Zhibo

An Ethnography of Ordinary, Boring, and Vulgar Livestreams

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

In the West, the phenomenal rise of Twitch.tv and livestreaming videogames has attracted much academic attention. In China, the exponential growth of the livestreaming industry from 2014 to 2017 has posed a new set of questions and alternative screen practices. *Zhibo* (literally “direct cast”)—as livestreaming is called in China—has become the primary site for ordinary people to perform their quotidian life live to regular viewers and ardent fans. This ethnographic project primarily studies one livestreaming platform, Douyu, and asks the question: How can we conceptualise Chinese livestreamers’ performances of everyday life as well as the ways in which their viewers perceive and participate in their performances? In particular, how do the performative tropes of *zhibo* reflect specific notions of ordinariness, boredom, and vulgarity in contemporary China?

In order to answer this question, this thesis is divided into two parts. Firstly, this thesis will investigate contemporary livestreaming platform in its specific remediation of liveness and streaming as it moves across multiple aspects of socio-technological reiterations—from the directory of categories/genres, to the attention economy, to its interfacial performativity. Secondly, I focus on the three interrelated performative tropes of *zhibo*—ordinariness, boredom, and vulgarity—through an ethnographically-engaged analysis of viewers and streamers on Douyu. The methods of data collection include participant observation, interviews, site visits, analysis of commentaries from Chinese media pundits and, most importantly, archiving livestream events themselves.
Glossary of Chinese Terms

Danmu 弹幕, literally “bullet curtain”, is a real-time commentary subtitle system that displays user comments as streams of moving subtitles overlaid on the video playback screen. On most Chinese livestreaming sites, its generic meaning is almost equivalent to comments.

Diaosi 屌丝, literally “dick hair”, is a neologism that refers to mediocre losers.

Diduan 低端, literally “low end”, is usually a derogatory term that can describe practices, objects, and people that are considered “low quality”.

Douyu 斗鱼, literally “fighting fish”, is a livestreaming platform and most of this research was conducted on this platform.

Chafang 查房, literally “checking the room”, refers to a common practice of visiting other livestreaming channels, while live broadcasting the viewing browser.

Chaoguan 超管, literally “super administrator”, refers to official website administrators or community managers.

Chengguan 城管, literally “city administrator”, is short for “City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau”. The organisation is notorious for its violent clearance of unlicensed street vendors.

E’gao 恶搞, literally “viciously make [fun]”, refers to online spoof or parodies. Often it is a creative and entertaining way to comment on something or someone.

Fangguan 房管, literally “room administrator”, is a moderator for the channel.

Fanyule 泛娱乐, literally “variety entertainment”, refers to a broad collective of cultural or entertainment products.

Hanmai 喊麦, literally “yell mic”, is a specific musical style of rapping with disco as the background music.

Laobaixing 老百姓, literally “old hundred surnames”, can be roughly translated as plebeian or ordinary people.

Nüzhubo 女主播, literally “female hosting caster”, is a female livestreamer or broadcaster.

Richang 日常, literally “daily norms”, refers to various facets of everydayness.

Shuiyou 水友, literally “water friends”, is a neologism popularised in recent years on livestreaming platforms. It refers to fellow viewers and fans on livestream channels.

Shuju 数据, literally “number evidence”, refers to data.

Tieba 贴吧, literally “paste bar”, is Reddit-like site of countless sub-forums on various topics, owned by the search engine giant Baidu.

Wanghong 网红, literally “web hot”, is short for wangluo hongren or internet celebrities.

Wuliao 无聊, literally “nothing to talk about”, can be roughly translated as boredom and its related emotional state.

Yanzhi 颜值, literally “face value”, refers to qualitative, sometimes also quantified, value of the beauty of a person’s face.

Zhibo 直播, literally “direct cast”, is roughly equivalent to internet livestream under the context of this research and is the title of this thesis.

Zhibojian 直播间, literally “direct cast room”, refers to livestream channels.

Zhihu 知乎, literally “do you know”, is Quora-like Chinese platform where questions are posted and answered by other users. It is a good resource for collecting various opinions on many livestreaming-related matters.

Zhubo 主播, literally “hosting caster”, is a livestreamer or stream caster.
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Introduction

0.1 Setting the Scene

0.1.1 Chuange (2014-2017)
Let me begin with the story of Chuange who is emblematic of the growth and decline of an ordinary Douyu livestreamer. Chuange (literally “barbecue brother”)—also known flatteringly as “Chuanhuang” (literally “king of barbecue”) and pejoratively as “Chuangou” (literally “barbecue dog”)—was born to an impoverished family in Heilongjiang Province in the late 1980s. He previously worked various jobs: internet café receptionist, security guard, train conductor, and taxi driver, before becoming a barbecue vendor opposite a primary school in his home town in 2014. This job coincided with the rise of zhibo (literally “direct cast”) and the livestreaming platform Douyu, so Chuange started livestreaming hoping to supplement his income.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions>

Figure 0.1 Chuange’s channel. Screenshot taken on 21 May 2015.

1 All Chinese names, terms, quotes from interview transcripts, livestream chatlogs, and published articles in this thesis are translated by author.
In 2015 when I discovered his Douyu channel, Chuange usually broadcast his regular workday as a barbecue vendor from his laptop—preparing, cooking, serving, and, most of the time, idly talking while waiting for the next customer (see Figure 0.1). In the evening, he would drink with his viewers via the mediation of his webcam and danmu (chat messages)—he raised his glass in a toast to the webcam and said “drink up, brothers”—more often than not, becoming inebriated before turning off the stream. New viewers who stumbled upon his channel often pondered in the chat: “why is this Chuange’s daily activities considered broadcast-worthy?” and “how did selling lamb barbecue earn him five tons [of fish balls]”.2 Hundreds, then thousands, of viewers stayed in his channel, where they listened to him bantering, jesting, whining, uttering strings of generic platitudes on life, and occasionally confessing and sobbing.

According to a dedicated fan of his channel, Xiangzi (who is also a casual streamer on Douyu), Chuange’s success is attributed to his demonstrative “unremarkable humanity” on display and his sincerity in confessing his struggles—an “authentic diaosi” so to speak.3 Like many of his fellow diaosi viewers, he was not well-educated, worked in various diduan or “low end” jobs, and was emotionally vulnerable due to his troubling sense of inferiority. These feelings of inferiority were most intensely exhibited after he became intoxicated on a livestream. He was even allegedly a very unhygienic cook, according to a viewer who regularly observed the way he prepared food.

As the viewership of his channel grew massively in 2016, Chuange’s personal life—which was almost exhibited without omissions in his whole-day livestreams—also gradually shifted. Most notably, the minimalistic barbecue street vendor transformed into a proper restaurant with a shopfront, which was also bustling because of his popular Douyu channel. The intimate attraction shifted from his earlier self-deprecating sincerity of self-awareness as a loser, to his relationship with his girlfriend Huihui. The popular consensus

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2 Fish ball or yuwan is a virtual currency that viewers can gain through watching then donate to broadcasters. Five ton of fish balls could be converted to a large sum of real-world money at the time (2015). I will return to the operation of this virtual currency in Chapter 2.

3 This theme on authenticity of diaosi will be discussed in detail in Section 4.2.3, Chapter 4.
among his viewers was that Huihui was a “good girl” who took care of every aspect of his life from doing laundry to waitressing at his thriving restaurant.

Above all, Huihui did not mind his “loser mindset” nor his lowly upbringing and was even willing to marry him, despite the social climate of fierce competition in the “marriage market” due to the gender gap and class division. The trajectory of the story was nearly an urban fairy-tale of someone with almost zero marriage prospects achieving major milestones in life—owning a business, a car, and property in a few years. It was upward mobility witnessed live and therefore highly “authentic”.

<Image removed due to copyright restrictions>

Figure 0.2 Chuange’s channel during his fan gathering. Screenshot taken on 8 March 2016.

Emotional meltdown is the climax in the dramaturgy of zhībo, and was reached in late 2016 and early 2017. From the all-seeing collective gaze of his viewers—or “water friends” in Douyu’s colloquial term—who were clearly aware that he owed his success to them, Chuange should have been enamoured of his current life and appreciating opportunities given to him rather than squandering them. ⁴At the peak of his popularity, Chuange was always surrounded by an entourage of ardent fans when travelling in the northern provinces.

⁴“Water friends” or shuǐyǒu is a unique way to address fellow viewers on Douyu. I will return to this term in the following chapters.
According to his own estimate, his fans grew from mostly single men to visibly more women and even some married couples. Figure 0.2 is a screenshot of a livestreamed fan gathering event in Harbin, where Chuange was welcomed like a government official with a red banner that read “Welcome Douyu broadcasters Mr and Mrs Chuange to Harbin”.

Beginning in late 2016, Chuange often muttered about Huihui on livestreams and rumours of domestic violence began to spread among his viewers. The live theatrics peaked when Chuange broke up with Huihui and his viewers became fiercely divided on the split. More heated debates on the morality of marriage, adultery (Huihui allegedly committed adultery), and bride price (Chuange refused to pay after their engagement), ensued both in the barrage of chat messages during livestreams and in the ocean of shitposts on Baidu Tieba and QQ group chats. His reputation was severely damaged—his “water friends” started to call him an arrogant and pengzhang (literally “swell”, referring to his inflated ego) scum. His viewership began to dwindle and some of his most committed fans and moderators openly boycotted his channel. On 18 August 2017, Chuange was physically assaulted outside a foot massage parlour in his hometown, allegedly by non-locals (Aitijianannan, 2017). He soon went on livestream again despite the injuries. His story is still unfolding publicly, and will do so for as long as his zhibo channel persists.

The direct translation of internet livestream in Chinese is wangluo zhibo; however, it has become abbreviated to the term zhibo—literally “direct/straight cast”. The term zhibo derives from the televisual context as it originally refers to live television. However, as the rapid growth of livestreaming platforms made the term so topical in 2015 and 2016, and then ubiquitous from 2017, zhibo now refers by default to the phenomenon of internet livestreams (instead of live television). While zhibo’s proponents often try to distinguish the medium from television, zhibo is built upon the televisual language as well as the familiar, if not more heightened, obsessions with liveness, representation of ordinary life/people, habitual boredom in modern society, and the much-stigmatised vulgarity of the demographics that are addicted to the medium.

0.1.2 Ambit of Study
As outlined above, Chuange’s gradual growth as a zhibo channel—its accompanying comment culture, and his online microcelebrity persona—are also indicative of the early developments of Douyu as a zhibo platform. This vignette paints an approximate image of the sorts of performativity that emerged and came to homogenise zhibo platforms: obsessively mundane yet sincere and sometimes incisive, exhaustively boring yet occasionally exhilarating, unrepentantly vulgar yet moralistic. Each of the performative modalities and practices are then framed by cultural- and platform-specific notions of ordinariness, boredom and vulgarity. These genres of performativity then coalesce into an ethnographic theory of zhibo in contemporary China.

This PhD project studies the burgeoning phenomenon of zhibo by focusing on a single Chinese livestreaming platform Douyu and its livestreaming personalities such as Chuange. Based on 20 months of fieldwork (from November 2015 until June 2017) around Douyu (both online and offline), this ethnographic project sets out to explore what zhibo and livestreaming media means for ordinary participants in China. From Douyu viewers or “water friends” to livestreaming microcelebrities like Chuange, this zhibo culture reflects mundane and normalised notions of the performative around livestream events.

This PhD project asks the question: How can we conceptualise Chinese livestreamers’ performances of everyday life as well as the ways in which their viewers perceive and participate their performances? In particular, how do the performative tropes of zhibo reflect specific notions of ordinariness, boredom, and vulgarity in contemporary China?

In order to answer this question, this thesis is divided into two parts. Firstly, it will investigate contemporary livestreaming platform in its specific remediation of liveness and streaming as it moves across multiple aspects of socio-technological reiterations—the directory of categories/genres, the attention economy, real-time monitoring, and its interfacial performativity. Secondly, I focus on the various performative tropes of zhibo—ordinariness, boredom, and vulgarity—through an ethnographically-engaged analysis of viewers and streamers on Douyu. The methods of data collection include participant observation, interviews, site visits, analysis of commentaries from Chinese media pundits and, most importantly, archiving livestream events themselves.
In this introductory chapter, I will first outline the general theory and practice of my research—as encapsulated by performativity and ethnography—and then introduce and specify the spatio-temporality of the field (i.e. Douyu). I also outline the thesis chapter structures and how they seek to address the above research question.

**Performativity: Media and Platform**

In this thesis, performativity is used as a multidisciplinary concept (from media theory to anthropology) in discussions on livestreaming video, platform, and performative practices. Without retelling the intellectual history of performativity in detail (e.g. from J.L. Austin to Judith Butler, from linguistics to anthropology), this section aims to give an overview on the concept as every following chapter mobilises and situates performativity in a specific context.

The core inspiration of performativity, for this thesis overall, is that the concept does not institute an ontological distinction between real life and fiction, and between the much-disputed concepts of “reality” and “illusion”, as it denies the ontological “purity” or a priori of an untainted “reality” before mediation and it also circumvents the dead-end of representationalist politics (e.g. media representation in television studies). As Daniel Miller and Heather Horst (2012) write, “people are not one iota more mediated by the rise of digital technologies... mediation is an intrinsic condition of being human” (p.11-12). Instead, as mediation offers insights to “media as vital process” (Kember & Zylinska, 2012, p.xvii), performativity is a more productive conceptual device that allows ample opportunities—as Judith Butler (2006) reminds us—of both normative power and escape. Instead of identifying the real (whether of the phenomenon of zhibo or Chinese society in general), I am more interested in interrogating desires and affective flow in the livestream dialogues on zhibo as well as many streamers’ own struggles against precarity on the margins of the platform.

As Kember and Zylinska’s (2012) performative approach to media events highlights (I will return to this discussion in Chapter 1), “media cannot have effects on society if they are considered to be always already social” (p.31). The resulting perspective
is a shift from “how media events integrate (or disintegrate) society” to “how media produce or enact the social” (Ibid, p.31). As this perspective informs Chapter 1’s discussion on liveness and media events, events are not understood through the lens of philosophy in this thesis but, similar to Peter Eckersall’s (2013) approach to event and performativity in addressing the disorderly streets of Japan in the 1960s, “a form of cultural material production through the mode of performativity” (p.3).

A performativ act, in its anthropological appropriation, identifies the materiality and vitality, as opposed to triviality, of events in everyday life. As Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) writes on the aesthetics of performance, “it identifies performances not as the allegory and image of human life but both as human life in itself and simultaneously as its model” (p.205). Beyond the traditional lens of media rituals and catastrophes, my account of media events builds on the reorientation to the ordinary and extraordinary events of everyday life exhibited on livestreams. My purpose is not to critique their realness but understand how streamers and viewers articulate their own versions of media criticism.

In asking the questions of how the medium of livestreaming video (in Chapter 1) and a platform performs (in Chapter 2), performativity as a concept is used to not just analyse the “substance” of technical/digital objects (which uses theoretical models explaining practice) but also the socio-technological practices (which emphasises the correspondence between theory and practice). As I will elaborate in Chapter 1, livestreaming video is examined as both a technical object (e.g. the technical structure of streaming and latency) and socio-technological practices (e.g. the actual experiences of watching a live video). Liveness in livestreaming video is not fetishised as a technical novelty but rather understood relationally in remediation of other media, analogue and digital (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Similarly, a platform is not seen as neutral infrastructure that users obliviously inhabit but as a reiteration of a structure of power. As Thomas LaMarre (2017) builds his version of platformativity on Butler’s theory of performativity,

Judith Butler’s now classic articulation of performativity concerned the human individual reiterating itself, with iterations bringing an affective infra-individual potential to the surface, enabling repetition with the difference. In platformativity, the platforms, and infrastructures play an active role, or more precisely, an intra-active role, as they iterate, over again (p.24-25).
LaMarre (2017) thus provides a theory of how platform performs, fusing Butler’s (1988) theory of gender performativity and Barad’s (2003) posthuman performativity. The identity of a platform is formed in its (re)iterations over time. As I will show in Douyu’s history later in the chapter, its identity shifts from 2014 to 2017 (e.g. from centring on videogames to variety entertainment) and infrastructural changes (e.g. institutions of genres and presentation of metadata) both demonstrate how Douyu as a platform adjusts and orders itself through this performative process. Moreover, Barad’s theory of the intra-active helps us understand the agencies of humans (streamers, viewers, and administrators) from within the agency of the platform. Thus, it is impossible to address performative modes I outlined earlier without considering the platform and its history of reiterations. As the organisation of the thesis indicates, the platform of Douyu, its context of emergence, and its history of reiterations are all indispensable knowledge for the second half’s discussions of individual streamers, events, and specific performative tropes.

Ethnographic Theory and Practice: Events, Confrontations, Improvisations

This thesis is not strictly an ethnographic monograph in the disciplinary style of anthropology, as a large part of it engages with media theories (while remaining engaged with ethnographic data), but it is heavily informed by anthropology methodologically and epistemologically. As I will expand in this section, participant observation is the pillar of my research methods and principle of conducting research. Epistemologically speaking, ethnographic knowledge is the practical (e.g. setting up a livestream) as well as reflexive (e.g. dialogues on the meanings of zhibo) knowledge I co-produced with my informants and research participants.

I will begin with the term zhubo, which literally means “casting host” and is now roughly equivalent to the English neologism livestreamer in the context of zhibo. The term zhubo originally refers to the television news anchor. As the term migrates into the new context, it becomes the central allegorical device of how livestreamers are stigmatised in
China. As Tianyou, one of the most successful zhubo before his sudden downfall, said on a television show defending the medium of zhibo,

If you go online now and search wangluo zhubo (internet livestreamers) these four characters, you will likely find the following results: papapa (sex scandals), lowering the bottom line, and “not wanting any face” (shameless). There are also comments like this: as long as you donate money, then you can sleep with the nüzhubo (female livestreamers). As long as you pay, you can enjoy the nanzhubo’s (male livestreamers) 360-degree ass kissing without any omission (extreme flattering). I guarantee you 8 out of 10 of the people who said these things never watched any zhibo. . . If you have the time to say all these things, why not spend some time watching zhibo. You can download a livestreaming app, and watch the top ten channels, how many of them are like what you said? Probably zero.

As proposed by Tianyou, the methodological remedy to this permeating stigma is to simply watch the livestreams, and hopefully in their entirety. This approach also highlights the core research practice of this PhD project: long-term “Live” participant observation on livestream channels, and ethnographic accounts of livestream events as part of the broader conceptualisations around the role of events in ethnographic theory and practice. In theory, events occupy a central position in my framing of livestreaming video as the basic unit of analysis (detailed in Chapter 1), the role of events in shaping viewers’ memory, and the ways the history and culture of a given channel are understood. In practice, livestream events are crucial in my practices of archiving, notetaking, and commentary (detailed in Chapter 3). In the second part of the thesis, eventlogs—chatlogs with screenshots, contextual information, as well as my commentary—are the most frequent format of presenting ethnographic data.

One of the most prominent issues in studying an internet platform ethnographically today is the balance between specificity and scale. As Burgess and Green (2009) write in the early days of YouTube research,

An ambition to contribute to an understanding of how YouTube works. . . requires dealing with both specificity and scale, and so presents epistemological and methodological challenges to the humanities as well as to the social sciences. The methods of cultural and media studies (and anthropology) are particularly adept at the close, richly contextualized analysis of the local and the specific, bringing this close analysis into dialogue with context, guided by and speaking back to cultural theory. . . But scale at the level which YouTube represents tests the limits of the
explanatory power of even our best grounded or particularist accounts (Burgess & Green, 2009, p.7).

