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Mukbang Streamers in China: Wanghong as Industry, Laborer, and Exemplar of Social Transformation

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Wanghong studies are emerging as an important field in international communication studies, but scarce research focuses on particular subgenres of wanghong. This article builds on data collected through netnographic research and investigates eat-streaming from the three areas developed through wanghong literature: Wanghong as industry, laborer, and exemplars of social transformation. As an industry, eat-streaming is high-profile as it was promoted by party media, and national law was tailored to its management; as laborers, eat-streamers manifest broader gender and socioeconomic inequalities as undereducated, underprivileged, rural women who have been hospitalized repeatedly over the years as a direct result of their live-streaming labor; and as exemplars, eat-streamers exemplify successful figures for China's socialist development. Contributing to studies of wanghong and China's Internet governance, this article argues that eat-streaming in China further demonstrates the acute sociopolitical tensions embodied in China's wanghong industry, explicitly concerning governance, labor conditions, and social inequalities.

Keywords: China, wanghong, microcelebrity, Internet governance, mukbang (eat-streaming), digital labor, social media entertainment

Since the coining of "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2008), which describes the phenomenon where ordinary people become famous online by displaying their everyday life, this topic has gained international significance. However, it was not until a decade later that Chinese microcelebrity studies emerged as a distinctive field of research (Li, 2019; Zhang & de Seta, 2018). Zhang and de Seta (2018) marked its beginning by defining the Chinese concept, wanghong as "a shorthand term for *wangluo hongren* (literally 'person popular on the Internet')" framing "the enticing shores of online celebrity through the peculiar lexical domain of a grassroots popularity" (p. 57). Craig, Lin, and Cunningham (2021) further developed this Chinese phrase to examine the problematic process of digital creators' celebrification and the political-economic tensions that structure China's wanghong industry.

Based on a review of wanghong literature, scholars in this field primarily focus on three aspects: Wanghong as an industry or wanghong economy (Craig et al., 2021; Sandel & Wang, 2022), wanghong as an embodiment of transformation fantasy (Li, 2020; Song, 2022; Xu & Zhao, 2019), and wanghong as digital laborers (Wang & Picone, 2021; Zhang & de Seta, 2018; Zhou & Liu, 2021). From the perspective of

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the wanghong economy, researchers explore the state-industry dynamic and China's current Internet governance strategies. Work focusing on wanghong's transformation examines the radical socioeconomic changes they experience as ordinary people and disadvantaged populations, such as rural youth, who become celebrities. The studies of wanghong as digital laborers highlight their precarious and exploitative working conditions. Setting the tone for this field, Craig and colleagues (2021) thoroughly discussed different types of wanghong, and experts in this field paid particular attention to gay wanghong (Song, 2022; Wang, 2021) and rural wanghong (Li, 2020). However, less scholarly work has been done on another particular type of wanghong—Chinese *eat-streamers* (for more details about this translation, see Shen, 2023)—ordinary people who obtain money and fame by performing excessive or extreme eating.

By analyzing mukbang through these three aspects, this article highlights two significant tensions in China's Internet governance and online cultures. The first tension is between the political claims wanghong fantasy upholds and wanghong's lived experiences. The wanghong fantasy, which promises that one will rise in social and financial capital, doubles as an exemplifying story upholding the correctness of China's economic strategy and social development. Yet, eat-streaming wanghong's experiences expose the socioeconomic inequalities and digital laborers' destitution. The second tension is the obscured limit in the state's management of its online cultures. Eat-streaming's rise and fall in China highlight state regulations and attitudes that may take sudden turns without warning—a performance promoted one day could become morally condemnable the next.

Unlike other wanghong's precarious conditions, eat-streamers will certainly reach a physical limit with worsened physical and mental situations without labor protection or insurance while having to deal with the condemnations of being immoral. This certainty highlights the urgency of discussing the aforementioned tensions in China's wanghong industry. The following section demonstrates these tensions through analyses of the three aspects (industry, exemplars, and digital laborers).

Contextualizing Wanghong Studies: Wanghong as Industry, Laborers, and Exemplars

Wanghong is first and foremost an industry in China, and the economic implications and regulations regarding the governance of this industry have been a subject of scholarly research. China's wanghong industry emerged with the development of media technologies operating within the structure of the Chinese market and technological advancements in interactive digital platforms (Liang, 2022; Sandel & Wang, 2022; Zhang & de Seta, 2018). It manifests in the formation of a hypercompetitive industry founded on platforms later merged under BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent; Cunningham & Craig, 2016). The wanghong industry *is* China's "economic engine" (Cunningham, Craig, & Lv, 2019, p. 721); this is evidenced in state protection and sponsorship, including infrastructure and technological advancement such as "AI, 5G telecommunications, quantum and cloud computing, and what is denominated as the Internet of Things" (Craig et al., 2021, p. 61). As an industry, wanghong is simultaneously "governed, regulated and commercialized by powerful social media platforms" (Guo, 2022, p. 1). As Cunningham and colleagues (2019) point out, China's e-commerce-integrated wanghong industry relies on "the ever present possibility of state action in pursuit of upholding 'social morality'" (p. 731). Uniquely, China's "omnipresent internet governance offloads the responsibility of self-regulation, (self)censorship, and content moderation to

