandemic and quarantine — the overflow of digital data and vicarious living amid the ostensibly deserted analog world, the sound and the fury from the digital space that has never before been so jarring ---- with all their dystopian and apocalyptic vision in fact illuminate a near future of the digitalization of human society, one that would not have had the chance to be speculated in “normal times”? In what sense might we be haunted by a future that had yet to come, in which the humanities not only fully depend on but even parasitize the digitalized world in this era of posthumanism?

In speculation, it would be productive to view the digital experiences during the age of the pandemic and quarantine as a surplus, in the sense that what is perceived as excessive or irregular may provide precious archives of the violence of the normalcy. In particular, digging into those things that are forgotten, erased, and neglected in the process of going “back to normal” might offer crucial trajectories of inquiry to answer the questions raised above. For instance, it may be painful, howbeit ever so productive, to look at the shadow of the public online ritual of mourning,



emblemized by the Chinese government's proposition of the "three-minute silent mourning" ceremony (Linder 2020) and to ask what kinds of emotions and lives become mournable subjects in the digital sphere and what are abandoned as disposable feelings that one needs to get over. The same inquiry of the politics of glorification may also lead us to further pose questions regarding the issue of the relation between digital-generated affect and human society — only certain stories of scarification are "hashtagged" as heroic and glorious. Additionally, a paranoid reading of the degradation and injury of certain national subjects would probably lead us to reflect on the sense in which digital hatred does not solely express micromanaging nationalism in a time of crisis but, rather, the anxiety of the digitalization of communication and opinions.

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