This research seeks to reconcile the multiple macro/abstract (e.g. theoretic) and micro/concrete (e.g. ethnographic) dimensions of livestreaming cultures. By focusing upon Douyu in China, it not only highlights culturally-specific media practices, but also socio-technological practices instrumental for a theory of livestreaming video or/and platform. While conducting fieldwork in China, this thesis seeks to contribute to the burgeoning field of livestreaming studies, especially those outside the US-centric and videogame-dominant Twitch. As TL Taylor (2018) writes on her choice of choosing Twitch.tv as the “anchor platform”: “even if we hold a single object of analysis in frame, we must be attuned to the assemblage that makes up our media lives in order to fully understand what is happening” (p.13, emphasis in original). As my research has led me to many places such as homes, streamer studios, various public spaces, as well as different online places from discussion boards (e.g. Tieba) to QQ group chats, my starting point is always a livestream channel— assemblage cannot be found without the anchor.

Although I have not avoided quantitative data in this thesis (they serve specific purposes in various places throughout my argument), the issue of scale and “explanatory power”, in my case, does not directly derive from quantitative data but rather a theoretical practice. Ethnographic particularity cannot address the problem of general applicability. However, especially with a degree of quantitative data as the referential groundwork, ethnography provides an understanding into practice and motivation—two concepts impenetrable by statistics.

For example, how helpful is the metadata collected by a livestreaming platform for the ethnographer? As Nick Couldry (2017) writes on big data, “big” conveys an underlying “ideological work, beyond its obvious descriptive force. . . [and it] bypasses humans’ meagre attempts at self-understanding through interpreting the local details” (p.235). Instead of taking the statistics at face value (I am not invalidating quantitative research but outlining ethnography’s specific contribution to the discussions on metadata and platform algorithms), ethnographic dialogues can help problematise our own and the livestreaming
platform’s obsessions with quantifying user practices; how users themselves distrust, interpret, and challenge Douyu’s metadata and algorithms; and the banalised scandals of data fraud on Douyu (discussed in Chapter 2 and 3).

As Johannes Fabian (2002) writes, “when we study other cultures, our theory of their praxis is our praxis. . . [and] the foremost problem of ethnographic writing is not the extraction of meaning. . . but the meeting of—I prefer confrontation—of kinds of praxis, ours and theirs” (p.4, emphasis added). Ethnographic theories are thus contact zones, provocations, and dialogues between academic theories (especially from the various sub-fields in media studies), user practices, journalistic discourses, and my informants’ own attempts at theorising what zhibo means for them. Also situated in the context of studying a livestreaming platform (i.e. Twitch), Taylor (2018) asks researchers to respect livestreamers as theorists of their own practices,

They [the livestreamers] are frequently insightful theorists of their own experiences, identifying the ways that they dance between their own desires and legal or economic structures. . . They knowingly, and often with great pleasure, engage in forms of affective and performative labour on platforms that they recognise are never fully in theirs to control. The challenge for us as researchers and scholars is to honor their experience as active meaning-making agents who undertake complex navigations in everyday life, but not lose sight of serious form of structural inequality and precariousness (p.259-260).

The confrontations presented in my writing do not shun the contested space of zhibo, which is why I do not circumvent but instead build my ethnographic knowledge directly on the key themes—ordinariness, boredom, and vulgarity—that emerged from the prominent (whether academic or journalistic) voices in China and within livestreaming communities themselves (the ways in which zhibo is often debated by my informants and research participants). All the chapter titles in the second part of the thesis are taken from the vernacular of zhibo. All the eventlogs and livestream dialogues are livestreamers’ own attempts at articulating and theorising their own experiences and practices—ordinary affect, tactical boredom, and vulgar politics. This co-produced ethnographic knowledge is also accompanied by a broader view of platform politics, labour practices, and various sorts of precarity from the economic to the emotional. This work is thus empirical and dialogical
at the same time, which is a great way to introduce the field of zhibo and set up the pioneer camp for future research on the same or similar livestreaming platforms.

Furthermore, theory and method are not simply seen as a vertical structure, but rather an intertwined process of knowledge production. Theory is, in Fabian’s (2001) words, “introducing theoretical reflection at the right moments, moments that are created by empirical matter at hand in any course that is not devoid of factual information” (p.7). Theory should not be considered a timeless higher form of knowledge, but rather as emergent improvisations at the interstices of discussion of fieldwork events. My ethnographic methods correspondingly follow a “situated empiricism” in Malkki’s (1997) words, rather than technical standards of interpretation (e.g. content or conversation analysis).

As Scheffer (2007) notes, “there is no modus operandi” (p.168) for ethnography. “Ethnography is not a method. . . [but] the written product of a set of methods” (Boellstorff, 2012, p.53) and “a strategy to choose and fit a sensitive set of methods to a distinctive field” (Scheffer, 2007, p.168, emphasis added). This sensitive set of methods is not just my own invention, but also adaptations of media practices I learnt from other livestreaming practitioners on Douyu. Ethnographic fieldwork is thus an improvisational practice and a processual mode of research, developed according to both spatial (the platform/channels) and temporal (events) contexts, as I will detail in the following section.

0.2 Spatio-Temporality of the Field

0.2.1 Locating the Zhibo Platform

I chose Douyu as the primary research site not only because it led the innovation of the livestreaming industry within China by (re)building its own platform infrastructure over time, but also because it is a “live” laboratory of screen cultures that has witnessed
continuous emergences of new genres, personalities, and viewing and commenting practices.\(^5\)

The first step is to delimit what sort of livestreaming platform I am studying, since platform is a contemporary term that encompasses too many phenomena. Steinberg and Li (2017)—while reviewing various authors such as Srnicek’s (2017) *Platform Capitalism* and Negoro and Ajiro’s (2012) work on the topology of platforms—suggest three broad categories: “product-technology type platforms” (hardware), “content platforms” (user-generated content), and “transaction-type platforms” (mediatory devices for transaction). Video platforms such as YouTube and Niconico Douga and livestreaming platforms such as Douyu should belong to the category of “content platform”, since they are “congregation sites for users and a distribution mechanism for user-produced content, and increasingly, official contents as well” (Steinberg & Li, 2017, p.177).

Douyu, as a platform of video streaming, is certainly not on the scale of Facebook in terms of its ecosystem of various products, but it still meets many criteria for a “content platform”. For instance, Douyu runs across multiple hardware such as the web and mobile devices; it relies on immense server capacity to handle the massive simultaneous streaming internet traffic; its monetisation mostly depends on amassing ordinary users’ participation (see a detailed discussion in Chapter 2). The main activity of the platform operators is consolidating, curating, administrating, and commodifying, rather than producing, content.

To follow LaMarre’s (2017) critique of regional media studies, this thesis intends to look beyond the divide between “contents and usage (psychologising, therapeutic, personalising) and form, platform, or infrastructure (engineering specifications, connectivity, technical affordances)” (p.24). To grasp the ethnographic details on each

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5 In addition, I will also use examples from Bilibili, Kuaishou, and Zhanqi. Bilibili is a popular video portal that thrives on an extremely active user base and abundant user generated content. Its subsidiary livestream site is live.bilibili.com, which is significantly smaller than its main Video on Demand (VoD) site Bilibili.com. Bilibili provides some very relevant additional examples into the subcultural creativity of online videos. For example, the “Bilibili Spacing Out Contest” will be featured in Chapter 5. Kuaishou is a mobile-based platform for short videos and livestreams with a largely rural user base. I will use some examples from Kuaishou in Chapter 5. Zhanqi is a livestreaming platform that is very similar to Douyu in both content and infrastructure and thus a direct competitor. In Chapter 6, I will feature a livestreamer from Zhanqi.
observed livestream channel is not simply a description of the performative practices of broadcasters and viewers—in other words, the “content”—but how they make sense of, or rather tactically connect their performances to, the meanings of *zhibo* as media platform.

The next step is to demarcate Douyu’s geographical boundaries. In the West, the phenomenal rise of YouTube has given way to livestreaming platforms such as Justin.tv and its re-iteration Twitch.tv. It is thus very tempting to call Douyu China’s Twitch. The obvious counter-argument is that like all global phenomenon, the rise of livestreaming has different textures, genealogies, meanings, and techniques at local levels. Local knowledge is certainly necessary, but we have to delimit the scope of this local knowledge. The important lesson from LaMarre (2017) is the limitation of scope in area studies: the designated area is often not as self-sufficient as we presuppose. The localisation of platforms should not be understood as strict geographic boundaries or parochialism but “fragmentary networks” of different platforms and areas (Maitra & Chow, 2015, p.26), as I will substantiate in Chapter 2.

Instead of resorting to area studies, I want to move beyond the cross-cultural politics of equivalence—Baidu as China’s Google, Xiaomi as China’s Apple, Alipay as China’s Paypal, Bilibili as China’s Niconico, Douyu as China’s Twitch and so on. Even though the allegations of imitating designs or even code plagiarism against Douyu are often not entirely unfounded, Douyu absorbed multiple influences—regional from Japan and Korea, and international from Euro-American platforms. In its current form (from 2015 onwards), Douyu needs to be acknowledged as *more* than just a Chinese version of Twitch. Douyu should be situated with the various influences on its early formation, and within the historical emergence and socio-economic contexts of online video sites/platforms in China. Plformativity in LaMarre’s (2017) designation does not necessarily amount to a comparative cross-cultural study exactly because a clean-cut comparison is very difficult, since all these platforms are intertwined in various networks and co-evolve in different (but intersected) timelines.

Twitch and Douyu
In Recktenwald and Du’s (2016) brief comparative study of Twitch and Douyu, the authors claim Douyu has embarked its own path in various aspects of “design organisation”, commentary system or chat, popular games, and diversified “non-gaming content”. This comparison is very helpful in highlighting the differences, but only at a surface level of putting two platforms into a time capsule; in other words, it artificially constructs an artificial ahistorical time—a “plastic present” (Back & Puwar, 2012, p.8)—that disregards the two platforms’ morphology over time according to their shifting regional contexts and technological practices. I am not suggesting that a comparison cannot be done but if it is to be done with care, it must be situated in time and space, otherwise it will be “stuck in a series of perpetual presents without any recourse to either understand our pasts or affect the future” (Urichard, 2012, p.136). In this section I outline the two very different contexts involving the emergence and development of Twitch and Douyu.

Justin.tv was Justin Kan’s personal lifestream in 2007, which was an experiment inspired by the idea of surveillance art. His 24/7 live performance popularised the term “lifecaster”. Justin.tv was then relaunched as an open platform that hosts numerous diverse lifecasting channels, as the founders aspired to be “reality TV moguls” (Taylor, 2018, p.53). In 2008, the site added numerous categories such as People, Lifecasting, Music, Radio, Sports, and Gaming. Justin.tv was a pioneer in creating a livestreaming platform with a multiplicity of content but it largely failed to generate sustainable profits. It should be clarified that Justin.tv was a pioneer of coalescing livestream channels into a platform, while individual cam sites such as Jennicam were already common years before Justin.tv.

In 2011, Justin.tv’s section “gaming” was relaunched as a separate site Twitch.tv in order to solely focus on videogame livestreams. Twitch—as a videogame-centric platform with a massive catalogue of videogames—developed into a platform with a full-fledged attention economy and numerous fan communities forged around channels. Twitch was then acquired for $US 1 billion by Amazon in 2014 and its financial success since its rebranding was, as it was often argued, indebted to insulating videogame content from a staggering multitude of other livestream content. Pressured by competitors and user practices, Twitch then reverted from being an exclusively videogame-centric streaming platform to accommodate lifecasting and other non-gaming content. In 2016 Twitch
launched new sections such as IRL (in real life), Mobile Broadcasting, Social Eating, Creative, Music, and several other non-gaming sections.

In 2013, China’s subcultural video hub Acfun introduced Acfun Namahōsō as an early trial of livestreaming service after the model of the Japanese video portal Niconico Douga’s livestreaming subsidiary site Niconico Namahōsō. The main content of Acfun Namahōsō initially catered to Acfun’s audience with some of its content creators taking the new role of being streamers and also attracting some of the already established Esports celebrities. In 2014, Acfun Namahōsō relaunched as Douyu.tv, and the site was redesigned entirely imitating the basic style of Twitch.tv. Apart from its origin as a subsidiary site of Acfun, Douyu also inherited the Japanese danmaku (danmu in Chinese) system from Acfun. In terms of targeted viewership, Douyu moved beyond its original confines of subcultural status among Acfun’s audience and ambitiously aimed at expanding to be a mainstream platform.

In 2014, Douyu initially adopted a similar idea of building a videogame-centric platform, especially to ride on the success of Esports and the associated competitive games in China (e.g. League of Legends), but it also had to accommodate various pre-existing non-gaming popular content. The rebranding as Douyu in 2014 was originally intended to replicate Twitch’s success in the Chinese context as it was demonstrated in the original tagline of the platform—“a videogame zhibo platform for everyone”. However, later Douyu shifted to “a zhibo platform for everyone” because its active channels became evenly divided into gaming and non-gaming content.

In 2015, Douyu trialled a business model focusing on Esports games with the expectation that they can simply build on the pre-existing immense popularity of Esports spectatorship, but soon realised that its identity must be located within more diverse non-gaming content along with gaming channels. Unlike Twitch, Douyu lacks a catalogue or a large and updated library of videogames for viewers to search for a specific game. It only lists mainstream Esports games such as League of Legends and Overwatch, a dozen Chinese Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) sponsored by their publishers, and some popular indie games such as Don’t Starve. This absence can be interpreted as a
desultory altitude or simply unnecessity, since Douyu’s aim was not to build a streaming platform exclusively for videogames.

In summary, through several major iterations from 2014 to 2017, Douyu’s platform design and its digital infrastructure became a mixture of elements from Twitch, earlier indigenous livestreaming sites such as YY, regional influences from Japan and Korea, and its own improvisations primarily impacted by user practices. Douyu has never been an exclusively videogame-centric platform even though it was re-modelled after Twitch’s interface in 2014. Douyu oscillated between its regional Japanese Niconico Namahōsō model (which is its historical roots to a certain extent) and the enticing success of Twitch model for a year, and eventually settled on its own path. Twitch’s success was often indebted to the move to make the original Justin.tv into a videogame-centric livestreaming platform, while Douyu did the exact opposite since 2015. In other words, if anything, Douyu shares more similarities with Justin.tv than Twitch.

Douyu, as a livestreaming platform in China, should not be approached reductively from the perspective of videogame livestreams, but as a mass of diverse contents. From professional staff of a television station streaming from the backstage of a studio, to an university student streaming a videogame from his dorm with no microphone, from a barbecue vendor selling skewers on the street to chengguan (city management) officials chasing hawkers off the street, from a cosplay fan doing make-up to a bodybuilding enthusiast working out in the gym, from an impoverished peasant in hinterland China building a house to a wealthy Chinese student in Los Angeles buying a car, and everyone in between. They all coexist and compete within their own genres. Douyu’s disparate sections and categories—ranging from League of Legends to erotic camgirls to cosplay to tourism to online courses—are tailored to completely segregated audiences who do not necessarily intersect. I must emphasise that I made the conscious choice not to focus on the gaming-centric and Esports content but rather on the diversity of fanyule or “variety entertainment” of performers from all walks of life.

While I am not interested in a systemic comparison of Twitch and Douyu, I am still bound to some of the lingo that has emerged from and been popularised by Twitch since this thesis is written in English (such as viewers, livestreamers, streamers, “the chat”, and
so forth). However, I will not simply posit these English terms against their Chinese equivalent but introduce and contextualise the Chinese terms as they emerge from the discussion. For example, while the meaning of zhubo is very similar to streamer within the context of livestreaming, its specific origin must be outlined first. Then in other common cases of referring to my informants, these two terms will be used interchangeably.

0.2.2 Specifying the Temporality: Early Douyu

Going back to the issue of temporality that I mentioned earlier in a prospective comparison between Douyu and Twitch, an ethnographic theory of livestreaming should not invoke permanence but a less enduring spatio-temporality. It is indeed difficult to capture a picture when internet platforms are always “in a state of ongoing transformation” (Karpf, 2012, p.647). In the case of Douyu, as I discussed earlier, the platform went through several major overhauls from its experimental state in 2013, to its formal platformisation and first attempt at specialising a platform identity in 2014, to its major investment in gaming/Esports content in 2015, to a re-orientation towards “variety entertainment” in 2016.

These larger (infra)structural changes are also accompanied by numerous smaller technical changes. Experimental redesigns such as the implementation of a stream archive in 2016 and a Video on Demand (hereafter VoD) subsidiary site did not pan out very well. Just during the period of my fieldwork (2015–2017), many socio-technological conventions from ways of browsing and viewing on the platform, to performative genres categorised by the platform, were gradually formed and some even become established conventions. A plethora of novel (mis)uses of the platform emerged, broadcasters rose and fell, and communities were in flux. It is crucial to recognise and take the ephemeral and undefined nature of Douyu as a platform into account and reflect the specificity of each performative genre and individual channel.

The periodisation (as I outlined earlier) was not simply observed by me but by many other observers of the entire Chinese zhibo industry from industry analysts, journalists, programmers, entrepreneurs, to ardent fans. For example, according to industry reporter Connie Chan (2016), the Chinese livestreaming business has developed “from 1.0 (PC
showrooming) to 2.0 (game streaming) to 3.0 (the current generation—mobile entertainment streaming)”. In this report, one can easily identify the language of periodisation in the fast-evolving “generations” of livestreaming platforms. Even though one given periodisation can be always contested by new methods of periodisation, the contested nature of periodisation is not necessarily counterproductive to ethnographic narrative. As Boellstorff (2013) writes,

Periodization is not just some Silicon Valley Hype... Periodization is heuristics not immutable... the contested characters give them value; they thereby represent one important means for producing “dated theory” (p.3).

A “dated theory” helps alleviate the ethnographer’s fear of not catching up with the latest developments. In the process of contesting the exact date we can reflect on the “temporal imaginaries shaping those who use it” (Boellstorff, 2013, p.3). Following John Postill’s (2017) critique of an unclear sense of temporality and unspecified continuity in much of ethnographic writing (discussed in detail in Chapter 3), I argue that it is necessary to be candid about the exact dates of events that took place during fieldwork, which is especially relevant given the prominence of liveness in this project.

There are two aspects of specifying temporality here. Firstly, untimeliness of ethnography should be cultivated as an accountability. By delimiting to a specific period, I hope to document and give context to zhibo events “in the course of their emergence... to show their various effects and affects, and to thereby make them available for thought and critical reflection” (Rabinow & Marcus, 2008, p.58). Instead of reporting immediately after the happening of an event, taking time to consolidate the data into theoretical reflections and trim them into a narrative of processual development is an important virtue of ethnography. Secondly, all eventlogs and screenshots presented in the thesis are dated and contextualised, in an event-based ethnography.

The closest precursor to my position in producing academic knowledge in the field/area of online videos is YouTube Studies. The “early” book-length academic publications on YouTube such as Video Vortex Reader (2008), The YouTube Reader (2009), Burgess and Green (2009), Michael Strangelove (2010), and Patricia Lange (2014), as
opposed to the latest reports on YouTube’s decline in 2017–2018, are all invaluable historical sources to inform us on the “ongoing transformations” of YouTube before its accession to the dominant platform, ubiquity, and eventual recession. Hillrichs’s (2016) work on “early YouTube” is a great example of useful periodisation. The most “emblematic” user practice in the early days of YouTube was video blogging. Selectively focusing on these Vlogs helps trim or clarify the mess (of YouTube) into “specific phenomena of media history” (p.10) and provide the groundwork to rethink the interim propositions made by YouTube studies, such as questions regarding the separation of production and consumption. Learning from the above examples, I thereby situate the period I have done research on Douyu as the “early Douyu” (2014–2017).