platforms and wanghong, and this governance style exposes them to more risks" (Craig et al., 2021, p. 105). A salient example is China's anti-porn campaigns, which significantly impaired Chinese gay men's capacity to engage in creative online expressions through live-streaming practices (Song, 2022).

From this perspective, eat-streaming as a sector in the wanghong industry exhibits an intensified tension between state-level promotion and regulating responsibility off-loaded to the platforms and workers. As eat-streaming's history in China shows, it emerged in China as a result of party media's direct promotion of its low-entry requirement and high profitability; the workers in this sector are condemned as wasteful, immoral, and profit-driven as a direct result of top-down shift to the opposite attitude—from promoting to condemning.

This precarious condition fostered by China's Internet governance and the exploitations of wanghong is an important area of exploration regarding wanghong as digital laborers and workers. According to Tan, Wang, Wangzhu, Xu, and Zhu (2020), wanghong is inherently subjected to exploitation due to the structural force of platforms—they are set up as factories. One particularly concerning characteristic of China's wanghong industry is that the labor laws and rights do not protect the workers since they are considered subcontractors rather than employees (Craig et al., 2021). Although researchers do find that these workers actively collaborate to cope with the precarious working conditions, such as lack of guaranteed working time, income, and labor protection (Zhou & Liu, 2021), live streamers' worker unions, also known as *gonghui*, are even more exploitive than the platforms for their self-serving, profit-driven business model (Liu et al., 2021). Worse still, wanghong are constantly under increasing mental and emotional demands, such as struggling with drawing the line between their private life and entertaining their followers and keeping up the fundamental and exhaustive labor of updating their video productions (Craig et al., 2021; Wang & Picone, 2021).

What concerns this research the most in this aspect is wanghong's gendered labor. According to Li (2019), more than 80% of wanghong are women. Wanghong as gendered labor is further demonstrated by the fact that even the basic platform functions, such as beauty filters and emojis, are designed exclusively for women (Tan et al., 2020). The state-supported live-streaming e-commerce industry further complicates and intensifies the gender tension and gendered live experience (Cunningham et al., 2019; Hou, 2022). According to Hou (2022), women wanghong embrace traditional patriarchal values and gendered roles without questioning, and these videos passively reinforce the patriarchal structure, especially in rural China. In general, research shows that China's wanghong industry reveals and exacerbates urban-rural discrepancies (Li, 2020).

Despite wanghong's precarious working conditions, exploitation, and discrimination, the industry is attractive to the general population because of the fantasy of radical social transformation—the ordinary and disadvantaged obtaining money and fame on the Internet. This fantasy is related to the perceived easy rise into fame by doing work that is associated with fun and glamor (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). As Guo (2022) argues, the wanghong industry attracts young Chinese women because of its glamorous work. Kuaishou, in particular, is a platform that appeals to rural youth as a means to express oneself while increasing income (Zhou & Liu, 2021). Conversing on ordinary topics, emotions, and daily lives that the viewers can easily relate to is one effective means for wanghong to establish connections with their followers (Wang & Picone, 2021). Nevertheless, being subject to China's hyper-stratified and immobile social

conditions, the wanghong plays an exemplifying role as the celebrity who not only transforms from ordinariness but also breaks free from their socioeconomic constraints (Xu & Zhao, 2019). This particular fantasy of social transformation is observed in eat-streamers' own words that indicate they view performances of extreme eating as their (only) means to a better future where they can support themselves and their families. The money and fame eat-streamers obtain are also viewed as leverage that grants them status in the social hierarchy and also gives them respect from their relatives and friends.

These three aspects, wanghong as an industry, digital laborers, and exemplars of social transformation, provide a structure for analyzing particular types of wanghong; in this research, they structure the study of mukbang wanghong. Craig and colleagues (2021) mention mukbang as an example of social wanghong, which produces "a kind of fetishized performance in which strangers watch creators eat massive amounts of food" (pp. 121–122). However, there was a very limited focused study of this fetishized performance using the framework of wanghong studies. Earlier mukbang research focuses on the reasons for its popularity and its feminist emancipatory potential (see Choe, 2019; Ioannidis & Chamberlain, 2021; Park, 2020; Schwegler-Castañer, 2018; Woo, 2018) although recent research explores its psychological (harmful) impacts (Kircaburun et al., 2021; Yeon, 2022). The aesthetic, the performance, and audience interactions were also points of inquiry to explore mukbang's representation of diverse types of performances, as a cross-cultural attraction, and a multi-sensorial and digitally mediated online culture (Hong & Park, 2017; Park, 2020; Pereira, Sung, & Lee, 2019). Chinese eat-streaming, in contrast, is a commercializable cultural product rather than merely an online entertainment (Shen, 2023). This perhaps is why Chinese researchers are inclined to criticize its failure to adhere to China's ideological and cultural training (see Gao, 2018; Li & Liu, 2019). Chinese scholars' criticisms of eat-streaming have been rather one-sided, especially since China issued the anti-wasting-food law, and eat-streaming has been criticized as vulgar, wasteful, obscene, trash, and meaningless (see Ma, 2018; Xiao, 2021; Yao, 2020; Zhao, 2018). These judgments adhere to mainstream government-initiated criticisms.

A Netnography of Chinese Mukbang

Drawing on a netnographic approach, this article bases its analysis on a total of 446 hours of live-streaming sessions transcribed by the author over a period of five months between March 1, 2019, and May 31, 2019, and between August 1, 2019, and October 1, 2019. During these periods, the author conducted participatory observations on the top 50 eat-streamers with the highest number of fans on the Kuaishou platform (per the platform ranking list on March 1, 2019). The time for observation was set daily from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. Beijing time. Within this selection scope, the eat-streamer who was live streaming when the author logged in for observation was selected. When more than one eat-streamer was live streaming, the one with the highest number of viewers was selected. The observations prioritized episodes of hyperexcited performances as this is when eat-streamers' business and performance strategies are most acute. Although much of the live-streaming observations are not included in this article, they form the basis for understanding China's eat-streaming culture.

The analyses below include material from eat-streamers' conversations with the viewers, their self-disclosed personal experiences, and online comments related to these streamers. In addition, this article draws on media coverage produced and disseminated by mainstream party news outlets, including Xinhuanet,

People.cn, China Central Television (CCTV), and so forth. This set of research data allows the article to apply critical arguments from wanghong studies to unpack sociopolitical conditions in Chinese society.

Mukbang Wanghong as an Industry: From Economic Hot Spot to Internet Trash

Mukbang emerged in Korea on Afreecatv around 2008 (Braithwaite, 2019), and the live streaming of eating became an international sensation in 2014 when Park Seo-Yeon, a Korean streamer, was interviewed by Reuters (Kim, 2014). Eat-streaming's rise and fall are in tune with the political-economic conditions of the wanghong industry observed by scholars. As shown above, the wanghong industry is an economic engine that is protected, sponsored, and incubated by the state (Craig et al., 2021; Sui, 2021), and in this context, China's eat-streaming was viewed as an economic practice with lucrative business potential approvingly promoted by the state-owned media outlets. Notably, mukbang's popularity in China began when China Central Television (2014) reported this novel online phenomenon where people could make millions by eating. As such, mukbang's later development is conditioned by China's Internet governance, which predominantly holds creators responsible for (failed) self-censorship and self-regulation, and the latter's chance of monetization relies on state actions in pursuit of social morality (Craig et al., 2021; Song, 2022).

Between 2014 and 2017, the official attitude toward this novel live streaming, which had (and has) virtually no entry requirement (everyone can eat), was to promote and encourage. Based on Baidu search results, the phrase 吃饭直播 (literally "eat live streaming") first emerged in China on CCTV's official website on January 28, 2014 (China Central Television, 2014). A day after CCTV's report, Sina News (2014), Sohu News (2014), and Sina Video (2014) all reposted this news report on eat-streaming. These news reports highlighted mukbang's profitability: "Park Seo-Yeon resigned from a consultancy company when realizing her high income from mukbang. . . . Now, all she has to do is to livestream herself eating for three hours a day to earn a comfortable USD $9,000 per month" (China Central Television, 2014, para. 2). A year later, in February 2015, *Guangming Daily* (2015) reported that Korean mukbang performer, Li Changxun, could earn hundreds of U.S. dollars every night by broadcasting himself eating. This report was further disseminated through *Global Times* (2015) and People.cn (2015). Xinhuanet (2015) followed up with a report promoting the story of a 14-year-old Korean streamer, Jin Chengzhen, who could earn 10,000 yuan after one night's streaming of eating. These news outlets are the most critical mouth and tongue of the party in China. Following the top-down push for these profitable performances, in November 2015, live-streaming platforms Huashu (a state-owned local media outlet) and KK Live started to focus on exclusive promotion and market cultivation tailored for Chinese eat-streaming (Sina, 2015). By early 2017, China's party media, Xinhuanet (2017), reported that, on average, each Chinese eat-streaming session could attract 200,000 views on the platform DouYu, and its total views had surpassed 1.7 billion.