0.3 The List of Documented Channels

0.3.1 Selection Criteria and Privacy Concerns
I followed over twenty livestream personalities and the ephemeral communities forged around them for at least a year. When looking for new channels to observe, I deliberately looked at the margins of Douyu, instead of starting with the already highly popular channels. Most of the popular channels in the first two years (2013–2015) were already established personalities migrating from other pre-existing spaces such as Esports, Youku, and Acfun. Three small channels—Ligan, Chuange, and Xiangxi Xiaopang—that I followed for two years did end up growing to become very popular. However, only a minority of channels I observed followed this pattern of growth. This was not just because there were many shady practices of viewer bots, viewer boosts coordinated by streamer clans, and insider deals, but also due to the precarious nature of being a zhubo and, especially, a trained professional streamer (e.g. wanghong). Popularity and fame are certainly not a matter of permanence (see a detailed discussion in Chapter 4). While documenting the periods of growth and decline (and in some cases irreversible decline or sudden disappearance), key events will often stand out because they will be remembered and retold by viewers.
The selection of channels is not aimed at being systematically representative of each genre of performance available on Douyu. Rather, the selection process was emergent and dependant on the social climate on the platform at the time of participant observation. However, the selection does attempt to acknowledge the diversity of performances and performers by selecting different genders, social classes, formats, and locales. While there are many recorded personalities and events relevant to my three main themes (outlined earlier), only twelve of the following channels are discussed in detail in this thesis due to limited space.

There are several levels of protecting the privacy of my observees and interlocutors. Just to further clarify, observees are broadcasters who I have observed for a long period of time, and publicly interacted with on their livestream channels, but never had the opportunity to interview or interact in a one-on-one private conversation. Interlocutors refer to broadcasters who I have interviewed either in person or online via a private chat, as well as viewers who I interviewed either in person or online.

First, all words spoken, and actions performed by broadcasters on their livestream channels are considered public. On Douyu, all broadcasters have legally consented to disclose their privacy to the extent they voluntarily exhibit themselves on their livestream channels and be responsible for their livestreamed (and recorded) and therefore public actions. Thus, quoting the words they have spoken on their public livestreams and screenshotting the livestreaming video is not violating their privacy, at least not on legal grounds. Nor does quotation of a broadcaster’s speech in itself, which is translated and reproduced faithfully to the original, potentially constitute defamation. For many streamers broadcasting in the category of “variety entertainment” (see Chapter 2) who I had been observing, the affective commodity of zhibo was exactly the broadcaster’s personal life: their lives must be public (partially if not completely) in order to be profitable.

Second, there are also exceptions to the above ground rules. I have considered the privacy of livestream broadcasters who spoke to me privately, either online or in person.

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6 In terms of copyright, non-commercial and pictorial reproduction of livestreams for scholarly purposes is not a violation of Douyu’s terms of services, as I have consulted and confirmed with the company’s lawyer.
In these cases, the conversation started with a consent form and I communicated to the interviewee my intentions as a researcher and how I had known them through watching their livestreams. They would then decide whether they wanted their “stage character” or public persona (associated with their livestream channel and online presence) to be disclosed in the publication of the interview (this thesis or other academic publications). If yes, the interview quote will be under the same name/persona as the quotes of their public speech on livestream. However, the majority of my livestreamer interviewees requested to be anonymised if I were to quote excerpts from our private conversations. In these cases, another anonymous voice is created—separate from the streamer’s public online persona—when I am quoting a private conversation from an online or face-to-face interview. No real name nor streamer names are used in these situations.

0.3.2 List of Observed Channels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Streamer Name (English translations/pinyin and Chinese original names)</th>
<th>Channel address</th>
<th>Performativity/Main stream activity (during the period I observed them)</th>
<th>Brief Bio (detailed introduction in later chapters when they are discussed)</th>
<th>Follower count (Collected on 12 July 2018)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nvliu 女流</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/nvliu">https://www.douyu.com/nvliu</a></td>
<td>Indie games/Q&amp;A</td>
<td>Graduate from an elite university; passionate about indie games.</td>
<td>2,473,149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hani9</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/446748">https://www.douyu.com/446748</a></td>
<td>Cross-dressing/Dance/Talk</td>
<td>From rural Sichuan; employed by a streamer agency.</td>
<td>195,656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ligan, Esports Liboqing, 电竞李伯清 aka Chouxiang Studio 抽象工作室</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/6324">https://www.douyu.com/6324</a></td>
<td>League of Legends/Social Drama</td>
<td>Formerly a policeman; later founded Chouxiang Studio (a streamer house); Channel censored due to political controversy.</td>
<td>Permanently closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emoqq 恶魔 qq</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/70231">https://www.douyu.com/70231</a></td>
<td>H1Z1</td>
<td>Original protagonist in the “China no.1” meme in battle royale games.</td>
<td>1,303,189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xima 西马</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/70231">https://www.douyu.com/70231</a></td>
<td>Indie games</td>
<td>“House husband”; passionate about indie games.</td>
<td>5,665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>URL</td>
<td>Category/Genre</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Followers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC Shitou MC stones</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/mcs">https://www.douyu.com/mcs</a> hitou</td>
<td>DJ/Banter</td>
<td>Previously celebrated as a hanmai celebrity on Acfun.</td>
<td>88,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother Jiong 囧哥</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/ivy">https://www.douyu.com/ivy</a> ou</td>
<td>Overseas life/Videogames/Talk</td>
<td>International student in the US.</td>
<td>782,196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chuange/Brother Barbecue 串哥</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/zhangdalong">https://www.douyu.com/zhangdalong</a></td>
<td>Eating/Talk/Social Drama</td>
<td>From a Northeastern town; barbecue vendor.</td>
<td>908,679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanghai Laotou 上海老头</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/487">https://www.douyu.com/487</a> 333</td>
<td>Politics/Finance/Talk</td>
<td>Native Shanghai resident; one of the few senior livestreamers on Douyu.</td>
<td>22,057</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yezi 叶子</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/244">https://www.douyu.com/244</a> 548</td>
<td>Outdoor/Travel/Talk</td>
<td>From rural Sichuan; first Douyu streamer who propagated outdoor streams.</td>
<td>1,197,928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC Lengleng PC 冷冷</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/cold">https://www.douyu.com/cold</a></td>
<td>DotA2</td>
<td>Former Esports personality; Esports event hostess.</td>
<td>1,234,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiaojie 超级小桀</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/cave">https://www.douyu.com/cave</a></td>
<td>Mario maker</td>
<td>Coder; ardent Super Mario fan.</td>
<td>1,299,662</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiuchang 酒沧</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/669">https://www.douyu.com/669</a> 745</td>
<td>Cosplay/Talk</td>
<td>University student; part-time streamer.</td>
<td>74,717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fanfan faerie 繁繁</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/508">https://www.douyu.com/508</a> 85</td>
<td>League of Legends</td>
<td>18-year-old full-time streamer.</td>
<td>296,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiangxi Xiaopang 湘西小胖</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/519">https://www.douyu.com/519</a> 996</td>
<td>Eating/Talk/Work</td>
<td>Peasant in rural Hunan.</td>
<td>163,194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DabaoduiXiaobao 大宝对小宝</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/604">https://www.douyu.com/604</a> 183</td>
<td>Office work/Talk</td>
<td>Officeworker and mum in Hunan.</td>
<td>14,528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuwen 宇文</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/534">https://www.douyu.com/534</a> 469</td>
<td>Talk</td>
<td>Disabled young man in rural Sichuan.</td>
<td>3,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miao cast 喵播</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/cats">https://www.douyu.com/cats</a> how</td>
<td>Pets (surveillance cam)</td>
<td>Multiple surveillance cameras monitoring the cats’ room.</td>
<td>156,497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianshijiao 520 天使焦 520</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/973">https://www.douyu.com/973</a> 76</td>
<td>DotA2</td>
<td>Retired Esports athlete.</td>
<td>282,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heirenyi (blackman yi) 黑人毅</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/280">https://www.douyu.com/280</a> 072</td>
<td>Fitness; Bodybuilding</td>
<td>Bodybuilder in Shanghai.</td>
<td>518,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiangzi 祥子</td>
<td><a href="https://www.douyu.com/zhuxiangzi">https://www.douyu.com/zhuxiangzi</a></td>
<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Casual streamer; quit streaming after a few trials.</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
0.4 Chapter Outline

This thesis is broadly divided into two parts. The first part sets the theoretical, historical, and methodological background and prepares for the second part, which focuses on the presentation and discussion of ethnographic data. Each chapter in the second part presents an ethnographic theory of one performative quality of zhibo: ordinariness, boredom, and vulgarity.

Chapter 1, “Livestreaming Theory”, starts with the question of how livestreaming video performs. This is then broken into three segments: liveness, streaming, and video. As I first excavate how liveness was conceptualised historically in theatre, television, early cam sites, and online videos, I argue that liveness should be understood through movements of remediation. Second, livestreaming video is stabilising its own socio-technological mediation of immediacy, displacing television’s assertiveness in the aura of liveness and instigating its particular situated beliefs. Building on the various critiques on liveness, I thus propose a performative approach to livestreaming platform should build upon genres as the distributed performances of liveness. In the second half of the chapter, through outlining technological metaphors from televisual flow, to online video streaming, to the current technology of livestreaming, I contend that the technological specificity of livestreaming video gradually coalesces into the formation of a medium: its experiential aspects of watching and its distinct forms of performative expression. Finally, I propose that it is necessary to identify and redefine event as a crucial unit of analysis for an ethnographic theory of the medium of livestreaming video.

Chapter 2, “The Zhibo Platform”, opens with a review of platform studies and highlights the key concept of “platformativity”. I then clarify my epistemic position in studying Douyu as a platform: to learn the platformativity of Douyu as the background knowledge for the ensuing ethnographic discussion. This is followed by a short history of Chinese online videos, in terms of their key platformativities, from the early days of video portal Youku-Tudou, to subcultural hubs like Acfun and Bilibili, to the contemporary rise of livestreaming platforms. Finally, I will outline the platformativity of Douyu from four
aspects: the institution of genre, the practical operation of the attention economy, the real-time censorship machinery, and the danmu interface and its associative comment culture.

Chapter 3, “Methods and Methodology”, recounts my process of developing a set of methods specifically for livestreaming platforms. It starts with a digest of fieldwork activities of two phases, from long-term online participant observation to offline interactions with various participants and informants. It also includes some notes on ethics and the miscellaneous technological issues encountered during fieldwork. The second half of the chapter explicates the various building blocks of an event-based ethnography, in response to the methodological challenges posed by liveness and real-time medium. Accentuating the concept of a livestream event, I outline three types of events and each corresponds to a method of observation, taking fieldnotes, and writing ethnographic text. The practice of chafang (inspecting livestreams while livestreaming) is a way of attention management during the observation of ordinary livestream events. Ethnographic commentary is a way of writing commentary upon rereading fieldnotes. Presenting eventlogs in the ethnographic text is a way of presenting transformative events. Finally, I will discuss the various aspects of building a digital archive of livestream from screen-recordings, screenshots, chatlogs, and transcriptions.

Chapter 4, “Richang”, starts with a review of the literature on the problematics of claims to ordinariness and authenticity in reality TV, and situates the contemporary debates on zhibo’s realist claims in the history of Chinese reality TV and documentaries. The chapter is then split into two parts, where I examine two kinds of (micro)celebrities on Douyu. First, drawing on the concept of “ordinary celebrity” and “microcelebrity”, I explicate the concept of xiaozhubo in the operations of ordinary affect in their conflicted claims to be the authentic ordinary person/livestream, demonstrated by Yuwen and Pili Wuwang’s livestream confessions. Second, I situate the much-discussed Chinese term wanghong within the context of livestreaming industry, then detail the process of celebrity production in the wanghong incubators from recruitment and training, to the affective (and often gendered) labour of performing on livestreams (through the example of Hani9). Last, I will touch upon the precarity of the work of being a wanghong.
Chapter 5, “Wuliao”, starts with identifying the theoretical and methodological challenges in articulating boredom in the context of livestreams. I proceed to detail the specific metaphorics of wuliao, followed by delineating the historical contexts of boredom and modernity in China from the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) to Reform China (1978–), and then reviewing Chinese cultural critics’ views on zhibo and boredom. To demonstrate the aesthetic quality of livestreams and parallels to contemporary art and avant garde cinema, I have chosen two exhibits: the first is the event of Ligan sleeping on livestream; the second showcases the performance of repetitive labour on Kuaishou and Bilibili’s boredom Competition. These examples point to a sense of vulgar boredom that alleviates livestream viewers from a debilitating aesthetic pedagogy of boredom. Finally, in outlining a practice-based account of digital boredom, I accentuate boredom as tactic through the example of Dabaoduixiaobao’s work-stream.

Chapter 6, “Laobaixing”, opens with a critique of the democratisation narrative on zhibo, while referring to earlier literature on Chinese reality TV and documentaries. I then postulate the colloquial term laobaixing as a more situated perspective to understand the politics of zhibo. Through a livestream dialogue from Shanghai Laotou’s channel, I will draw on the emergent themes on the vulgarity of ordinary concerns, State censorship, and the speculations on the performative boundary of zhibo. I then associate laobaixing with Foucault’s notion of “plebeian aspect”, to further elaborate the unpredictability of plebeian energy, which is demonstrated through the example of Sheng Ge’s hoax during the media event of the Tianjin Explosion in 2015.
1 Livestreaming Theory
Live-Streaming-Video, Genre, and Event

1.0 Introduction

Rather than asking the classical ontological question of “what is video?” it might be worth it to concentrate on the question of “how” do we use video, how do we engage with video. (Treske, 2015, p.46)

This chapter will re-situate contemporary questions on livestreaming (as a technology and medium) in the context of television studies, internet studies and various strands of media theories. This thesis does not attend to the ontological question of what is livestreaming video. Rather, it is motivated by the question of how livestreaming video performs.¹ This question is broken into two congenial parts—live and streaming—which culminate in performativity of genre and event through media practices of online video. The dual concepts of liveness and streaming also resonates with the two critical descriptives of televisual specificity: “liveness and the matter of flow” (Bonner, 2003, p.35).

In instigating liveness as the essential definition of television, televisual liveness has taken many forms—from an “ideological construct” (Feuer, 1983) to a “metonymic fallacy” (Mimi White, 2003, p.76), and to an “actuality effect” (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002, p.5).² In other words, liveness was “falsely” attributed to television in most occasions as an unfulfilled potentiality or aesthetic performance (e.g. “recorded live”), while only present in its full liveness during special media events such as the Olympics and news reports on catastrophes. On the other hand, the domain names of livestreaming websites—Justin.tv and Douyu.tv—explicitly suggest a lineage from television since the medium of

¹ In this chapter, I will mainly consider livestreaming video as a technology and medium. It does not insulate the politics of platform, especially in the forms of genres/categories. But I will not engage with this aspect in detail until Chapter 2 because livestreaming video is a smaller unit to theorise and lay the foundations for later discussions.
² These references will be discussed in detail in Section 1.1.3.
livestreaming proactively strives for a televisual identity or form. On the surface level of technological traits, livestreaming platforms have already achieved real-time simultaneity between all participants, temporal co-presence between broadcaster and viewers, and instant verifiability of reality claims via this afforded interactivity, all with high graphic fidelity.

However, the challenge of discussing liveness in the context of livestreaming is that liveness is no longer a rare or extolled quality captured by television studies. Rather, it is a banalised description of being fully live. Is the theoretical obsession with liveness—which is regarded as quintessentially televisual or the “differentia specifica” (Gripsrud, 1998, p.18) of television as a medium—eclipsed by its most banal actuality in livestreaming? In other words, is liveness a defunct theoretical metaphor when its ubiquity and accessibility among today’s livestreaming platforms make it no longer desirable?

Television has always been haunted by liveness as an “ontology” (the ontological question of what television essentially is) or “ideology” (the answer itself is ideological, perpetuated by the televisual regime, masquerading as ontology). In between these registers is the frustration of lived experience—or as Beverle Houston (1984, p.184) puts it, “of television, we say: I always want it as I have never had it”. What if livestream has done a better job in realising the “conceptual anchor for the properties considered essentially televisual” (Mimi White, 2003, p.81) and yet we are still frustrated? Hallvard Moe (2012) speculated about several answers,

One could say that the recent uses of liveness rob television of its remaining characteristics that specified it as a medium, the result being an impoverished and outdated term. . . alternatively, one could see the redefinitions—the extension and recoupling—of liveness as injecting new life into television as metaphor (p.292, emphasis added).

Before attempting to answer the above questions in practical terms, we must be aware of our presuppositions within academic literature: conspicuous adherence to the

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3 This ubiquity is primarily a result of technological affordability of live broadcasting democratised to ordinary people (the lowest requirements are merely a mobile phone and internet connection) and also due to widespread socio-economic incentives to practice livestreaming.
concept of liveness and hydrographic metaphors (e.g. flow and streams) in both television and internet studies. A performative approach can be beneficial in acknowledging and building on “the definitional ambivalence”, to borrow Uricchio’s (2009b, p.29) word on YouTube, of livestreaming video as a productive experimental laboratory in extending and recoupling liveness. In the following sections of reviewing histories and theoretical debates, I traverse from technological notions of immediacy and liveness to a relational and situated understanding of liveness’s role in different media; from the categorical liveness to performative genres of liveness; from the technology to the medium of livestreaming video, to the formulation of a renewed notion of media events for the medium of livestreaming video.

1.1 Perspectives on and beyond Liveness

1.1.1 Aura of Liveness from Theatre to Online Videos

In this section, I will identify genealogical movements of (re)mediation from liveness from theatre to television, to cam sites, to contemporary livestreaming platforms in order to reach a relational and situated understanding of liveness. Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) double logics of remediation is instrumental in setting the tone: “hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and achieve the ‘real’” (p.53). The double logics allow for a relational dialectics between the desire for transparency or erasure of mediation (i.e. immediacy) and multiplication of media and acknowledgement of the medium (i.e. hypermediacy). To rephrase in Walter Benjamin’s (2008) term in this context, the “aura” of liveness is one that denies or hides the operations of remediation, while also making the multiple processes and relations of mediations all the more obvious. Reproduction/remediation and liveness always exist in relation. The “aura” of liveness is only effective in relation to mediation.
I will start this narrative of liveness from the language of “aura” as proposed by Benjamin (2008): “what shrinks in an age where the works of art can be reproduced by technological means is its aura” (Ibid, p.7). Cinematic innovation was considered an existential threat to theatre as the technical reproduction of original live events: “a work of art captured entirely by technological reproduction, indeed (like film) proceeding from it, can have no more direct opposite than live theatre” (Ibid, p.19). In live theatre, “that aura [of the actor] is bound to his here and now; it has no replica” (Ibid, p.19). This corresponds to the exaltation of ontological integrity of theatre—a theatrical aura. The fading of this aura in the age of mechanical reproduction “depends upon the social condition” (Ibid, p.9).

The anxiety around the remediation of theatre lies on the unresolved nature of “the originary media. . . [that is] postulated, or even to remain latent as an a priori” (Berry, 2013, p.13). Such movements dictate an origin and thus a need for an ontology. The originary media or proto-liveness is the face-to-face interpersonal communication (i.e. both temporal and spatial co-presence), which is then constructed as an ontological need for humans. Therefore “most if not all other media derive from or seek to recreate” (Crisell, 2012, p.11, emphasis added) this mode of communication.

For Philip Auslander (2008), the reason why theatre studies prioritise theatre as the prototype of “liveness” is closely connected to the ontological integrity of theatre. Much of performance studies and many playwrights have been arguing that the “influence of other media on theatre is a contamination” and “from this point of view, once live performance succumbs to mediatization, it loses its ontological integrity” (Ibid, p.46). Following this argument onto the disappearance of “aura” postulated by Benjamin, the moment when technologies of mediatisation, such as writings, radio, film, and television, is introduced to the audience, theatre is transformed. As British anthropologist Mark Hobart (2013) argues,

The possibility is born of discriminating nostalgically between authentic, the ‘live’ performance and their mechanical or electronic reproduction. In fact, however, it is the contrast itself which creates the conditions of a privileged, essential original form, against which divergent versions can be compared (p.13).
Liveness, or the “real-time drive” (Gehl, 2011, p.6), and recorded, or the “archival impulse” (Ibid, p.6), have always existed in relation to each other, just as their social statuses are also relational. This relationality is then situated in the socio-technological contingencies at a given time, which corresponds to the discussions on the situated beliefs later this chapter.

Television

While we became gradually removed from the initial anxieties of television’s impact on live theatre, this theatrical aura was remediated in the ontological core of television in the specific form of televisual liveness. Coming from the perspective of theatre and performance studies, Auslander (2008) states that “television was imagined as theatre” (p.22). Televised drama is defined by its recreation of the “original” theatrical experience—it seeks to, “through the televisual discourse. . . to replace live performance” (Ibid, p.18).

Throughout the history of television, a series of recurring definitional crises have occurred and seem to have no resolution (Uricchio, 2009a). Lynn Spigel’s (1992) book on the history of American television identifies a 1912 article predicting liveness as less about technical terms but “basic social and cultural understandings that television would have for the public in the 1950s” (p.99) and presuming its superiority over cinema. On the history of American live anthology dramas in the 1950s, Elana Levine (2008) writes,

It was not the liveness of particular genres that earned them the distinction of being labelled art, but rather a host of gendered and classed cultural association that allowed some liveness (within certain genres of television) to be heralded while other instances were ignored or even disparaged (p.395).

Throughout this history of television, there were contested opinions between its low cultural status and reassertions of its social value, some of which were attributed to liveness. Boddy (1990) and Levine’s (2008) historical accounts of the “golden age” of live anthology dramas is another reminder to us that liveness was once a source of distinction (of “being labelled art”), “not only between television and other media but also between instances and
genres of television” (Levine, 2008, p.395). This “distinction” is also evident in the discourses on zhibo: as I will discuss in detail in Chapter 2, some performative instances or categories on Douyu are selectively elevated while others are particularly stigmatized. In Chinese media reports and academic discussions, there are rich discourses on the “contamination effect” of liveness in China, which I will discuss in the second half of the thesis.

By the 1940s, liveness was already considered a technological limitation since television was “forced to be a live medium, as recording content for later transmission would not have become practical for a few more years” (Daubs, 2011, p.53). In later decades, television became less live and largely supplanted by VCR videotapes “not only because a massively increasing output of channels relies on reruns and inexpensive pre-recorded programs, but also due to the slow but steady uptake of digital video recorders” (Moe, 2012, p.290). For instance, through studying journalistic discourses on television specificity from 1945 to 1955, Berenstein (2002) argues that “the impending development of videotape in the fifties offered the means, unlike film, of maintaining centrality of liveness even while a TV broadcast was not live” (p.28). Liveness is then attributed to certain genres such as sports events, news reporting during heightened media events (such as catastrophes) and diversionary reality TV. Reflecting on this history of remediating televisual liveness, Marriott (2007) writes,

fully live television increasingly begins to look like an endangered species; all the more odd, then, on the face of it, the ideology of liveness, the idea that television is ontologically, essentially live should have remained so remarkably persistent (p.49).

The maintenance of this “aura” of liveness in television demonstrates liveness’s fluctuating cultural status in relation to other media, with the introductions of different technologies and modes of production. Historical conceptions of liveness, as opposed to

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4 I will discuss this idea again in the next section through Bourdon’s (2000) idea of liveness in various degrees in different televisual genres. This perspective of seeing liveness as a distribution of various genres, in which it performs differently, is a crucial point that I will come back later in Section 1.2.
the ontological consideration, is certainly not static nor absolute but situated in “cultural and historical contingencies” (Auslander, 2008, p.11).

Webcam sites

The next major moment of remediating liveness in academic literature after television studies was the emergence of the early individual (web)cam sites from late 1990s onwards, which were enthusiastically celebrated to have approximated or even surpassed the criteria of televisual liveness in almost every aspect—a “bastard child of TV, with its obsession of liveness”, in Palmer’s (2000) words. At the time, early “webcam operators” (White, 2006b) such as Jennifer Ringley and Ana Voog positioned cam sites as better versions of television. Ringley famously claimed that the webcam could provide unmediated reality and was even a precursor to reality TV. Voog predicted that “it is going to be a VERY interesting day indeed, when streaming with sound is available to everyone and EVERYONE has a TV show” (cited in Daubs, 2011, p.88, emphasis in original).

As Tara McPherson (2006) writes how the web was framed a better version of television during the heyday of the dotcom era, it stressed “the particular aspects of the medium that illustrate its superiority over television while simultaneously linking the two media in a seemingly natural convergence” (Ibid, p.458). The previously discussed preoccupation with theatrical “aura” does not only exist in television studies but also extends to internet studies. Framing Jennicam as “reality-as-entertainment”, Theresa Senft (2008) argues,

The Jennicam’s historical antecedents stretch back even further, to 19th century genre of reality-as-entertainment: the Victorian sensation drama. These plays were essentially demonstrations of technology, in which waterfalls, locomotives, and court cases were simulated on stage ‘thrill and chill’ audiences with displays of ‘theatrical authenticity’ (p.16).5

5 I will return to the issue of authenticity in detail in Chapter 4.
Senft’s “theatrical authenticity” alludes to an inter-generational movement of remediation. Movements of remediation should not be understood as fixated stages between two adjacent media in a linear technological development, but rather fluctuating sporadic movements of both simulating and distinguishing from (multiple) previous media. As Bolter and Grusin (1990) write, “media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other. ... media need each in order to function as media at all” (p.55). Reflecting on the history of liveness from television to cam sites to YouTube, Michael Daubs (2011) writes in his PhD thesis,

Webcam and homecam sites, it was said, would trump television’s constructed and heavily mediated vision of reality by appropriating and perfecting the trait often used to define television specificity as a medium: liveness. By 2003, Jennicam was shut down, Ringley herself was relegated to mere ‘curiosity’ status, and television’s claim to reality was being reinvigorated by... reality TV. The meteoric rise of YouTube’s popularity... in 2005 has reignited debates about liveness, immediacy, and mediated reality (p.110-111).

In hindsight, the ambitious prophecies made by Ringley and Ana Voog on how internet liveness would supersede televisual liveness are highly problematic. Decades before the arrival of the internet as we know it, Licklider (1967 cited in Waldrop, 2001) already predicted that the internet, or his term “selective television”, would be the end of liveness as a distinguishing feature of television. Licklider’s prediction was correct in a sense, but he originated the “television versus internet” comparison, which partly contributed to misleading the debate into the question of ontological specificity. As I have shown earlier in theatre’s exalted claim to liveness, liveness was never truly a distinguished feature of television in the first place.

Furthermore, there are many similarities between television and internet renderings of liveness. As Michele White (2006a) highlights, they both appear “unmediated” in that they both indicate viewers are witnessing the event as they happen; and they both “establish connections between temporal liveness and the purported aliveness of representations” (p.342). To push the argument further, Mark Andrejevic (2004a; 2004b) was very cautious about the revolutionary rhetoric surrounding Jennicam at the time and argued that the internet was becoming like television. As Andrejevic writes, “interactive media are rapidly
being assimilated into an economic framework in which participation has nothing at all to do with power sharing” (2004a, p.194). The intangible products generated by the work of being watched is also a form of self-commodification. Writing on early cam sites such as Dotcom Guy and VoyeurDorm, Andrejevic (2004b) critiqued the consolidation of reality as entertainment in the webcam subculture as a “total institution of voluntary submission” (Ibid, p.76) to comprehensive surveillance.

Online Videos

In contrast to Andrejevic’s rather pessimistic view, Strangelove (2010) saw YouTube as a force that would “erode the monopolization of representation by media corporation. . . [and] redistribute TV power” (p.4), and function as a beacon of hope for a “post-television era” (Ibid). This position is partly a result of the optimism in early YouTube, partly Strangelove’s position that “the medium, not the corporation, is the message we need to heed” (Ibid, p.5-6). This turns out to be a mistake as participatory culture because the medium and corporation cannot be separated. If we do, we often end up in either optimism (i.e. users win) or pessimism (i.e. corporations win). As Christian Sandvig (2015) critiques the idea of internet as anti-television,

Commentators expected that television via the internet would transform television, but instead it caused the internet’s distribution architecture to become like television in significant ways. . . it is clear that media infrastructures do not have the essential characteristics that are often attributed to them. Just as the internet is often thought to be ‘about’ the long tail or user-generated contents, television is often thought to be ‘about’ liveness (p.304-305).

Today, with the ubiquity of Netflix and iQiyi, it would be ludicrous to still argue that the internet is anti-television. The internet, or more specifically online video platforms like YouTube, no longer needs to be posited against television in order to consolidate its cultural status like it did in the dotcom era. Although realising Voog’s vision that everyone

6 Early internet was constructed around the idea of archive, alternative to the ephemerality of televisual broadcasting.
potentially has their own “TV show” or “broadcast yourself” in YouTube’ own slogan, YouTube is largely not a live medium (although it does afford livestream technically) and it operates more like a database (I will return to this point later this chapter). Strangelove (2010) and Lange (2007a; 2007b) will likely disagree with this argument as they consider YouTube as a social space, since videos are constantly shared and commented upon. For instance, Lange (2007a) shows “how YouTube’s sharing and commenting features project identities that affiliate with particular groups” (p.361)—what Lange (2009) calls “video of affinity” (p.71).

However, generally speaking, YouTube is “a machine for selection from an audiovisual database or archive” (Schröter, 2009, p.340) and YouTube does offer a variety of instruments such as subscription feeds to compliment that machinery of selection. In this sense, YouTube is resolutely a public database or archive on an overall scale, as Burgess and Green (2009) writes, “YouTube is thus evolving into a massive, heterogeneous, but for the most part accidental and disordered, public archive” (p.88).

If anything, livestreaming video, rather than YouTube, is the more appropriate recent digital medium in this series of remediation of liveness. The variety livestreaming platform hosting all sorts of live performances, such as Justin.tv and Douyu (as opposed to Twitch’s specialisation in broadcasting gameplay), is the proper re-iteration and platformisation of the past phenomenon of scant individual cam sites. In 2015, YouTube did also launch a separate videogame livestreaming sector called YouTube Gaming, and YouTube also supports a variety of livestream channels that are not gaming focused. While they certainly exist and continue to thrive on the margin, they have not become the defining identity of YouTube.

Livestreaming is no longer a subculture as Andrejevic (2004a) initially formulated on cam sites, but a mainstream media form or “quanmin zhibo” (literally, everyone livestreaming) in Douyu’s own catchphrase. There are no longer conflicted desires between the “desire of democratisation of access… [and] rationalisation of the work being watched” (Andrejevic, 2004b). For every livestreamer who has a contract with the platform, it is a job—verified, certified, entitled, and pronounced. For other part-time streamers, it is a
hobby, but compensation is nonetheless welcomed and there is an aspiration to be full-time one day (see a detailed discussion in Chapter 4).

The focus of this thesis is not the political economy of livestreaming platforms today. However, I want to emphasise that the major shift from cam sites to livestreaming platforms is the banal consolidation of liveness as the ubiquitous form of mass entertainment. Much like how television asserts its cultural and social dominance in liveness, there is no doubt that livestreaming as a medium is carving out and stabilising its own social and cultural spaces—discursively against television while structurally assimilating into the manageable model of television. The movements of remediation between media is indeed “translucent” rather than “transparent” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p.46). In the following section, I will reconsider liveness in technological and cultural terms from television to cam sites of early internet to the livestreaming platform of contemporary platform capitalism.

1.1.2 Immediacy, Liveness, and Real-timeness: Technical Quality and Situated Belief

Having discussed the relationality between iterations of liveness in different media, I argue that liveness operates as both a technical quality of live transmission and a situated belief afforded by communicative practices. Immediacy and liveness are often invoked interchangeably or undistinguishably next to each other in television studies. The primary meaning of liveness is “simultaneity of its production and reception” while immediacy means “of or near present time” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p.26). Both are concepts of relative temporality, temporal (and spatial in case of live music performance) co-presence to be exact. Berenstein (2002) puts the two terms in the same basket as they both “connote (firstly) temporal and spatial relations between the viewer and the performance at hand and (secondly) suggest an unmediated or direct access to those performances” (p.26-27).

However, Daubs (2011) argues that liveness as a concept is too slippery and rigid because it can “conflate a historical period with technological capability or aesthetic” and therefore justifies the “false ontological realness of television” (p.82). In contrast, coupled with hypermediacy as relational “double logics”, immediacy “broadens, rather than limits,
theoretical approaches to understanding the appeal of all media” (Ibid, p.82). In the following section, I will elaborate on liveness and immediacy as a technical quality of live transmission and situated belief through communicative feedback.

**Technical Quality of Live Transmission**

In this section I will address the immediacy and liveness in technical terms. Following Bourdon (2000), Nick Couldry (2004) writes on technical quality of liveness, “the decisive of liveness is not factuality of what is transmitted, but the fact of live transmission itself” (p.96). If live transmission is simply measured by the time-shift variable or latency, then the technological history of liveness is not a linear process of technological advancement. Strictly speaking, except for the human-imposed factors such as the seven-second profanity delay, analogue television and radio can be broadcast without perceptible delay.⁷

In the 1990s, streaming a watchable video over 56k modem lines was initially a huge struggle before the advent of broadband internet, RealNetworks, Macromedia, and later Adobe Flash Player. For example, Jennicam was originally a webpage that automatically refreshed every three minutes—that is, one frame per three minutes—to display a picture (without audio) taken by the webcam, which should not count as a livestream *video* by any contemporary standard. This is in stark contrast to the fact that both Douyu and Twitch streams can be watched in 60 or 30 frames per seconds and various scaling of video quality. Due to limited server processing power, Douyu and Twitch both prioritise transcoding services that downscale video quality to only selected channels (e.g. partnered popular channels) while enforcing original video quality on channels with small viewership.

Under the new climate of solidified platformisation and more ubiquitous and better internet infrastructure, the striving for immediacy is revived in the movement of developing

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⁷ Hulbert (2015) further elaborates on how political economy influences/limits the technical potential: “most commercial stations adopted a voluntary 5-7 second ‘profanity delay’ as a safeguard against the deleterious effects of uncensored liveness. As a result, simultaneous radio and television practices during the era of analogue transmission were generally blocked by the difficulties of resolving barriers imposed by the political economy of the broadcasting milieu” (p.120).
new technologies of livestreaming video. This striving aims at the “progressive elimination of any perceptible delay from the time of machine processing” and “the time of conscious perception” (Mackenzie, 1997, p.60). In the case of livestreaming, this process includes software encoding of the video at the sender end, transmission to the Content Delivery Networks (CDNs), and streaming the video from the server at the receiver end. In terms of latency, in May 2018, Twitch already achieved a low latency stream with under one second of delay at times. Douyu enforces a minimum of 10 seconds of delay. Sometimes streamers prolong this delay in order to avoid “stream snipers”, who inspect the streams of their competitor as they are in the same competitive game as the broadcaster, and therefore achieve a significant advantage.

Technically speaking, immediacy is a question of approximation. It is a “question of speed and the organization of content in relation to time” (Weltevrede et al, 2014, p.128). According to Weltevrede et al (2014), this striving to reduce latency in our real-time Web and more recently the technology of livestreaming video cannot be considered in universal applicability, just like how liveness was wrongly extolled as the overall defining quality of television. Weltevrede et al (2014) instead propose the term “real-timeness”—“real-time is not a framework in which media change but is assembled through the technicity of platform” (p.127, emphasis added). In other words, specific temporalities are produced or “fabricated” in different platforms and therefore a “medium-specificity of the real-time experience” (Ibid, p.142), according to the specific platform under discussion. This leads to questions of a socio-technological or, even, a political economy nature.

For example, Twitch tends to be explicit and highlight its technological superiority in its implementation of HTML5 in reducing latency while Douyu tends to downplay this technical aspect in reducing latency. According to an anonymous informant who works in the livestreaming industry in China, the main reason why Douyu still used Adobe Flash Video in early 2018 (instead of updating to HTML5) is not that Douyu did not possess the technology but because of their reliance on Flash advertisements. HTML5 advertisements have to be reencoded as videos, which can be too resource intensive for advertisers. Flash advertisement was the industrial standard in 2015 and still was in 2018 (at least on Douyu). Douyu also rarely publicly pronounces its claim to liveness for ideological reasons—
unfiltered liveness is considered a threat by Chinese authorities and therefore must be strictly regulated.8

A brief history of immediacy in digital broadcasting technologies reveals that it is not necessarily a linear process of technological advancement that continuously reduces latency but rather a meandering course, in which there are mutual influences between the analogue and digital. Before the capability to transmit pre-recorded content, liveness was considered a *technological limitation* in the television industry. The subsequent development is in fact one that institutionalised latency rather than reduced it for censorship reasons and reduction of costs. Later, the arrival of Web video did not immediately assume technical superiority over analogue transmission in terms of latency and video quality. In the next step, livestreaming technology presumes this superiority and to a degree extols its socio-technological role in reducing latency, in which the technical “full liveness” (in this case, zero latency) is the unattainable goal to strive for.

**Situated Belief Through Communicative Feedback**

After addressing the technical quality of liveness, it is also vital to understand how liveness is situated in specific media contexts. In Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) two logics of remediation, immediacy is not regarded as “universal aesthetic truth. . . [but] practices of specific groups in specific times” (p.20). For example, for television, the concept of immediacy dictates the “purity of the absence of mediation” (Weisel, 2002) and the desire for transparency. Immediacy is therefore a crucial theoretical device that “both fuels and is fuelled by a belief in television’s capability to present an unmediated reality” (Daubs, 2011, p.82). Berenstein (2002) also stresses there is a consistent “belief in and commitment to, liveness and immediacy” (p.27) in the early defence of television.

However, the desire for transparent immediacy should not be taken for granted neither be trivialised as if “viewers [were] utterly naïve” (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p.30).

8 The discourses on the accessible “real” due to the impartial liveness is prevalent among streamers and viewers on Douyu (see Chapters 4 and 6 for a detailed discussion).
There is often a belief “in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents. . . [and] immediacy is our name for a family of beliefs and practices that expresses themselves differently at various times among various groups” (Ibid, p.30, emphasis added). For example, for Wolfgang Ernst (2013), this “contact point” or the basis of our belief is the bold letters “LIVE” with a red dot signalling that the channel is live—
“authorization of live as a quality for the observer is not a matter of the technical artefact. . . images alone give no clue whether we are seeing a direct transmission or a recording” (Ibid, p.110). We test the “veracity of what is or what is not live by dint of technical and communicative feedback” (Ibid, p.111).