Emerging from this top-down promotional attitude, a significant difference between Chinese mukbang and that in other countries is that, initially, mukbang in China was organized through a 投稿 (submission and selection) system. In September 2014, a user named "Chu Nv Zuo de Chi Huo" (处女座的吃货), a fan of Korean mukbang, started to upload mukbang videos to his channel on YouKu, called China Eat-streaming (中国吃播), when he could not find any on Chinese video-sharing platforms at the time (Sina, 2015). At this beginning stage, he was working as an editor who selected eating videos submitted to him.

Shortly after he established the YouKu channel, his fans began to ask about mukbang videos made by Chinese people with whom they could communicate and connect. Answering the fans' call, he started to recruit Chinese eat-streamers from his existing fan base. By 2015, he had recruited 83 streamers and formed several QQ chat groups with a few hundred people (Kanchai, 2015). Until late 2015, mukbang in China existed as a well-organized practice through a more traditional gatekeeper model on this YouKu video channel, which later changed its name to "Eat Yourself a Future" (吃出个未来; Chunvzuodechihuo, n.d.).

The event that transformed Chinese eat-streaming into a user-generated culture was when an eat-streamer, known as Mi Zi Jun (密子君), uploaded her video of eating 10 bowls of instant noodles in 16 minutes 20 seconds to BiliBili in 2015. This video attracted 1.7 million views overnight (Zhu, 2017), and 2.2 million people became followers of Mi Zi Jun within three months (baoxianzhidouhuiguoqi, 2018). Mi Zi Jun's overnight popularity set the model of a form of radical social transformation in terms of her rise in social and financial capital over a short period. Within months, Mi Zi Jun transformed from a streamer who solely relied on users' donations (打赏) to a retail brand that branched across product endorsements, advertisements, promotions, sales, and guilds (wanghong agents).

Based on this business model, top eat-streamers started their guild exploiting and controlling newly joined eat-streamers who would work for them without appropriate financial insurance or compensation. In exchange, these "apprentices" could use the eat-streamers' brand and media accounts to attract followers. As more eat-streamers cashed out their microcelebrity status and joined guilds, eat-streaming in China formed an industry chain from factory to (follower) table. Eat-streamer Tong Tong, for example, opened her own factory producing hotpot soup base and dipping sauce while eating, endorsing, promoting, and selling her own products on her channel. Chinese eat-streaming's transformation from an online culture to an industry with its own production and distribution channel was further expedited and exacerbated by the state regulations targeting eat-streamers (Shen, 2023).

Mukbang-targeted state regulations officially began in March 2019 when China Newspaper of Publications and Broadcasting criticized eat-streaming as vulgar and called for censorship prohibiting these obscene performances from spreading (media.people.cn, 2019). Since then, the official attitude toward eat-streaming has taken a dramatic turn. On August 12, 2020, CCTV criticized eat-streamers as wasteful: "One out of nine people in the world are starving . . . these people are wasting food" (The Paper, 2020, para. 5). On December 22, 2020, China issued a new law against wastefulness (The National People's Congress of People's Republic of China, 2021). Article 30 of this law clearly states that broadcasting stations and the Cyberspace Administration of China must monitor, prohibit, and punish the guilty parties who produce, disseminate, and encourage audiovisual products that feature consuming a large quantity of food (The National People's Congress of People's Republic of China, 2021). According to the new law, streamers who perform extreme eating could be held legally responsible in China (*Chinadaily*, 2021).

Local governments immediately backed up this law with local regulations. Hebei and Hainan provinces issued regulations prohibiting the production and dissemination of fake eating, self-induced vomiting, and binge-eating content. Hefei prohibited performing binge eating and other wasteful behaviors on live-streaming platforms. Guangdong province required video-product providers to tighten their censorship and quickly ban the dissemination of food-related live-streaming content (Nan Fang Gong Bao,

2020). All the major live-streaming platforms declared a "war on eat-streamers." TikTok issued regulations to punish users who display wasteful behaviors; Kuaishou announced its intention to delete videos and prohibit users from live streaming if wasteful behaviors were detected; DouYu set out to tighten content censorship for food shows to prevent wasteful behaviors (Xinhuanet, 2020).