This communicative feedback presupposes a sense of temporal co-presence. Television has traditionally institutionalised the televisual voice as the important vehicle for both “conveying presence” and “possessing life” (Crisell, 2012, p.14). Bourdon (2000) even argues that television is a “vococentrist” or “verbocentrist” medium: “television is always talking” (p.549). On analogue television, there was a “presence of a perceptual space” (Marriott, 2007, p.5) shared among the viewers and the broadcaster. Later, on what was called “interactive TV”, “audience participation through digital return channels works both to extend and transforms the conventions of liveness and eventfulness” (Ytrennerg, 2009, p.469)—the perceptual is now interactively real. Live transmission is thus further augmented by the continuous viewer participation. This augmentation of communicative feedback, which was seen as an “addition” to the conventional television, is now the integral norm on most livestreaming platforms.

On the VoD platform Bilibili, the infrastructure of danmu (“bullet curtain” comments) constitutes a particular way of constructing situated belief in liveness. According to Li (2017), the system of danmu on Bilibili enables “a sense of live communication” or “pseudo-simultaneity”—having an argument with someone on danmu is “like quarrelling with a ghost” (p.249). The two “quarrelling” comments are sent from different times during the day or even weeks, but they occupy adjacent temporality within the timeline of the video. From the perspective of the third viewer, they are arguing in “real

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9 In Chapter 4, I will discuss in detail the role of small talk and confessions in performing the everydayness on Douyu.
time”. In this case, commentators collectively contribute to the performance of video commentary and make the video feel “alive”.

On the livestreaming platform Douyu, viewers assume that the live transmission they are watching is, first, also watched by a defined number of others at the same time (as exhibited by the concurrent viewer count) and, second, unfolding in real time as they are watching it. This knowing is fundamental to the experience of liveness. On Douyu, the communicative practices afforded by the real time commenting interface danmu, which is different from the above example of accumulated and “recorded” danmu on Bilibili, supplies viewers with a valid and straightforward means of verification—if the broadcaster responds timely in speech to textual messages in the chatroom, it means the channel is live.

The red dot LIVE is not so trustworthy after all and new situated knowledge needs to be generated. On Douyu, there are many types of “non-live” content that are often not very distinguishable. Some Douyu channels are actually video recordings of gameplay or other kinds of footage “masquerading” as livestreams. However, as viewers can test by communicative practices, the pretence usually does not last long if the channel does have an engaging viewership. Some channels are very explicit in their claims to non-liveness or being “recorded live”: for example, channels in the category fangyingting (literally “screening room”) or replays of classic films (see a detailed discussion in the next section).

It should be also noted that this interactivity of one-to-many structure and voice-to-textual-comments format is not equal nor instantaneous compared to the one-to-one voice conversation on Skype. The perceptible delay between the time a viewer sends their comment and the time a streamer sees it—in Douyu’s case, at least 10 seconds—actually works well in the imbalanced format of conversation, if the given channel has many concurrent viewers. It takes time for the broadcaster to filter through the large number of comments and spare attention from whatever activity he or she is engaging (e.g. playing a videogame).

1.1.3 Liveness and its Discontents: Televisuality and Performativity
Since I have established liveness as both a technical quality and a situated belief, I am more equipped to review the many iterations of critical scrutiny on liveness in television studies. In this section, I will concisely review this convoluted intellectual history surrounding liveness (mostly in television studies) then hint at an alternative performative approach to liveness.

Feuer’s (1983) famous argument on “the ideology of liveness” is a criticism of the ontological approach, in which she proposes that television is often not live in a literal sense and liveness operates as elaborate ideological and institutional mediations. Couldry (2004) provides an excellent interpretation of Feuer, which does not emphasise the very confusing “ideological discourses” but points to usage of the word “liveness” itself. Liveness is not a “descriptive term” but a “ritual term”—“that is, a category put to use in various forms of structured action that naturalize wider power relationships” (Ibid, p.354).

While acknowledging the value in deconstructing liveness as the ideology of television as an institution in Feuer’s work, Mimi White (2003) posits a critique of this preoccupation with liveness as a “conceptual filter” that eclipsed other “discursive registers” (in her case, spatiality): Feuer “ends up elevating it (i.e. liveness) as even more potent force, as the ideological and technological sleight of hand at the heart of the medium’s strategies of address” (Ibid, p.80). Derrida and Stiegler’s (2002) conversation on television also provides a very compelling argument on the potential dangers (or dead-end) of an intellectual deconstruction of liveness,

how to proceed without denying ourselves new resources of live television while continuing to be critical of their mystifications? And above all, while continuing to remind people and to demonstrate that the ‘live’ and ‘real time’ are never pure, that they do not give intuition or transparency, a perception stripped of interpretation or technical intervention. Any such demonstrations already appeal, in and of itself, to philosophy. . . . the requisite deconstruction of this artifactuality should not be used as alibi (p.5-6, emphasis my own).

The deconstruction of live media often, especially in the case of Baudrillard and application of his work to media events, results in the dead-end of “critical neoidealism” (Ibid, p.6) of the default philosophical position. When liveness is critiqued as an ideological construct, the argument ends up returning to the loop of ontological liveness versus
ontology as ideology debate. It falls exactly into the defence of or attack on the ontological integrity of liveness, which are both affirmations of representational politics that are concerned with whether media distorts reality or not. Caldwell (1995) similarly criticises this centrality in “high theory” of ideological critique and outlines his alternative,

as long as high theory continues to overestimate the centrality of liveness in television even as it critiques liveness it will also underestimate or ignore other modes of practice and production: the performance of the visual and stylistic exhibitionism (p.30).

According to Caldwell (1995), regardless of the impact of scholarly criticism, the television industry “de-ontologised” itself and style has become more prominent in television than temporality. Building on this critique, Bourdon (2000) argues that these stylistic performances, or genres, have always used liveness as a resource “through a quite traditional series of indices, such as direct addresses to the viewer, or editing as a sign of continuity of the action” (Ibid, p.533). The televisual regime or televisuality, thus corresponds to the mutation of both technologies and these indices.

There are also crucial divergences between Caldwell’s concept and my appropriation of it: Caldwell’s concept of televisuality is demonstrated in his treatise on the “stylistic exhibitionism” (editing technologies, special effects, postmodern hyper-aesthetics, and so forth); I am taking televisuality as an inspiration to address genres as performative modes, rather than applying his theory in the new context of livestreaming. A performative approach helps us to see mediation as a normalised operation that can be observed and analysed. Producers, viewers and the various technologies of mediation they employ, all play active and even creative roles in situating and consolidating liveness. Moving on to the next section, I intend to move from the preoccupation of abstract notions of liveness to more practical considerations of how liveness is used as a resource to distinguish livestreaming genres.

### 1.2 From Liveness to Genres
The vital argument is not that liveness is an illusion, which is not exclusive to “high” intellectual critique. Viewers are often also ready to verify and debunk claims of liveness, or voluntarily partake in the performative dimension of liveness fully aware of its “constructed-ness” (more ethnographic examples on this point in Chapter 4). For instance, Senft’s (2008) ethnographic research on cam site viewers show that “they enjoy the images, sounds, and textual interactions transpiring on their screens while simultaneously engaging in sustained critiques of the ‘so real’ that put most reporters and academics to shame” (p.15).

Similarly, my contribution is to focus on the operativity of liveness as performatives on a livestreaming platform, that is based on colloquial theories elucidated by my informants, livestreamers, and viewers’ own attempts at medium-specific criticism. I therefore arrive at the issue of genre at a junction where theoretical discussions of liveness (to displace it from the centre) and field observation converge.

### 1.2.1 Liveness and Genre: Structured Contingency

As Bourdon (2000) notes, “live television is not an absolute. It is, rather, a question of degree” (p.534). The various degrees then correspond to different genres throughout the history of television. For instance, “fully live” or “maximum live” are often utilised in major media events such as Olympic Games. “Pseudo live”, with live editing and layers of recording, are used in the setting of newsroom. Bonner (2003) similarly uses the term “performed live” (p.35) to mean that the presenter speaks to the camera and “as if” they were speaking in front of the audience members.\(^\text{10}\)

These genres serve as foundations for viewers’ expectations or “inferential work” in Bourdon’s (2000) words. Live transmission should not be privileged as the technical specificity of television, but performed in the form of televisual genres, and programming flow, which are always in a profoundly industrial, social and cultural process, whose familiarity among viewer are developed over time (to a vast body of accumulated shared

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\(^\text{10}\) This self-awareness is very similar to Wesch’s (2009) research on YouTubers, where “infinite number of contests collapsing upon one another into that single moment of recording” (p.23) in the YouTuber’s imagination when speaking to the camera. YouTube videos are also “performed live” in this sense.
knowledge) in a specific region, or in the case of this project, a platform (also deeply situated in a regional media ecology).

Genre studies, according to Mittell (2001), often assume a textualist perspective (i.e. category for category’s sake or intrinsic-ness of the category itself) but genre should be “intertextual” rather than “an inherently textual component” (p.6) of the televisual text. To push the argument further, genres need to be located “within the complex interrelations among texts, industries, audiences, and historical contexts” (Ibid, p.7) thus it is more useful to “explore the categorical operation of a genre. . . [in] cultural practice” (Ibid, p.11, emphasis added). This perspective is particularly useful for this project because I am less interested in studying theoretical genres of ideali
s
ted texts and more in “how genres are operative and constituted in everyday life” (Ibid, p.18).

Building on the perspective of studying genres in its practical operative-ness, Fabian’s anthropological theory of genre is very helpful. “Genre. . . embodies cultural injunction to know what belongs and what doesn’t, what is proper and what isn’t” (Fabian, 1998, p.42). As I will expand further in detail in the next chapter (in Section 2.3.1), genre has much to do with authority and order on Douyu. As I document the various shifts in institutionalising categories on Douyu, the power of the platform manifests as a “process of differentiation of genres” (Ibid, p.46).

On the one hand, there are different levels of agency in user creativity and repetitive practices among both viewers and performers. On the other, corresponding to user activities, there is also compliance, commercially driven promotion, algorithmic censorship, and human-operated regulations on the side of the platform and its benefactors, which operate on both a macro-organisational level and more oblique practices of micro-management (see Section 2.3.3 for an example).

Moreover, these processes are not just “dominated by repetition” but also “marked fundamentally by difference, variation, change” (Neal, 1995, p.165). This perspective helps highlight the incessant transgression of genres, formation of subgenres, and demise of certain genres (not simply on the level of individual channels but across platforms) due to declining popularity, censorship and other reasons. The cycle of gradual formation, consolidation, and transgression of genres not only culminates the creativity of ordinary


viewers and performers, but also “larger systems of cultural hierarchies and power relations” (Mittell, 2001, p.18) or a “structured contingency” in Thomas Elsaesser’s (2008, p.30) words on YouTube. Platform provides the structure, viewers and performers are the contingencies.

1.2.2 Douyu: Genres and Shifting Platform Identity

As I will unpack in detail in Chapter 2, the growth of Douyu as a platform—in terms of the number of active channels and viewers—is accompanied by not just technological improvements (such as adding new and streamlining old features on various hardware) but also the curative efforts of the platform to classify, rationalise, specialise, and regulate emergent contents into its directory of categories, which operates in a similar way to early televisual genres. It is through the creolising and coalescing of categories that the platform distinguishes its identity.

At its beginning in early 2014, Douyu initially positioned itself as a videogame-centric (specifically Esports games) livestreaming platform. There were no separate sections, or an overall division of sections designated for non-gaming contents. As the genres under the broad spectrum of “variety entertainment”—such as non-gaming talk shows, outdoor streams, eating streams, and various other emergent performative genres—became the major sources of revenue and internet traffic, the design of website and app infrastructure shifted drastically according to users’ needs to effectively navigate the site and the smartphone apps, as well as commercial drives to encourage certain profitable genres (e.g. a sponsored videogame).

Categories/genre on Douyu are often asymmetrical as some genres denote a certain activity (e.g. eating streams), others represent a particular mode of performance (e.g. singing), or a collection of non-PC gaming platforms (e.g. console games). It seems arbitrary, but the division of these categories makes sense within the framework of Douyu’s specific “structured contingency”.

In terms of viewer practice, viewers navigate and often form subordinate branches of fandoms within specific genres or categories. It is common knowledge among various
viewer groups that the general viewership on Douyu is heavily segregated. Viewers usually look for channels in a particular segment—an interrelated collective of categories or even a single category—of the livestream platform. Very few channels have universal appeal across the entire platform. Each popular category has its own celebrities, active and interactive between channels within the same category. In this aspect, Douyu is very different from Twitch. On Twitch, the category is often dynamic as the streamer switches games or activity during a single stream; the category thus changes in real time (even though many streamers are known for playing one specific game). In contrast, Douyu’s category is usually static as a streamer is located and develops within one category persistently over time and rarely migrates to another category.

1.2.3 The case of Fangyingting: Degrees of Liveness

While Douyu initially designated its role as a strictly live medium, in which the broadcaster should be verifiably at the scene (i.e. not away from keyboard) during the broadcast and replays are often not tolerated as a rule set (but not necessarily enforced) by the platform, channels on the platform gradually began to diverge into various degrees of liveness. Fangyingting (literally “screening room”) is a fitting example that demonstrates the aforementioned “structured contingency”, as this category represents the persisting popularity of “non-live” content despite official prohibition.

Fangyingting channels run cycles of marathon screenings of one popular television drama or a series of movies from one director or actor/actress, such as Stephen Chow’s vintage comedies, action movies featuring Jackie Chan, or the hugely popular television series Empresses in the Palace. These channels were very popular in the early phase of Douyu (from 2014 to 2015) but in 2016, they were largely removed during the copyright skirmishes launched by various publishers and producers of movies and dramas.

In the case of Fangyingting, liveness is not an absolute quality of livestreaming, since liveness is only in technical sense in relative to the broadcaster’s end; the content is a replay of old films or television shows—much like how television replayed old films as a major attraction. For a more concrete example, I have documented one livestream event on 28
December 2015 in which a fangyingting channel broadcast an episode of Bear Grylls’s Running Wild that featured Barack Obama as the guest. An intense political debate on the comparison between China’s political leaders and Obama erupted in the channel chatroom. There were some very misinformed and ad hominem debates on the openness of governance in China and US, interjected by raging nationalist trolls. The channel host was active and working hard in the chatroom banning commentators, as he or she tried to save the channel from being censored for attracting too much political controversy. In this case, the Running Wild episode itself was not live and the active debate and commentaries in the chatroom made the experience of watching it intensely live. Genres or categories play a crucial role in separating the different degrees, as Bourdon (2000) argues, of liveness in the variety of contents Douyu channels can offer.

It is impossible to reconcile the depth of scholarly discussion with the stupefying diversity of genres of performances emerged (and continuously emerging) on Douyu. The obvious alternative is to focus on one or two genres in particular—for instance, Esports event livestreams or social eating livestreams. However, instead of focusing on one or several genres, I want to encapsulate the performative qualities of the platform as a whole, and distribute the discussion of various genres into, first, the practical process of institutionalising genres on the platform of Douyu (Chapter 2), and, second, socio-technological and performative practices in the second half of the thesis—everydayness and claims of realism (Chapter 4), aesthetics and taste (Chapter 5), and plebeian politics and vulgarity (Chapter 6), which are all intricately interrelated in the process of genre formation as a cultural institution.

1.3 Live-Streaming-Video: From Technology to Medium

1.3.1 From Streaming to Livestreaming to Flow

This section will enquire into the technological differences between streaming and livestreaming and the remediation of technological metaphors from television to online videos. There is supposedly a historical opposition between pre-digital analogue television
and film-based cinema. Television’s exalted essential quality was its live transmission, ephemerality, and the inability to possess or retain (at least before the arrival of videotapes), while cinema was “for the duration of its photochemical history, emphatically not live” (Uricchio, 2009b, p.32).

There was a technical division between early cinema and early television because they employed different technologies, namely film and analogue signal. Streaming or “the display of media while they are still being received” was the taken-for-granted norm of analogue television “so much so that the word did not need to be coined” (Sandvig, 2015, p.298). Not being able to replicate/reproduce the “stream” was originally a technical limitation. Later on (but before the internet), there emerged multiple iterations of various media technologies, such as the VCR, that ordinary consumers could use to record and archive. In the following, I will go through the hydrographic metaphors from streaming to livestreaming and relationship between recorded and liveness in these iterations of media technologies.

Streaming

The relationship between live and recorded media has always been entangled. This ambivalently conflictual and mutually benefiting relationship is reconstructed between VoD and livestream videos. However, the major divergence from the comparison between analogue television and film-based cinema is that contemporary streaming VoD and livestreams are both under the rubrics of the “digital”, albeit under different protocols, codecs, server structures, and distribution methods. Before delving into the differences between streaming and livestreaming, digital streaming—viewing the file while it is still being downloaded (i.e. buffering)—was originally juxtaposed to viewing after downloading the entire file. As German media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst (2015) said during an interview,

technically, when you stream video, the frames are buffered for a micro-moment of time. This means you technically produce a copy, though only for a brief moment. It’s very ephemeral, it’s the most ephemeral archive or short time memory, but technically, it is still a copy.
This transience of data flow in the act of “streaming” is therefore not an ontological quality of data transmission that fundamentally distinguishes it from the opposing mode of technical reproduction (i.e. downloading a video before viewing) since there are also copies in streaming, just that they are not intended to be experienced as “copies”. The video that is being streamed (i.e. VoD) is the live transmission/reproduction of a static, pre-recorded file located on a server, which leaves a web or app cache, just not as a complete file.

Livestreaming

Livestreaming video is a further extension of streaming video since it is full liveness in the technical sense with no pre-recorded file. According to the Wikipedia entry on streaming media,

Live streaming is the delivery of Internet content in real-time, as events happen, much as live television broadcasts its contents over the airwaves via a television signal. Live internet streaming requires a form of source, an encoder to digitize the content, a media publisher, and a content delivery network to distribute and deliver the content. Live streaming does not need to be recorded at the origination point, although it frequently is (Streaming Media, 2018).

In the case of livestreaming, the media source is the captured image of a webcam, PC monitor, or secondary monitor footage (connected to a gaming console or camera, for example) transcoded by a capture device; the encoder can be a plethora of software such as Open Broadcast Software (OBS); the media publisher is often a livestreaming platform like Douyu; Content Delivery Networks (CDNs) are third party commercial entities that possess massive number of servers. For example, two of Douyu’s main CDN providers are Wangsu Science & Technology and Tencent’s cloud service (Zhang, 2016).

Reiterating my point in the first half of the chapter, the liveness of analogue television was originally a limitation. However, the perceived lack of archiving efforts or undesirability of watching an archived livestream video is not a technological limitation
but is due to socio-technological practices.\textsuperscript{11} Livestreams can be archived both on the origination point via encoder software such as OBS (the expenses are hard drive and CPU capacity) or the media publisher’s own server (the expenses are server space and maintenance costs). Douyu did not have its own stream archive at the beginning and only implemented the function of automatic archiving in November 2016, for partnered streamers. Prior to that, archiving on Douyu mainly relied on the good will of spontaneous archivists with a working program—either fetching the livestream directly from the server or recording their screen—and reuploading the stream record onto a third-party video portal such as Youku and Bilibili.\textsuperscript{12}

Flow

Given the inchoate relationship between streaming and livestreaming, it is critical to reconsider the technological metaphor of streaming from television to streaming media. I will start with the language around “channel” and “flow” in the television studies. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams (2003) is most famous for his argument on planned flow “as a technology and a cultural form” of television (p.86), which has become, quite similar to theories of liveness, central to the televisual theory. In Williams’ own words,

The replacement of a programme series of timed sequential units by a flow series of differently related units in which the timing, though real, is undeclared, and in which the real internal organization is something other than the declared organisation (Ibid, p.93).

In other words, the television industry hides certain operations from its audience and intends to structure the viewing experience, say, of a given evening, as a coherent whole: we usually say “we watch television” instead of “we watch news”. A television channel must “sustain that evening’s flow” (Ibid, p.94) and deter the viewers from

\textsuperscript{11} This is highly contextual since each platform has its own accustomed archiving practices afforded by specific technologies provided by the platform itself. For instance, Twitch’s unique of function “clipping”—creating a sharable short (30 seconds at max) video clip of the ongoing livestream—is afforded by its HTML5 video player.

\textsuperscript{12} I will discuss the software dimension of this livestream fetching in Chapter 3.
consciously selecting another channel or switching off the TV. “Flow” here operates not as a technological metaphor but rather how television programming is designed to capture audience attention: in Thibault’s (2013) words, “the flow of programming attempts to deter, at all costs, channel surfing” (p.3).

There are also valid criticisms of Williams’s concept. For instance, television scholar Jostein Gripsrud (1998) argues the metaphor of flow paints the audience as passive subjects with little agency. The danger of flow theory is “to be odds with both practices of production and the most widespread practices of reception” (Ibid, p.29). Gripsrud does not reject it completely however, but the experience of flow should be more “diversely composed” (Ibid, p.31) or customised (e.g. through VCR recording).

Moving onto the early narratives conceptualising the Web, David Berry (2011) identifies a critical difference between the traditional notion of “pages” when thinking about the internet and contemporary real-time “stream” of data: “informational retrieval” and “ecology of data streams” (p.143), an environment where various sources of data intersect and collide. Weltervred, Helmold, and Gerlitz (2014) also note that the idea of a “real-time Web”, or Berry’s “real time stream”, is “a successor of the less well-known ‘live web’ which sought to break with the ‘static web’ organized around webpages and links as initially imagined by Tim Berners-Lee” (p.126).

Tara McPherson (2006) updates Williams’ concept of “planned flow” in the context of the internet and argues that our motive of sticking to the “planned flow” is no longer “linear and contiguous” (p.204) like the experience of watching television but corresponds more to our desires such as navigability and sense of choice in the experience of web browsing. In McPherson (2006) ’s words, while “television’s much-heralded ‘flow’ worked to move viewers through segments of televisual time, orchestrating viewership,. . . Web programming could allow for an even more carefully orchestrated movement, all dressed up in feeling of choice” (p.206, emphasis my own)— “a volitional mobility” (p.200) so to speak.

This then leads us back to the question of remediation. The “feeling of choice”, or personal control of flow, as promised by internet, is certainly complicated by algorithms— “the paradigm shift is from user-controlled surfing to algorithm-controlled sorting”
(Andrejevic, 2009, p.35). Unlike cinema and television that are “built on the concept of singular objects . . . as programmed events, [that] require the reservation of specific time and schedule for viewing” (Treske, 2015, p.44), videos are on demand and therefore bounded by a “structured life” (p.45). “As a jukebox of emotions, feelings, and algorithmic relations as each video suggest others aside” (Ibid, p.44), YouTube viewing features its own kind of phenomenological experience of flow.

Livestreaming video disrupts the clear line between televisual flow and the experience of surfing the Web. Although livestreams are structured by schedules of individual channels, these channels can also be browsed through the platform’s catalogue/directory, categories, tags, and the customisable tab of followed channels—there is both linearity and navigability.

Apart from having a directory of channels sorted according to popularity, most livestreaming platforms still attempt to simulate this experience of sustaining the flow, so that the viewing experience does not end abruptly even after the livestream ends. On Twitch, a livestreamer can host another channel while their own channels are offline. On Douyu, when the current channel is offline the website will automatically redirect the viewer to another channel page in the same genre/category determined by its algorithm, which is informed by subcategories and tags. 13 Movements between livestreaming channels are orchestrated by, in the first case (Twitch), broadcasters themselves, or, in the second case (Douyu), algorithms devised by the platform.

The other issue is duration: what is the optimal duration for “a flow of undemanding pleasantness” (Bonner, 2003, p.38)? For her definitional “ordinary television”, one hour is the “smallest acceptable unit” (p.38). 14 For a Douyu livestream, the duration is highly flexible, but the usual minimal acceptable duration is two hours. Most full-time streamers have fairly regular schedules of when they will go live and there is often a public

13 For example, videogames (division) à H1Z1 (category) à Female casters playing H1Z1 (tag). The viewer is more likely to relocated to another channel under the same tag of the same category.
14 I will go back to the issue of duration from different perspectives later in the thesis. In Chapter 3, I will deal with the duration-related pain of watching livestreams in my own fieldwork. In Chapter 5, I will address the issue of duration through the lens of boredom and non-event.
announcement of their fixed weekly schedule on their social media accounts. For the popular streamers with tens of thousands of followers, viewers are most likely to join the livestream soon after receiving a notification sent through the mobile app or visiting the channel page according to the fixed regular schedule. However, part-time or sessional streamers mostly have very erratic schedules and it takes time—often a few hours—before non-regular viewers can discover or come in by chance so the channel chatroom starts to be populated and the conversation starts flowing.

**Hydrographic and Spatial Metaphors**

Online streaming, specifically YouTube and Netflix, remediates televisual forms, industry and practices to the degree that it “marks the grand return of broadcasting media in digital culture” (Thibault, 2015, p.111). Hydrographic metaphors thus play a vital role in remediating the televisual regime—a “metaphorical disguise” (p.246) in Ernst’s (2011) words. Television vocabulary such as channel is still in use on YouTube and Twitch and these lingos forms the basic unit of the larger discourses on livestreaming media.

However, there are some critical divergences. As I have emphasised earlier on YouTube’s role as an “accidental and disordered public archive” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p.88), YouTube is perhaps more like an “ocean”, as Treske (2015) uses the metaphor to describe the sheer number of videos on YouTube, and their atmospheric nature as a space-medium. To extend this metaphoric strategy, if the unruly database of YouTube is the bottomless ocean of videos, the endless pages of livestream channels of Douyu are the river of zhibo. Channels go online and offline, but the collective stream is kept flowing 24/7 with cyclic rhythms of flood (early evening peak hours) and drought (early morning down times) of incoming and returning viewers.

Here also lies the curious case of shuiyou or “water friend”, which is how Douyu viewers refer to themselves. Water is clearly a hydrographic metaphor. However, seen from my interviews, the “water” in “water friends” seems to have less to do with technological metaphors of streaming, more to do with the hydrographic metaphor of online sociality—a fleeting, temporary, untrustworthy, anonymous friendship.
However, for Canadian media scholar Ghislain Thibault (2013), the fluid analogies that persisted across generations of media from television to digital media today do not capture the specific operation of digital media and hide the technological details of the digital. Thibault (2013) writes,

Analogue television was a true flow, technologically speaking, because it involved transmitting signals of various lengths through the wavelike electromagnetic spectrum. . . In the case of digital television, the code of the data no longer bears an analogical relationship with its referent and its transport within the digital network is not necessarily contiguous (p.115).

The problem with Thibault’s critique is that ordinary users and viewers often do not necessarily mind the technical accuracy of the metaphors, they are more concerned with how these correspond to their scenarios of use and their imageries based on their practices. In van Loon’s (2009) words, “We habitualize technology” to a degree that we “‘take technology’ for granted in our ordinary everydayness which in turn makes it possible for us to get on with things” (p.114). The metaphors used on livestreaming platforms must be understood as not just technological but also experiential. We must recognise the specific experiences of flow afforded by the technology of livestreaming and at the same time, explicate the ethnographic nuances within the historical lineage of different metaphors.

Chinese analogies of “channel” have different origins in the media histories of Chinese television and online platforms, which are deeply rooted in the divergent media practices. On television, a channel is called pingdao, which literally means “frequency route”. This analogy is very similar to the hydrospheric metaphor of “conduit” in English since frequency refers to electric signal and route implies a cable or road like conductor. While the language of channel persists on video platforms like Twitch and YouTube, the same metaphoric strategy is rarely invoked on contemporary Chinese livestreaming sites. The word currently in use in Mainland China is fangjian or “room” and a livestreaming
channel is called a *zhibojian*, literally “direct casting room”. Its connection to newsroom is conspicuous so this language is still explicitly associated with television.\(^{15}\)

While acknowledging the remediated metaphors, the origin of this *spatial reference* in *fangjian* can be traced to early online sites such as online chatrooms and early forms of client-based audio/video chatrooms such as YY. Online chatroom is the literal translation of *wangluo liaotianshi*, which is similar to “live chat” in the US context (Michele White, 2003). In 2008, YY started as client-based guild chat program like TeamSpeak (except users cannot host their own servers on YY) and it gradually morphed into a platform of “room”-based communities of hobbies. Beyond its original design for MMO guild chat, some of these chat “rooms” hosted karaoke singing contests, in which the hosts and other participants could equally participate. These early subcultural forms of live chat established the now dominant internet spatial metaphors to the web infrastructure. YY’s room was not called a “livestream” or *zhibo* at the time. But aspects of sociality and intimate community, without the ubiquity of commercial activities, largely resemble today’s *zhibojian*.

1.3.2 The Medium of Online Video

There is no video theory in the way there is a body of knowledge called film theory, or rather differently, television studies. There never will be. (Cubitt, 1993, p.xvi)

Video goes beyond television and cinema, and thus we need a different set of conceptual tools to discuss it. (Treske, 2015, p.19)

Following the above discussion on the metaphors of *zhibo*, in this section I will explore livestreaming *video* as a medium. The main purpose of this section is to identify some of the necessary divergences from the existing bodies of literature on online videos, in

\(^{15}\) A television channel is called *dianshitai* and *tai* can refer to platform, station, or stage. On Taiwanese Twitch channels, a channel is referred to both “*pingdao*” and “*tai*”. In addition, a streamer is called *taizhu* (channel host) on Taiwanese Twitch, which is different from how streamers are called on Douyu. This language widely used on Taiwanese Twitch channels still derives from television, perhaps also due to the fact that Taiwan actively embraces a different translation strategy that is consistent with the original English metaphors.
preparation to critique the livestream video, not as subset of online videos, but something of its own with its own remediations of television and online video “platformism”. Lastly, my medium-specific theory of livestreaming video will centre on “event” as the basic unit of analysis.

The first generation of video theory came from Sean Cubitt’s *Videography* (1993) and Yvonne Spielmann’s *Video the Reflexive Medium* (2008), which relied on materiality of magnate and laser media (such as VHS videotapes) in the 1990s and their analysis of video art from that era. Videotapes were among the first iterations of digital storage centred around computational devices. In Cubitt’s narrative on video media, narratives of essentialism were carefully circumvented: “video media” exists in relation to other forms of media without depending entirely on any of them—the strategy is not “centring video as single, uniquely this or that, essentially something” (Cubitt, 1993, p.xv). Later Cubitt (2012) changed his position to a more medium-specific criticism: “each work needs to be analysed in its specificity, rather than ascribing universal qualities to its imaginary abstractions such as ‘digital media’” (p.37). Spielmann (2008) is also concerned with medium specificity and video’s “process of development from a technical novelty to the formation of medium-specific forms of expression” (p.2). She encourages the research on videos to,

reflect the basic technical conditions governing the apparatus aesthetically and, finally, culminate in the cultural connotation of a new medium, which can assert its singularity in setting itself apart from media (p.2).

In the form of electronic signal processing, video initially had a specific “open apparatus” of an audio-visual medium— “the predisposition of the electronic to processing and the interchangeability of its audio and video streams” (Ibid, p.69). This led to video’s specific aesthetic language in video arts from the 1960s onwards. As an analogue medium, video’s processing capacity and open-endedness was particularly akin to computation, and it was quickly adapted to digital technologies. As I have delineated the differences between streaming and livestreaming in the previous section, video seems to have collapsed into the various forms of online video and does possess different aesthetic qualities engendered by socio-technological practices as they now coalesce into video platforms today.
Filmmaker and media artist Andreas Treske (2013; 2015) comes from a new generation of video theorists who build around YouTube and Vine. In the rest of this section, I will outline three aspects of “video theory” extracted from Treske’s work to resituate in the context of livestreaming: (1) participation and the question of hot or cold medium; (2) verticality and the question of interface, and (3) clip and the question of unit of analysis.

Hot or/and Cold Medium

First, Marshall McLuhan (2002) used concepts of cool (low fidelity but high participation, such as television and telephone) and hot media (high fidelity but low participation, such as cinema). Following this binary structure, Treske (2015) writes,

> video on the web is embedded. . . in our environment. . . [and] we are already an active element of the completeness—it’s not just our active participation, it is we, together with the video that completes. Low information again means maximum participation (p.41).

Online videos are therefore a low fidelity medium. Also applying McLuhan’s (2002) theory, Hamilton, Garretson, and Kerne’s (2014) early work on Twitch postulates livestreaming “as hybrid form, conjoining game graphics (high fidelity), live webcam video (medium fidelity), and chat (low fidelity)” (p.4).

In Chinese, the equivalent of livestreaming is zhibo, which means “direct/straight cast”. In Japanese, the word for livestreaming is namahōsō, which means “raw cast”; as discussed in the introduction, this term was also adopted very early by the first iteration of Douyu—Acfun Namahōsō. The opposite of direct is indirect or mediated and the opposite of raw is cooked or processed, which is a culinary metaphor. Raw is cool, and cooked is hot.

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16 “Live” is also “direct” in French and according to Bourdon (2000), “En direct de (live from) . . . ‘from’ actually referred to a variety of hard-to-search or strange locations. . . here television wanted to exhibit its technical capacity” (p.532).
While not casting aside these metaphors because they are useful for our sociotechnological understanding of media, I suggest invoking these metaphors according to various situations on livestreaming platforms instead of holistically referring to livestreaming video as a cool media because participation is not always at maximum. For instance, the chat messages of a popular channel can be flowing so fast that it is impossible to keep up. A single message in the chatroom is almost insignificant in the torrents of danmu comments and effective dialogic communication is very scant while the comments collectively contribute to the affective and visual construction of the moment (discussed in detail in Section 2.3.4, Chapter 2).

The effective alternative devised by Douyu, as both an interface design and a way of monetisation, is to highlight donors’ messages—the paying patron’s messages will be highlighted in different colours and their donations come with an embellished badge and animation such as a rocket soaring across the video window. In this case, the promise of participation is filtered by the attention economy: a single comment is most likely to be buried in the flow of hundreds of other messages sent around the same instant, even though Douyu’s interface does highlight your own sent message, by bracketing it, among the barrage of flowing messages. Participation is maximalised in the sense everyone can, and is participating, but it is not ideal as the communicative feedback is very weak.

As information overload aestheticises comment culture (as I will return to this point in Section 2.3.4 on the interface of danmu), the point is not the effective communication of reading every comment attentively but enjoying them collectively in one glance. In another case of a channel with small number of viewers, conversations are a lot more intelligible. This is when my comment to the broadcaster will be noticed and responded—hence the opportunity of a dialogue.

17 On Douyu, all the donation messages are presented by the platform’s built-in design for the web and mobile app, while on Twitch donation messages are presented through software plug-ins designed by third-party and implemented on the software-end from the broadcaster instead of the platform itself.
Second, the mobile screen popularises the vertical interface. As Treske (2015) argues,

> The advent of video-enabled smartphones violates cinematic conventions through their acceptance of verticality—it’s natural to hold a smartphone vertically instead of horizontally... this links online video aesthetics very closely to mobile devices and breaks with embedded cinematic conditions (p.23).

This point on verticality does not only have practical implications as many online videos are shot vertically then forcibly placed into the horizontal cinematic frame. YouTube’s mobile app rectified this issue in 2017 by making the frame ratio of video adaptive according to the format of the original file. Treske (2015) also presents another example in which a celebrity’s appearance in a vertical video was interpreted as a sign of authenticity as opposed to the contrived-ness of the horizontal cinematic music video.

The verticality of livestreaming video has a very complex role on livestreaming platforms. First, since 2015 most major Chinese livestreaming platforms support mobile streams, Douyu support both vertical and horizontal video. Many Chinese broadcasters stream from smartphones and stabilise the smartphone horizontally with a selfie stick, which became the most distinguishable and recognisable feature of a streamer working outdoors. Second, there were many mobile exclusive livestreaming platforms during the peak of the industry’s growth in 2016. These mobile streams can be only viewed vertically on mobile apps. These mobile exclusive livestreaming platforms were often ephemeral organisations that hired “showgirls”—a Chinese term similar to camgirl—instead of making their platform open to everyone.

On Douyu, these vertical mobile livestreams suffered a series of controversies in their early implementation before the eventual recognition of a specifically gendered genre. Douyu has a whole category or genres of showgirl content dedicated to vertical livestreaming from Douyu’s mobile app (see Section 2.3.1 in Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion). This exclusively vertical interface is in direct contrast to the rest of the Douyu channels in other categories, which are broadcast in the normal horizontal frame ratio. In addition, these vertical livestreams display locations of livestreamers, which, according to an anonymous informant, helps location-based dating and sex trade. On Douyu, vertical video has gradually become an integral part of a gendered genre.
Finally, in Treske’s (2015) formulation, analysis of video is centred around editing and the basic unit of analysis is “the material”—a clip. Treske writes,

Video has always been assembled... as online video, it is assembled in new contexts, levels, affordances... thinking about editing means engaging with a structural analysis of online video culture (Ibid, p.22).

This theoretical direction is certainly fitting for the majority of videos produced by full-time YouTubers since they have gradually developed their distinct styles of editing that became a recognisable performativity of YouTube. Clips are central units in order to understand and address YouTube, Vine, and editing-centric online videos in general. For example, Richard’s (2008) YouTube research develops a methodology around the clip—from tags, search modalities, to clip materials—which are categorised and analysed in case studies: “ego clips”, “fan clips”, “docuclip”, “experimental clips” (p.146) and so forth.

It is undeniable that clips are still integral parts of the ecology of livestreaming. On Twitch, viewers can “clip” a segment of an ongoing livestream for sharing and archiving as audio-visual evidence of a memorable event. Stream highlights are short videos of a much longer livestream session—an aggregation of edited and assembled “clips”. In this sense, clips are snippets of a past livestream. Referring to Friedrich Kittler’s (2017) notion of the storing of time in space (i.e. the spatial medium of video), a clip is a relic of the past, while livestreams are supposedly embodiments of the receding “now”. To use Treske’s (2015) more poetic language, a clip of a livestream is a “reflection of a past inscription, something, that has been” that condenses time while a livestreaming event is “looking at something that is” (p.123).

Clips are how events take the form of (digital) objects in the aftermath for either viewers who miss the livestream or fans who want to review the event for various reasons. Also as records of the livestream, screenshots arguably are even more pixelated and de-contextualised but more shareable (i.e. more possibilities of appropriation). As a research practice, I collected thousands of screenshots of livestreams as evidence of livestream...
events. In the following section, I will delineate the theoretical importance of events for a theory of livestreaming video, before delving into the practical side of producing an event-based ethnography in Chapter 3.