In this context, mukbang wanghong can be understood in terms of its first aspect (an industry), which is subjected to China's top-down Internet governance that aims to maximize economic gain *and* maintain control over online information flow. As shown, as an industry in China, mukbang wanghong's rise and fall were in accordance with the state's industry policies and China's adjustment of Internet governance strategies. After the dramatic turn in state attitude toward eat-streaming, there was further commercialization of eat-streaming because the streamers reduced or deleted content focused on performing the enjoyment of eating and increased the promotion and selling of food products (Shen, 2023). Within this economic-political context, the official discourse, platforms, and Chinese eat-streaming studies alike focus solely on these performances' failure to meet the state's moral standard. As a result, eat-streamers' role as exemplars of success online—which was the key theme promoted by party media at the initial stage—has seldom been discussed since this turn.

Mukbang Wanghong as Exemplars of the Streaming Fantasy

Viewing live streaming as a means to a better life is not a belief exclusive to eat-streamers. As demonstrated above, many researchers have highlighted this fantasy of radical social transformation embodied in China's wanghong industry. Eat-streamers are unique in the sense that the success they exemplify is doubled: They have not only obtained money and fame but have also become recognized as successful figures that are embraced and applauded by the mainstream. The latter success—becoming an ideology-ratified "role model"—is a fundamental difference between Chinese eat-streamers and those in other countries.

As a reporter from China's party media Xinhuanet observes, Chinese people view live streaming as a path to their China Dream (中国梦):

> Streamers believe they could "Ni Xi" [rise radically in social status as the underdogs]. . . . Drawn by the legends of streamers who have "transformed from sparrow to phoenix," tens of thousands of people have moved to. . . . Bei Xia Zhu, "China's Number One Live-streaming Village," and more grassroots continue to come. (Wei, 2020, para.4)

China's eat-streaming industry has always had this undertone of allowing the downtrodden a chance for a better life. As the slogan of the first Chinese eat-streaming channel states, people are encouraged to submit their works because it promises an opportunity to "eat yourself a bright future" (Chunvzuodechihuo, n.d.).Many eat-streamers had taken this promise to heart and openly celebrated their financial success in direct relation to their subsequent rise in social status. For example, in one of Sister Red's live-streaming sessions, she shared her experience with changes accompanied by her financial social transformation:

> My relatives used to treat me like a beggar with no dignity, no respect. Now I have money. Look at my watch, and it's 80,000 yuan [US$11,240]. When they saw my watch, they told me I didn't know who I was anymore. I know who I am—I am someone who has money. (personal communication, June 9, 2019)

Similarly, another eat-streamer, who posted a photo in which she is standing next to her brand-new red Mercedes-Benz G55, said, "I'm from the countryside. I was so scared that people would find out that I wasn't from the cities. But now, I'm buying a Mercedes-Benz G55. . . . I'm proud to say that I'm from the countryside" (personal communication, October 4, 2019).

This narration of self-made entrepreneurship carries a similar undertone to the general observations on microcelebrity culture (see Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017; Marwick, 2013). Nonetheless, successful eat-streamers in China double as exemplars who symbolize the achievement and correctness of the "China Dream" (中国梦) and, more particularly, the success of China's "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" (全民创业创新) initiative. A key distinction between digital entrepreneurs in and outside of China is the source and cause of success—it is the party and the government for wanghong. As People.cn, an outlet for China's official state discourse, explains, the China Dream means "being persistent with the strategic idea that development is the reason to truth, allowing more people to benefit from the development and every Chinese person to experience the happiness of a dream come true" (People.cn, 2013, para. 2). Under this discourse, a Chinese wanghong is fundamentally different from an individual who succeeded through their own entrepreneurship because the former benefits from the country's correct strategic planning. This logic is especially evident in China's "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation"—the mass is not the key acting party but *the party*, which "helped nurture a large number of market entities, which greatly supported employment" (The State Council The People's Republic of China, 2021, para. 3). In this sense, eat-streamers' entrepreneurship is not about their entrepreneurship but the success and triumph of the party's strategic planning and development of the country.

This relationship is observable in eat-streamers' motto on the Kuaishou homepage. Take the two examples of eat-streamers' mottos, as quoted at the time of observation. Sister Red's (n.d.) motto on her homepage says: "Thankful to the platform! Thankful to the government! Thankful to the time!" Nannanshigexiaochihuo (n.d.), similarly states, "Thankful to Kuaishou! Thankful to Uncle Xi! [a nickname for Xi Jinping]" on her Kuaishou profile page.

This second meaning of eat-streamers' exemplar effects is perhaps one of the reasons why it was not only tolerated but also promoted by the state. As a result of this state-sanctioned/state-promoted popularity, eat-streamers were becoming mainstreamed by being part of television shows and contests on state-owned broadcasting agencies, which implies endorsement by the state. In August 2016 and February 2017, Mi Zi Jun was invited to *Tian Tian Xiang Shang* (a popular TV program produced by state-owned provincial satellite TV station Hunan TV) on two separate occasions. In September 2017, eat-streamer TongTong participated in *Twelve Tastes* (十二道锋味) produced by Zhejiang TV (a major state-owned provincial satellite TV). Mao Mei Mei, another famous eat-streamer, was also invited to the TV documentary series *Jia Yi Bing Ding*, which is produced by Phoenix TV.

The transformation fantasy that famous eat-streamers exemplify completely denies the exploitation, inequalities, capital extraction, and, most importantly, the mental and physical toll related to the eat-streaming labor. One comment reads,

> Look at The King of Big Stomach [title given to the eat-streamers]: envied lifestyle—eat whatever they want; envied body—remaining skinny after eating so much; envied appetite—eat as much as they want; and most importantly, envied job—earning money by enjoying eating. (personal communication, July 24, 2018)

To a large extent, this exemplary figure represents the eat-streamers' dream in China: "You can earn money by eating while enjoying; isn't this the ultimate goal of life for almost all of us?" (personal communication, March 28, 2019). As such, eat-streaming is especially appealing to the underprivileged in Chinese society. Eat-streamers are the exemplars that prove possible the dream of becoming rich and famous, rising in social status, and being recognized on national TV for the undereducated and socioeconomically disadvantaged. What particularly stands out in eat-streaming's fantasy is that this can be done by anyone—without having to have any skills or put in the hard work—but through the enjoyment of eating. However, as Xu and Zhao (2019) note, truly successful streamers are a rare case, and, in the case of eat-streamers, they cannot escape exploitation, marginalization, gender inequalities, or discrimination despite their apparent success.

Mukbang Wanghong as Workers: Immoral or Marginalized and Disadvantaged?

Since China's dramatic change in its official attitude toward eat-streaming in 2020, Chinese research and media reports alike have adhered to the official attitude. Eat-streaming has since then been criticized as (1) negative, vulgar, obscene, wasteful, and Internet trash (Li, 2021); (2) unethical and immoral, repetitive, and meaningless (as in not facilitating China's ideological training; Wang & Chu, 2021; Yao, 2020); and (3) misguided and encouraging unhealthy consumption (Wang & Niu, 2021; Xiao, 2021). Although eat-streaming researchers take less notice of the precarious condition of the mukbang wanghong as digital workers in China's live-streaming industry, labor relations is a focused area of wanghong research. Continuing within the framework of wanghong studies, this section draws on famous Chinese eat-streamers on the platform Kuaishou to demonstrate mukbang wanghong's position as exploited workers. Mostly women, these streamers often share a background in mental illnesses and disadvantaged socioeconomic upbringing.

Chinese eat-streaming's emergence is closely related to China's online eating-disorder communities, and many eat-streamers were exposed as members of these online communities by their fans. Mi Zi Jun, for example, was disclosed as a member of Vomit-Inducing Forum (催吐吧), one of China's online eating-disorder communities. Eat-streaming fans shared exchanged messages that recorded her recruitment from the forum: "Earn money by eating, isn't that great! . . . It's a shame that they didn't contact me . . . how do I find them" (Juziyule, 2017). Despite this, Mi Zi Jun never admitted to eating disorders. In contrast, Mao Mei Mei self-disclosed that she has anorexia and that profiting from binge eating had destructive effects on her body. Over the years, Mao Mei Mei was hospitalized regularly for various reasons. She paused her live streaming and self-disclosed her hospitalization on return in 2018 (Wanghonggushi, 2018). She then shared her pregnancy news and miscarriage shortly after in 2019

(Buguosgmo, 2019). She was hospitalized again in 2020 (Yuqingyuli, 2020). After her plastic surgery in 2021, Mao Mei Mei finally announced her "retirement" from eat-streaming:

> People often ask me why I would have anemia when I eat so much. I only eat during live-streaming. I'm sleep-deprived to a point where I'm unconscious sometimes. Doctors told me that if I don't stop eat-streaming, it will lead to my death. (Huibaihuadetao, 2022, para. 10)

Like Mao Mei Mei, Mi Zi Jun had to stop streaming because of her gastrointestinal perforation (Benpao, 2018). TongTong, on the other hand, continues to eat-stream after being repeatedly hospitalized and having health emergencies during live-streaming sessions. As early as 2017, TongTong had one of her front teeth fall off during her eat-streaming when eating cake (Lapingbagua, 2020). On June 26, 2020, TongTong fainted during her live streaming. In this live-streaming session, after eating more than a dozen balut (half-hatched eggs), TongTong suddenly said, "Come and help me eat?" (personal communication, June 26, 2020). Having managed to take off her microphone and stand up, TongTong collapsed on the floor (personal communication, June 26, 2020).