1.4 Event as the Basic Unit of Livestream Video

The basic unit of a livestream video, instead of its reproduction in “clips”, should be event. In this thesis, event plays a connective role in both theory and practice. The aim of this section is to map the new territory of how to conceptualise event on contemporary livestreaming platforms, beyond the traditional paradigm of media events in television studies. To impose limits on my literature review, I shall clarify that I will only address relevant perspectives on events from media theory, not philosophical nor historiographical discussions on event. In the following sections, I will first review various theoretical strands on media events and then postulate my theory of livestreaming event.

1.4.1 Media Rituals and Disruptive Media Events

Media event has been a key concern in television studies and internet studies. In Dayan and Katz’s (1992) landmark work, a media event is defined as an “real” event at the “centre” of society being broadcast live, which cannot be “preplanned” but are an “interruption to the normal flow of broadcasting”. The role of successful media events is to integrate society and restore order. In contrast to profane daily routines of television, good media events are supposed to be extraordinary, “sacred” events that disrupt the ordinariness/profanity of media and bring people together in a positive light. In Durkheim’s anthropological theory, “the profane is imagined as a world of difference and diversity as against a world where difference is finally transcended and unity prevails” (Hobart, 2005, p.6). The media events proper are therefore the ceremonial centre and ritualistic “halo over the television set” (Dayan, 2009, p.24).

Nick Couldry (2003) was critical of Dayan and Katz (1992) for their neo-Durkheimian reading—i.e. to find a positive “hegemonic” effect of media events.
According to Couldry (2003), they miss ample opportunities of analysing the ideological function of media events and “possibilities of social interaction that is truly ‘liminal’ and disruptive” (p.70). Pawlett (2017) pushes this criticism further, arguing that the “so-called disruptive media event (e.g. disaster) is also integrative, seeking to create a consensus position on the state of the world” (p.5) while for Couldry (2003) disaster coverage does not integrate society.18

This idea of disrupting the normal flow of television is also linked to the performative dimension of liveness as I alluded to earlier in the chapter. When the normal broadcast is disrupted, *liveness proper* reveals itself: “live broadcast would be then condition of possibility of disrupting an otherwise imperturbably streaming flow” (Ernst, 2013, p.105). The seduction of liveness is exactly the dysfunction of this flow. This is perhaps why so much academic attention goes to major media events because they are the “rare” occurrences of being “fully live” and the sense of risk is high. The most memorable live event is exactly the unexpected disruption of the televisual flow.

This preoccupation with catastrophe in conjunction with liveness as the central televisual anchor is not without its discontents. As Doane (1990) writes, “television catastrophe is thus characterized by everything it is said not to be—it is expected, predictable, its presence crucial to television’s operation” (p.238). Indeed, “catastrophe and liveness are thus posited as an ideal pair” (Mimi White, 2003, p.76).

The problem is, however, these two definitions (ceremonial and catastrophic), or rather, genres of media event, are clearly not applicable to most events taking place on livestreaming video today. Livestream operates less like meticulously planned national television with interjections of global or local media events, and more like unplanned, routinised, often daily, broadcasts of a person largely repeating the same activities (albeit with slight differences every day)—all without palpable connotations for the society at large. Most livestream broadcasters are not concerned with reinforcing nor disrupting the establishment. This resistance towards meaning, perhaps in the positivist Durkheimian

18 Pawlett (2017) argues that Couldry’s (2003) critique of Dayan and Katz is in fact worse than the original book because it reduces the “sacred to the binary opposition with the sacred” while “sacred and profane are not binary oppositions in Durkheim’s work, they are mutually reinforcing” (p.5).
reading, is one of core reasons why zhibo is deemed a nihilistic “bad” influence by official media in China (discussed again in Chapters 5 and 6). But zhibo’s perceived lack of meaning also protects it from censorship because it is certainly not an immediate threat. A theoretical mediation on the mundane livestream events is clearly needed: duration and rhythm, uneventfulness and eventfulness, spontaneity and script-ness, distracted waiting and delirium of participation.

1.4.2 Non-event

To begin with, the original formulation of media events, no matter whether they bring sacred exaltation or moments of societal distress, was always drawn to the spectacle, be it a royal wedding, 9/11, or the Beijing Olympic. These spectacles are directly posed against the ordinary or the unqualified non-event (e.g. the genre of news for Katz and Dayan). In an update on their notion of media event, Dayan (2009) writes,

> News and media are no longer starkly differentiated entities but exist rather on a continuum. This banalization of the format leads to the emergence of an intermediate zone characterized by the proliferation of what I would call ‘almost’ media event (p.27).

These “almost media events” are still a half-way compromise to the original media event by acknowledging the stark contrast between profane new events and sacred media events. Banalization of the format of “sacred” media events into news has turned news into rituals. The argument is correct concerning news reports of disasters and so forth, but it is still far from satisfactory for the genre of media event I seek to define, which is beyond the contrast between the banal news reports and the spectacle of catastrophe and coronation.

William Pawlett (2017) provokes, “perhaps all events from the ‘world-historic’ to the micro-level of images of holidays, food and faces are to be considered ‘media events’ (or perhaps ‘non-events’)” (p.6). Also contemplating the banalisation of media events, Jean Baudrillard (2005) defines the non-event,

> The non-event is not when nothing happens. It is, rather, the realm of perpetual change, of a ceaseless updating, of an incessant succession in real time, which
produces this general equivalence, this indifference, this banality that characterizes the zero degree of the event (p.122).

Baudrillard (2005) is highlighting the perceptual indifference (perhaps as a coping mechanism) towards the information overload of incessant updating in real time in 24/7 news coverage. Baudrillard (2005) then urges us to savage the original living event: “pass through the news coverage... to find... ‘living coin’ of the event... [and] make a literal analysis of it, against the machinery of commentary and stage-management that merely neutralize it” (p.133).

A precursor to Baudrillard’s non-event is Daniel J. Boorstin’s (1992) “pseudo-events”—“planned, planted, or incited... for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced” (p.11). Similarly, the pseudo-event eclipses ordinary reality. In contrast to Katz and Dayan’s “good” events, media events are thus “bad” because they are, to put it reductively, staged performances and the sheer excess of reality simply blinds us from seeing the “real” event, which is similar to Baudrillard’s point. The real imploded into the artifice of representation. In the words of Kember and Zylinska (2012), Baudrillard’s nihilist “black hole obliterates event” (Ibid, p.69).

Baudrillard’s position is certainly closer to the contemporary situation, but it is still not satisfactory because it presupposes the “living coin” being buried by the representation of the event. Since the much-denigrated intermediaries of industry, producers and editors of reality TV are often removed from the production process, livestreams could be arguably the “living coin”—more “authentic” just as Jennifer Ringley proclaimed, no longer just in the forms of elevated sensations of ceremony or catastrophe. The desire and prophecy of immediacy is thus self-fulfilling: we get the “authentic” event as we wanted it, but some of us are terrified at the sight of banality. The livestream event, when observed from a distance, is literally “nothing happens”. The unfolding of events on livestream is resolutely banal. There is a certain fatalistic inertia in this bird’s-eye view, which is exactly the kind of indifference which Baudrillard characterises. However, closer ethnographic attention to how livestream events are remembered will demonstrate indifference is not necessarily the default viewing mentality.
1.4.3 Events and Memories

The event is what marked, what stands out in, (flow of) time.
(van Loon, 2009, p.111)

Event forms the basic unit of memories of the full stretch of a livestream. Watching the livestream live is the primary way viewers experience livestreams—immediacy and co-presence (as I discussed earlier in the chapter)—and how they remember it. After following the same channels for long periods of time, viewers have produced many folkloric accounts of livestream events they eye-witnessed. These stories are documented in their screenshots and online discussions, be it chronologically or diachronically. The original surge of events shakes up the ordinary flow of livestreams, and then the recounts of events spawn more socialities from remembering and discussing them.

Just as I retold the story of Chuange in the introduction, certain dramatised events are often recorded, reuploaded, shared across various social media networks, retold by fans on forums and blogs, and eventually become the yardsticks according to which fans give their favourite online personality their final verdict: Chuange being the “ungrateful bastard” he was to his former fiancé or the uninhibited authentic character he was to his fans.

For another example, Axiedaren (2018)—an ardent fan and a cynical detractor of Douyu streamer Ligan—wrote an elegiac essay chronicling the stories behind every key event of Ligan’s Douyu channel from its beginning and its eventual demise, and periodising these events to stages of Ligan’s microhistory as a livestreamer.¹⁹ Axiedaren wrote about Ligan’s transition from a humble traffic police officer and a part-time streamer, to a professional streamer in charge of a stream studio with several staff. The whole process was remembered via multiple extraordinary events—turning points in his microhistory. His beginning was remembered as a clumsy and light-hearted “one of us” and his process of

¹⁹ Ligan (his real name as he disclosed himself), also known as Dianjin Liboqin (Esports Liboqin), also known as Chouxiang studio, is among the pioneers of livestreaming on Douyu. I will return to this personality multiple times in the following chapters.
growing popularity on Douyu made him less and less appealing to his early followers such as Axiedaren. Ligan’s personality, according to this essay, had gradually changed from “performatively arrogant” to “actually arrogant” as his channel grew. To a degree, many of his viewers anticipated his channel’s eventual downfall.

Malkki (1997) outlines the concept of “accidental communities of memory” (as opposed to a local or national memory): “a less explicit, and often more biographical, microhistorical, unevenly emerging sense of accidental sharings of memory” (p.91). This concept is very appropriate for the sort of provisional or fleeting “communities” around the livestreamer—“water friends” in Douyu’s own colloquial term. Except for the smaller inner circles of ardent fans and active contributors (in terms of donations), the majority of livestream viewers do not constitute a stable or durable group even if they are regulars in the activity of watching a particular channel. What they remember about the particular livestreamers are often very personal, fragmented, and rarely properly recorded (let alone systemically archived). However, these fragile memories of events are often retold as microhistories and memes that periodise the development of the livestreamer, the genre or category that the livestreamer represents, and the livestreaming platform in general: “These memories—even when not very much narrativized—can powerfully shape what comes after” (Malkki, 1997, p.92).

Here enters the ethnographer. The fleeting events on livestreams seem significant and can be easily ignored by the researcher if or he or she solely focuses on the grand structures (which I do acknowledge) but the more important task is revealing livestream’s operations of power. The ethnographic text should not be a “depository of facts but a mediator. . . [and] a phase in a series of events” (Fabian, 2008, p.7). In my own two years of regular observations of livestreams, I have witnessed many events. First, this witnessing should not be trivialised. My sustained efforts of watching zhibo for two years (2015–2017), as opposed to ethnographic description, is the experiential foundation of this event-based ethnography (see Chapter 3). Second, this witnessing is not an isolated event: others were co-present witnesses. These viewers also produce narratives or “testimonials” (Malkki, 1997, p.94) on the event that are their own version of fieldnotes, albeit our wills to knowledge are motivated by different things. I produce my own interpretations of the same
witnessed events in relation to and in conversation with these other accounts by fans and participants.

1.4.4 Performative Events: Eventfulness as a Resource

As I hinted at earlier with two brief examples, ethnography shows that people remember certain events while they forget others. While everything seems trivial and prosaic on the scale of philosophical revelation that sees event as heightened interruption of the unreflexivity of everyday life, certain events do stand out—even after years—in some informants’ memories. They retold the stories with irresistible excitement, such as Chuange’s fallout with his fiancé as a key moment that defined the characterisation of his channel. The long duration of livestreams also creates different rhythmic modes of viewing across different (but often connected) channels, sometimes even between genres within the platform.

At this theoretical juncture, I would like to break the narrative of event into two parts—audiences and performers—that both consider a performative “event-in-mediation” (van Loon, 2009, p.109). Just like how I have treated the issue of immediacy and mediation in the first half of the chapter, it is important to ask question how event performs, rather than whether it is good or bad (another ontological judgement).

In the first instance, learning from Kaplan and Kupper (2017) and Ytreberg’s (2009) work on audience participation in reality TV shows like Big Brother, it is possible to study “how mechanisms of public intimacy mediate between the centralized, monological infrastructure of media events and the decentralized, dialogical structure of interpersonal networks” (Kaplan & Kupper, 2017, p.774). Viewers can form companionship or a “public intimacy” around their “media figure” (Ibid, p.761). For example, Ytreberg (2009) writes about how SMS return channel plays a role in instituting participation on a “live” media event. Their work on SMS and internet forums serve as auxiliary platforms for interactivity,
which is still fairly limited by technological delays and editorial selection. The comment culture of a livestream channel’s chatroom is perhaps another dimension.  

Moving back to the performers, the above works inspired me to reconsider eventfulness as a resourceful performativity—performers often need to cultivate eventfulness (e.g. social dramas). The livestreaming event is not planned in the sense of traditional television programmes but there is certainly an intentionality in the act of “creating an event almost forcibly”, in the words of Douyu streamer Ligan. Spontaneity, just as immediacy, is a slippery concept that lands the argument in the good or bad question. As Kember and Zylinska (2012) write, “mediation does not posit a reciprocal end game... but rather a productive relationality that is not an end point in history, but part of its creative evolution” (p.65). With hindsight, the productive intellectual approach is not to dictate whether such events are staged or not but to ethnographically understand the colloquial approach, which encapsulates the productiveness in cultivating the performativity of an event (see Chapter 4 and 5 for examples).

Event will continue to be a recurring theme throughout in the thesis in my eventlogs and exhibits. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the conceptualisation of events in my ethnographic practice—in both methods and formats of writing. Eventlog is a recurrent format in which I contextualise the events and weave them into the theoretical threads in the second half of this thesis. In Chapter 4, I will give examples of how streamers cultivate ordinary events and pace the rhythms of livestream events. In Chapter 5, I will return to the notion of non-event through the lens of boredom and waiting. In Chapter 6, I will give an example of a steamer provoking the State censors in the aftermath of a catastrophic event.

1.5 Conclusion

20 In Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.4) and Chapter 5 (Section 5.3.2), I will discuss how viewers effectively become the event in the form of danmu comment culture.
This chapter reviewed a broad range of literature from television studies to video theories for the building blocks towards to a theory of livestreaming video. It does not aim at giving a definition of what livestreaming video is but a preliminary navigation of the emerging field, which prepares for later discussions on ethnographic methods and theories. The basis of this theory draws on both the movements of remediation, especially in the aura of liveness from theatre to television to online videos, and the technical specificity of internet liveness and streaming. My theory of livestreaming video is thus located somewhere between the classic metaphoric devices of television studies—liveness and flow—and the latest theoretical strands on online video. This theory does not deny the genealogy of the televisual, which continues to serve a fundamental role in my participants’ narratives of why livestreaming media is “superior” to television due to its realisation of liveness’s misleading promises of the past, nor does it fetish the digital specificity of online videos, which is primarily concerned with Video on Demand in the current literature.

This theory of livestreaming video accentuates the performative approaches to the genres and events of livestreaming video. While not denying its continuing significance, my critique of liveness decentres the concept from the intellectual debate on ideology or ontology; instead, my approach focuses on the performative dimensions of livestreaming video (e.g. degrees of liveness) as opposed to treating liveness as a definitional importance. This also foregrounds Chapter 2’s discussion on Douyu’s platform practices of creating categories. Moreover, an updated theory of media events, especially outside the preoccupation with rituals and catastrophes, is indispensable for the theory of livestreaming video. Event, instead of video clips, should be treated as the basic unit for ethnographic analysis as it is also the basis of how viewers construct the historical narratives on their favorite channel. Paying special attention to the ordinary (non)events of daily life and the performative dimensions of cultivating eventfulness are key to ethnographic research on livestreaming platforms such as Douyu.
2 The Zhibo Platform

The History of Online Video in China and Plformativity of Douyu

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a historical and platform-specific narrative of Douyu’s initial emergence from the history of online video platforms in China, and subsequent reiterations of infrastructure from its directory of categories, attention economy, administration, to its interface. The new buzzword of the Chinese internet industries from 2016 to 2018 was platformisation—WeChat as the platformisation of daily chores, music streaming service like Xiami as the platformisation of music sharing, and zhibo as the platformisation of video livestreaming. The term “platform” can refer to a great many things even within the discussion of digital media, especially it already threatens to “displace the world ‘media’ itself as a catch-all content-holding or content-supporting entity” (Steinberg & Li, 2017, p.175). The internet, as we knew it, seems to recede (if not vanish) from the spotlight. If the internet is platformised, scholarship has to offer a response.

Nick Monfort and Ian Bogost’s (2009) work Racing the Beam was the first book in the platform studies series. It primarily focuses on investigating how a computing platform works. The book encouraged a wave of medium-specific research in digital media studies, as opposed to adopting the broad category of digital media. While I touched on the socio-technical specificity of livestreaming video in the last chapter, the central concern of this thesis is not hardware nor software and my methods are entirely different—not that platform studies dictate its own methodology in the first place. As Apperley and Parikka (2018) comment on the book, “Monfort and Bogost primarily performed platform studies rather than explicate its method” (p.350, emphasis in original). What Apperley and Parikka are proposing, instead, is that platforms can be “techniques that sustain interactions as well as offer an epistemological framework” (Ibid, p.353) to reflect on our knowledge media beyond the binaries of old and new media.
As far as the goal of this thesis is concerned—i.e. to examine one platform— it can be argued that I am doing platform studies since I study only one platform, albeit with other platforms such as Bilibili and Kuaishou as auxiliary examples. However, the first step is to delimit my epistemic ambition. I engage with technology insofar as ethnographic methods and performative practices occupy the central place in “evoking embodied memories and experience of users” (Apperley & Parikka, 2018, p.354)— in my case, performers, viewers, administrators, and the fieldworker myself on the platform Douyu. In this project, Douyu is not considered as an object in itself, nor a computing platform, but a reticulation of power relations, (digital) objects/interfaces, performative practices, and most crucially natives’ own interpretations of their practices. In stating my research purpose, I am not refuting the importance of the studies on computation and codes and I am merely claiming my focus on my angle of ethnographically studying socio-technological formation of a platform.

This is where this project is aligned with the research politics proposed by Langlois and Elmer (2013): I still start with “what is being said” (p.2) or in my case also what is being performed while emphasising “how it is being processed and rendered” (p.2). In this chapter the socio-technological institution of Douyu serves as the background knowledge. Referring back to the earlier discussion on the television versus internet narrative, Langlois and Elmer (2013) remind us, “there is no outside to human participatory communication that would be distinct from the corporate logics of social media: the platform itself is what melds these two aspects together” (p.8). The role of this chapter thus is to prepare this background knowledge on the various powers of the platform as the subtext of the discussions on what the platform of zhibo means for my informants.

Dutch media scholar José van Dijck (2013) deploys a double approach of actor network theory and political economy to study social media platforms: first, “platforms, in this of view [of actor-network theory], would not be considered artefacts but rather a set of relations that constantly need to be performed; actors of all kinds attribute meanings to platforms” (Ibid, p.26, emphasis in original); second, considering economic and legal (infra)structures, platforms are regarded as “manifestations of power relationships between institutional producers and individual consumers” (Ibid, p.27). Even though this thesis does not employ either of these approaches, van Dijck’s way of elucidating platform is very
helpful: “platforms as techno-cultural constructs and organized socioeconomic structures (i.e. microsystem). . . [and an] ecosystem of inter-operating platforms” (Ibid, p.25).