Even though eat-streamers face criticisms for being profit-driven, the majority of the eat-streamers do not try to hide their reason for performing such extreme eating. The following conversation demonstrates an eat-streamer's bluntness in admitting their goal. When a viewer typed on screen: "These people [eat-streamers] would do anything for money. They value money over their life," Juan Jie replied:

> Of course, I'm doing it for money. Who isn't? Even if you ask the most famous wanghong, they would admit that they are doing this because they want money. Do you think I like eating? Even if I do, who the fuck eats 10 pigs and still enjoys it? Are you insane or something? Why else do you think I am doing this? (personal communication, July 28, 2019)

Despite openly admitting to their profit-driven motivations, streamers' reasons for putting on such destructive performances are more nuanced than the societal-wide criticisms of moral corruption. On this matter, TongTong's reply is a salient example. When TongTong was asked during her eat-streaming session, "Do you think you'll earn enough money by eat-streaming to treat illnesses you are going to have by eating like this?" she answered,

> If I don't eat-stream, I won't have any money anyways. Do you even know how expensive it is to buy medical or social insurance? I know I will get sick. I can't eat like this forever. I want to make enough money to retire, to treat my illnesses when I get old. (personal communication, Aug 22, 2019)

Eat-streamers' self-destructive performances should not be simply viewed as inherently immoral but as a manifestation of the socioeconomic inequality in today's Chinese society. In this context, the eat-streamers are exploited by digital platforms, and this condition is similar for influencers around the globe. However, based on the aforementioned statements made by eat-streamers, it appears that their self-

subjugation to severe laboring of the body in exchange for financial relief is more of a systematic issue in today's Chinese society, such as gender inequalities, urban-rural imbalance, and immobile social stratification. Streamers like TongTong do not see any choice other than trading their health for money. As she claimed in her live streaming, the alternative for her would be to have neither money *nor* health. This is mainly because of the socioeconomically disadvantaged background of most of these eat-streamers.

Eat-streamers Mao Mei Mei and TongTong, particularly, are salient examples in this regard. As Mao Mei Mei disclosed, after her parents' divorce, she was abandoned by her mother and raised by her grandparents, and she dropped out of school at a young age:

> I started working at age 13 to support my family, including paying for my family's mortgages. . . . I've been working really hard, but I feel that no matter how hard I work, I can't change reality. . . . My grandmother, who raised me, always reminded me that I needed to earn money to support the family and my brother. . . . I'm under a lot of pressure; I want to sell everything I can to support my brother. (Heidan, 2021, para. 3)

TongTong shares a similar background: Her parents were divorced, and her grandmother raised her. She dropped out of junior high school to start working. To many eat-streamers, eat-streaming is their only means to a better life. As TongTong expressed in her live streaming, "I don't have any talent. I don't have any special skills. But I can eat. I eat a lot. This is the only thing that I do the best. I eat" (personal communication, May 20, 2019).

The Two Tensions: Contradictions and Obscured Limit

Notwithstanding the mainstream's surface-level criticisms of eat-streaming as "immoral," "wasteful," "profit-driven," "obscene," and "vulgar" performances, eat-streaming has research value in further demonstrating China's Internet governance and the socioeconomic context from which Chinese wanghong have emerged as exemplars, workers, and an industry. In this article, eat-streaming wanghong exposes two significant tensions in China's Internet industry and governance. The first concerns the fantasy that upholds political claims and labor conditions. The second one is the obscured limit in contradictory turns of state attitudes toward online cultural products.

First, eat-streaming offers the disadvantaged fantasies of escaping destitution without having to develop skills that require economic or social capital that they do not have. The fantasy embedded in eat-streaming and few eat-streamers' success upholds China's ideological claim to successful strategic planning. Nonetheless, the very fact that eat-streamers have to resort to harmful and extreme performances exposes the sharp contrast between ideological claims and societal realities. Eat-streaming wanghong showcases the desperation of disadvantaged Chinese people who subjugate themselves to extremely harsh laboring.

At its basis, eat-streaming, as a sector in the wanghong industry, embodies a fundamental fantasy: Obtaining money, fame, and subsequently radical social transformation through online performances. As discussed above, this fantasy (and its virtual impossibility) was thoroughly addressed by scholars of wanghong studies (see Guo, 2022; Xu & Zhao, 2019). The comment about making money by eating as the

ultimate goal for life summarizes this fantasy at its essence: Obtaining money and fame (which are enjoyable) through and by enjoying. This, on the one hand, is a "universal" fantasy embedded in online influencer culture. Yet, on the other, as a sector, particularly in China's live-streaming industry, eat-streamers double as exemplars who serve political meanings in affirming and upholding the claims of the correctness of China's Internet developmental strategy and mass-mobilization initiatives.

Despite this fantasy, eat-streamers' personal stories speak to the crude socioeconomic inequality in today's Chinese society. As several famous eat-streamers self-disclosed, they are disadvantaged by their family background in terms of their lack of parental and financial support. Also, they are victims of deeply rooted gender inequality in China as they are the ones who must drop out of school at a young age to support their family and see their male siblings through school. Although gender inequality in education in China is more nuanced in terms of data differentiation, researchers in this field confirm the significant disadvantage concerning girls from rural areas (see e.g., Su, Lau, & Rao, 2020; Zeng, Pang, Zhang, Medina, & Rozelle, 2014). As demonstrated in the live-streaming conversations, these women streamers are aware of the risk and harm these extreme performances can do to their bodies. Over the years, they have experienced numerous incidents where they have had to be hospitalized due to long-term unhealthy eating, and some even experienced sudden collapse during live-streaming sessions. Nevertheless, uneducated and lacking parental and financial support, these women "choose," because of no other foreseeable alternatives, to continue with their hazardous performance, hoping to one day support themselves (and their family) financially. In this sense, the eat-streaming case is in line with the argument that wanghong, as digital laborers, are always already subjected to exploitation (Tan et al., 2020). Eat-streamers' stories highlight that the exploitations are not only conditioned by the structure of the digital platforms, that is, they are set up as factories, but also by the gender and socioeconomic inequalities of contemporary Chinese society.

Second, as much as Chinese streamers' livelihood is utterly dependent on the state's attitude, the limit at which the government turns from promoting to condemning is obscure. As shown above, eat-streaming encountered the opposite set of attitudes from party media, which is an indication of the top-down attitude toward social phenomena in Chinese society. Among all the different subgenres in wanghong, eat-streaming is one of the very few that was named as a separate subsector by the party media and promoted for its profitable financial potential. Similarly, it is one of the very few that was targeted by a tailored national law. In accordance with these policy changes, the eat-streaming industry rose to be one of the top live-streaming genres promoted by various platforms who eyed its lucrative profit potential but then dropped to being "Internet trash," strictly censored, restricted, and closely managed by local governments and digital platforms. Eat-streaming's dramatic changes in development in China further demonstrate wanghong's reliance on state sanctions (Cunningham et al., 2019). Eat-streaming is undoubtedly not the only sociocultural product that exhibited such a dramatic rise and fall in China. Eat-streaming's developmental story demonstrates how vulnerable and dependent the wanghong industry is on the state's policy—popularity and revenue do not guarantee the success of any wanghong sector because a change in the state's attitude "in pursuit of upholding social morality" could very quickly threaten its existence (Craig et al., 2019, p. 731). Nonetheless, it is unclear at which point eat-streaming has gone wrong; that is, what could eat-streamers, who joined the performances following the top-down promotion, have done differently to avoid the condemnation that came later?

Worse still, unlike other wanghong, there is a kind of certainty to eat-streamers—that eventually, their consumption will reach a corporeal limit where they would not be able to resume their performances after their collapse. Without labor protection, insurance, or responsibility from their "employers" (the digital platforms or guilds), the eat-streamers following the fantasy of social transformation will almost certainly be in a worse condition after such a point. This includes having to live with the mental, physical, and financial pressure from the ailments developed or exacerbated by eat-streaming performances while facing societal-wide condemnation of being "immoral" and "greedy." This certainty highlights the sense of urgency in discussing and dealing with Chinese digital laborers' doubled political responsibilities and the contradictions in these responsibilities as well as the lack of transparency in sudden turns of attitudes when it comes to the regulation of online popular cultures in China.

Conclusion

This article focuses on a special kind of wanghong, eat-streaming, to further examine Chinese Internet governance and socioeconomic-political conditions through wanghong as an industry as well as exemplars and laborers. As demonstrated above, the development of eat-streaming as a sector in China's wanghong industry aligns with other scholars' analyses; it also embodies the same fantasy of socioeconomic transformation and labor exploitation discussed by many researchers in the field. Although mainstream media and Chinese scholars criticize eat-streaming as vulgar, obscene, and wasteful, in adherence to the party's attitude, this study shows that eat-streaming has its value, as a case in wanghong studies. It demonstrates an intensified and problematic relationship between the wanghong as workers and the state policies, that is, the workers' fragility in securing their income and their total dependence on the state's attitude. In addition, eat-streaming's value as a case within the framework of wanghong studies lies in its demonstration of the exploitations, not from the perspectives of the digital laborers at digital factories but that of gender and socioeconomic inequalities. Further highlighting the issues wanghong scholars had named to a more severe degree, eat-streaming is unique in terms of its connection to the wide societal stigma against mental disorders in digital laboring. Under a mirage of effortless celebrification through enjoyment gone wrong due to streamers' own corrupted morals, this article shows the socioeconomic conditions that shaped such extreme performances and the sociopolitical conditions that further disadvantage eat-streamers as subjects in today's Chinese society.

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