There are two concrete implications for this thesis to be extracted from van Dijck’s double approach. The first implication is for the study of the structure or the microsystems of a platform. As I will expand later in this chapter, Douyu should be regarded as a contested territory where the platform tries to create a consistent imagery of itself through its censorship machinery, institution of genres, and the attention economy in the midst of surging performative creativity.

The second implication is on the keyword “ecosystem”, which must be situated in the Chinese context. Matthew Fuller’s (2005) critique of ecosystem is very relevant at this juncture. Ecosystem or ecology is “spiritually troubled technological determinism” when it is used to describe a sense of “environmentalism”. Fuller writes,

‘Environmentalism’ possesses a sustaining vision of the human and wants to the make the world safe for it. Such environmentalism also often suggests that there has passed, or that there will be reached, a state of equilibrium: that there is resilient and harmonic balance to be achieved with some ingenious and beneficent mix of media (Ibid, p.4).

This critique coincides with how the term ecology or ecosystem is invoked in China. The Chinese term shengtai or ecology increasingly replaces other terms such as social environment, social circles, or man-to-technology relationships. For example, the popular neologism yuanshengtai or “original ecology” refers to a primitive lifestyle unmediated by technology. The problem is not so much the abuse of the term, but the embedded politics in these evocations of ecosystems, which conveys the political mainstream’s (e.g. the State) desire for a “harmonious society” (hexieshehui) or “a state of equilibrium” (Ibid, p.4) in Fuller’s words, no matter how artificial or idealistic these claims are in reality. There is an intrinsic conservatism in the Chinese rendition of shengtai or ecology as it conforms to the technological power and the logic of “play it safe”. And this is where politics of platforms comes into play.
Platform or *pingtai* in Chinese, similar to its French origin *plateforme*, literally means a flat stage or surface. As Gillespie (2010) writes, “the idea of the ‘platform’ . . . fits neatly with egalitarian and populist appeal to ordinary users, and grassroots creativity, offering all of us a ‘raised, level surface’” (p.358). Platforms thus signify a degree of egalitarian values, just as Douyu labelled itself as a “livestreaming platform for *everyone*” (emphasis my own) in its official tagline (see Section 2.3.1 for a detailed discussion). The company does not shun the fact that the distributed creativity of user generated content has been the core substance for its algorithmic machinery to attract investment and generate profits. Douyu gradually fostered its image of being friendly and supportive to their livestreaming personalities in terms of both sharing profits and improving its infrastructure. However, this egalitarian image has been deliberately apoliticised so that the operations of power can remain oblique.

Joss Hands (2013) originally coined the term “platformativity” to discuss the political questions on “the potential for harnessing platforms against constituted power in all its forms” (p.2). However, the term was still underdefined in the early iterations of platform studies that Hands was part of, which primarily focused on the politics of technical facets such as computation, digital objects, and software. Following van Dijk (2012), Li (2017) writes,

Platform is not simply a technical facility that demands technical studies; instead, it constitutes complex performances, meanings, and knowledge of social acts that raise questions on specific social, cultural and geopolitical contexts (p.234).

Platformativity is thus framed as a *logic*, according to which platforms “codify social activities” (p.234). In the same journal issue on regional platforms in East Asia, Thomas LaMarre (2017) provides a more concrete definition. Platformativity is defined as “a performativity via platforms. . . [that is,] the infra-individual intra-actions between platform and human, and individual and a collective” (p.24). As LaMarre (2017) further explains, “in platformativity, the platforms and infrastructures play an active role, or more precisely, an intra-active role, as they iterate, over and again” (p.25). This definition recapitulates the earlier discussions in highlighting the goal of this chapter: elucidating
Douyu’s active role in making categories and building an economy, and administering via both algorithms and manual labour.

Moreover, pushing Li’s (2017) call to pose the questions on the specificity of each platform in their contexts further, LaMarre’s (2017) version of platformativity is more fitting for this project because it attempts to “address these different registers or dimensions of media without resorting to methodological individualism vis-à-vis nations or cultures” (p.24). This leads us to the next step of delimiting the platform: its designated area. The value of platformativity lies in its acknowledgement of a performative morphology of platforms—how they iterate themselves over time as they are situated in broader contexts of both international or regional influences and local users. Although not unprecedented, Douyu as an inchoate phenomenon should not be solely studied in an enclosed space—i.e. the Chinese internet.

In this chapter, I will start with a history of online videos in China that identifies the various localising practices in the “fragmentary networks” of platforms in different countries, cultures, and even temporalities. As a microhistory of Douyu will demonstrate, the development of online participative video livestreaming media in China is emergent, volatile, and heavily influenced by various interconnected global, regional, and local actors rather than fixed as an enclosed geographical area of “Chinese characteristics”. Second, I will delve into the socio-technological formation of a platform through four aspects: categories, economy, administration, and interface.


Given the limited written accounts of media histories and screen ecologies on the streaming video platforms and video cultures in China, the first task is, before detailing the platformative features of Douyu, to provide a succinct summary of the historical and socioeconomic contexts of Douyu’s initial emergence among other video streaming sites in China.
In the following sections, I will divide the history of online videos in China from 2005 to 2017 into three phases—each with their notable infrastructure, platforms, and platformativity. The first period of early video portals is identified by heterogeneous databases, artistic short films, and amateur spoof videos. The second period of subcultural video portals is best represented by remix videos, memes, and complex editing techniques. The current ongoing period of livestreaming platforms is identified by professionalisation and banal celebrification. Please note, the three phases are not mutually exclusive as most of these platforms did not replace one another but, rather, co-existed. The emergence of new platforms in each phase represents significant moments in the history of Chinese video culture.

2.2.1 Phase I Video Database and Small Cinema (2005–2010)

Infrastructure: cell phones, Bluetooth sharing, internet cafes; Platforms: Youku, Tudou, 56.com, piracy, basic editing software; Platformativity: E’gao satire, amateur spoof videos, politically provocative, anti-monetization.

While this brief historical overview only focuses on streaming video websites, pirating media via client-based downloading or torrenting peer-to-peer networks such as BitTorrent and eMule used to be the dominant method of media consumption online, including films, television shows and videogames.¹ In the early 2000s, the software Xunlei played a key role in centralising the peer-to-peer structure of early internet file-sharing by leeching files onto its own servers and then seducing users to pay subscription fees with the benefits of greatly “accelerating” download speed (i.e. by downloading directly from their own server). As Xunlei became ubiquitous, this process of user leeching and obliviously uploading to

¹ It should be also added that the circulation of early viral digital videos up until 2007 was not entirely driven by online downloading due to limited internet access. There was a plethora of sharing practices such as loading music and video files onto “MP4” portable video players from internet cafés’ local storages, and Bluetooth sharing among portable devices, especially among school students with their first generation of smartphones (Voci, 2010).
Xunlei’s servers gradually eliminated the peer-to-peer structure of file sharing and paved way for the centralised structure of streaming services that emerged from 2005 onwards.

The well-known pioneering Chinese video-sharing portals Youku and Tudou—both founded in 2005 and merged in 2012—were commonly considered to be general databases of mostly user-generated content during their early years. These portals included both pirated or appropriated contents such as fan-subbed anime shows and movies, and more original contents of remixing videos, e’gao (spooning) or parody videos, DV cultures, short films, documentaries of mundane everyday life, and so forth (Li, 2016; Voci, 2010, 2013). These platforms later morphed into a convergence of proprietary traditional media content such as entertainment shows, many of which were directly produced or sponsored by Youku-Tudou, and a huge array of user-generated content, monetised by advertising revenue while not very financially rewarding for the original creators.²

However, local video cultures in China did emerge and grew exponentially during the formative years of Youku-Tudou, at the intersection of emergent broadband internet access, peer-to-peer sharing software, and video-sharing websites. Nina Luzhou Li (2016) provides a refreshing account of the origin of e’gao by looking at the political economy of video spoof production and linking it to older media such as pre-internet pirate VCDs. Hu Ge, creator of the infamous video A murder caused by a steamed bun—a spoofed remix of Chen Kaige’s movie The Promise (2005)—reflected on the important influence that pre-internet pirating practices had on his participation in the new-born scene of e’gao video-makers (Li, 2016). The work of Paola Voci (2010) also records many examples of e’gao videos that were widely circulated around 2006, turning unsuspecting creators like the “Back Dorm Boys” duo into overnight celebrities on a national scale.

Voci (2010) makes a critical point about this early internet fame: the circulation of popular amateur videos primarily relied on early internet infrastructure such as internet

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² According to the same report (Horwitz, 2015), “a report from iResearch shows user-generated content generated at best half as many unique views (registration required) as professionally produced content”. It demonstrates that Youku-Tudou, like its late competitor iQiyi, gradually became probably more comparable to Netflix after it predominantly relied on acquiring exclusive releases of TV shows and movies to generate traffic and advertising revenue.
cafés, cell phone Bluetooth transmissions between co-present users, and peer-to-peer online sharing constrained by the limited bandwidth. However, due to the limitations of technologies and the amateur-oriented nature of these forms of creativity from 2005 to 2008, creators of these videos were not able to immediately monetise their content, not that profit-making was necessarily their intention in the first place. For example, it took years for Hu Ge’s online fame as a producer of spoof videos to get him hired to produce web-based viral commercials.

There are many discernible resemblances between Youku-Tudou and YouTube, so much so that they are often dubbed as the “YouTube of China” in English reports (Horwitz, 2015). However, the major divergence is that these video portals have largely failed to replicate YouTube’s gradual process of transformation through professionalising platform-specific celebrities and the formalising of amateur content, as well as redefining its purpose and infrastructure, institutional forms, and even its “cultural logic” in Lobato’s (2016)’s term. Not until their 2015 announcement of “devoting 10 billion yuan (about $1.6 billion USD) towards producing ‘professional-generated content’, meaning high-quality videos made by semi-pros” (Horwitz, 2015), Youku and Tudou were very late to the game of encouraging and capitalising on vernacular creativity.

As an aside, Jinying Li (2016) writes an alternative history of YouTube’s historical role in Chinese video culture across the Great Firewall (hereafter GFW) outside China’s internet sovereignty. The GFW’s blocking of YouTube in China in 2007 actually drastically politicised this platform—“the division between what is inside and outside the GFW is marked by the peculiar function of YouTube as an effective distribution channel for Chinese underground films and videos that are barred from domestic release” (Ibid, p.116). YouTube was made a “platform” (i.e. in its political sense) for citizen journalism exactly due to its disconnection from the ordinary Chinese audience. I would like to expand on this point: even outside of YouTube, Chinese online videos from the first era were often marked by their political provocativeness in the form of documentaries, lowbrow cellfix films, artistic experimental videos, and various oblique political statements in what Voci (2010; 2013) calls “Online Small-Screen Cinema”.
2.2.2 Phase II Subcultural Hubs (2008–2012)

Infrastructure: broadband internet, smartphones, web-centric;
Platform: Acfun and Bilibili, complex editing software;
Plaformativity: remix videos, danmu comment culture, obscure memes, subcultural fame, unwitting fame.

The first wave of video portals that emerged around 2005 gradually receded from the forefront of video cultures after numerous legal issues, copyright battles, and eventual rebuilds. New forms of ACG (Anime Comic Games) video portals Acfun and Bilibili, which predominantly learnt from the Japanese video site Niconico Douga (instead of its Western counterparts), began to emerge in 2007 and 2010 respectively. Acfun and Bilibili were initially centred around subbed releases of bangumi (anime shows) and featured danmu (literally bullet screen, a commentary system), but soon the websites became subcultural hubs for remix videos and the birthplace of many popular internet memes. They were widely known as “danmu video sites”, with danmu as a highlighted feature.

On AcFun and Bilibili, the unwitting fame experienced by early online celebrities was extended to growing line-ups of “Allstars”—the accumulating repertoire of characters from former movie stars, TV personalities, and protagonists of news reports rediscovered by video remixers and thrown back under the spotlight by enthusiastic viewers of these viral remix videos. These remix videos gradually formed a genre of their own, known as guichu in Chinese pinyin or kichiku in Japanese romaji, with its own roster of “Allstars”. This particular aesthetics of audio-visual editing also originated from Niconico Douga, originally known as “Oto MAD” or Song MAD, and was made by a variety of auto-tone software (e.g. Adobe Audition or UTAU) and video editing software (e.g. Vegas).

It should be noted that at this stage the real creators of these remix videos were, albeit celebrated on the platform as content creators by ardent fans of the genre, often sidelined in the background. At the forefront, the stars were the unwitting personalities who were made into memes. For example, Billy Herrington (1969–2018) also known as

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3 Guichu as a genre in Chinese was originally a misinterpretation of its Japanese origin but the name stuck.
“ANIKI”, a minor softcore gay porn actor rediscovered by Chinese audiences through a humorous remix Oto-MAD video originally posted on Niconico in 2007, became an actual online celebrity in China and cult personality with a fanatic following. Herington was invited to commercial fan events as special guests and scoring advertising contracts simply in virtue of his unwittingly gained fame.

Acfun and Bilibili actively encouraged vernacular creativity, promoting and celebrating their main content creators thus giving the sites distinct identities (Yin & Fung, 2017). This gradual process established a new online video ecology, which formalises rewards for original content creators, especially Bilibili’s own celebrities. While Bilibili is not a pioneer in the Chinese streaming video industry, its business ethics or logics of commercialisation and infrastructure of the attention economy is more comparable to that of YouTube than Youku, despite its subcultural origin.

In summary, Acfun and Bilibili represents the Japanese influence in Chinese video cultures. This period also marks the elevation and consolidation of the editing talents that emerged during the early experimental phase. Video cultures became less preoccupied with DV documentaries and artistic expressions, and more with editing formulas, internet memes, and its exclusive subcultural status. The incoming rise of livestreaming platforms is partly why I have emphasised, in Section 1.3.2 in the last chapter, that editing is no longer at the centre of video culture. The accessibility and popularity of livestreaming video has gradually taken over the technical elitism of video editing prevalent in the remix videos on Acfun and Bilibili.

2.2.3 Phase III Livestreaming Platforms (2013–2017)

Infrastructure: 4G mobile internet, fibre internet, app-based smartphones; Platform: Douyu, YY, Inke, and hundreds of exclusively mobile platforms, (no more editing software); Plaformativity: mainstream audience, repetitive patterns of entrepreneurship, manufactured ephemeral fame, banal celebritification, high profitability, wanghong (internet celebrities).
The early form of participatory livestreams stemmed from a guild voice chat program YY, which was comparable to Teamspeak. Since 2009, YY made the transition from a service hosting MMOG guild or clan voice-chat channels to a Windows-based proprietary client for broadcasting and co-present viewer participation. At the same time, YY introduced the “showgirl” channels (similar to “camgirls”), which were still an inconspicuous area of the video industry at the time. Barboza (2014) reported on the thriving “lucrative” business of female hostesses who “work out of tiny apartments, fitted with webcams”, quoting the example of YY. As a pioneer of the burgeoning industry of “live interactive web entertainment” (which soon shifted to the mobile app market in 2015), YY set the industrial standard of propagating livestreams featuring núzhubo (female broadcasters) and male hanmai (a style of rap with disco music) performers such as the aforementioned example of Tianyou (see the introduction). Mainstream media and officialdom largely ignored the existence of these sectors until the controversies around núzhubo and hanmai in 2016 and 2017.4

Later in 2013, Acfun experimented with an early prototype of a web-based livestreaming site Acfun Namahōsō. In January 2014, this branch of Acfun was relaunched as a separate site known as Douyu.tv and the website design was also revamped following the general features of Twitch.tv, such as the interface design and broad orientation towards videogame livestreams (especially Esports). Since then, Douyu was often regarded as the Chinese equivalent of Twitch due to these similarities.

Douyu’s initial success and exponential growth in its first year not only brought in significant investment (particularly from Tencent) and accelerated the rest of the zhibo industry, but also cultivated and fostered its own celebrity streamers on various fronts such as Esports events, indie game streamers, lifecasters (who primarily broadcast their daily

4 In the following Sections in this chapter I will return to the issue of núzhubo multiple times, especially in Douyu’s category formation and Douyu’s regulations imposed on the female body. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the profession of wanghong in relation to gender performativity.
lives ranging from working in an office to consuming food at home), free tutorials on various subjects (e.g. English), and outdoor activities (from fishing to wandering in the street). It even hosted its own Douyu Carnival events.\(^5\) I discussed this part of Douyu’s history in the introduction so I will not repeat here.

Douyu’s struggle with the integration of VoD content into the site is an interesting example of platformisation. The function of archiving livestreams was launched in late 2016 along with the subsidiary domain v.douyu.com, which was then redesigned to be an independent VoD site with separately uploaded videos rather than seamlessly being integrated into channel pages as livestream archives. Douyu even tried to promote a voice-chat program for mobile gaming within its livestreaming app on mobile devices, and Tieba-like text-based sub-forums attached to livestream channels. Platformisation can therefore be seen as an expression of an *expansionist desire* beyond the site’s original or designated realm of expertise—in Douyu’s case, livestreaming video—and an attempt to emulate other platforms’ functions and enclose them into its own space.

During the livestreaming hype in 2015 and 2016 new competitors emerged, especially in the form of mobile streaming apps. According to an iiMedia research report (2016), there were more than 200 livestreaming apps/sites launched during 2015 and the industry attracted more than 9 billion RMB ($1.31 billion USD) of investment in China.\(^6\) It was not surprising when 2016 was labelled as the “year of *zhibo*” (Netease, 2017b). But the livestreaming boom proved to be short-lived, and by the end of 2017 the industry was already becoming a less volatile market. According to Zhang Hanshu’s (2018) report, the livestreaming platform Longzhu failed so spectacularly that at one point in 2017 the company had 380 million RMB ($56.56 million USD) worth of debt to over 200 investors, and over 5,000 partnered streamers.

\(^5\) Douyu Carnival is similar to TwitchCon, where fans and their favourite streamers can meet and greet. The past two annual events (2016 and 2017) were held at amusement parks.

\(^6\) The mobile livestreaming sector—that is, broadcasting and viewing exclusively through iOS and Android apps with no web presence—occupied a significant proportion of the industry’s total revenue in 2016 and 2017 before the sector’s decline in 2018. However, mobile livestreaming as a standalone phenomenon is not the focus of this thesis.
The recent influx of entrepreneur creativity (2014–2017), capital investment, and wild competitions in the Chinese livestreaming industry is largely reminiscent of the early formation of the first-wave video sites like Youku, which were eventually consolidated through bankruptcy and mergers despite the fact that “hundreds of these companies absorbed 100 million in venture capital investments” in their formative years (Li, 2016, p.4). The rise of Douyu was not an isolated event. It should be acknowledged that by the time Douyu was founded, screen ecologies in China were vastly different from the times of Youku.

While Youku and other early video streaming portals in the “Phase I” were still exploring possibilities of commercialisation of amateur content and simultaneously converging with the traditional television and film industry, these video portals have largely failed to replicate YouTube’s path of success through cultivating platform-specific celebrities and participatory cultures. In contrast, since its inception Douyu was determined to build a sustainably profitable livestreaming platform through cultivating its own celebrities and participatory cultures. On the side of Douyu’s broadcasters, speaking from my interviews and from long-time observation on Douyu, they are often motivated by monetary gains, albeit to various degrees, and are informed by media entrepreneurialism. This is in direct contrast to the conflictual ambiguity between creative amateurism, subcultural integrity, and the desire to monetise seen in the early years of online videos on Youku-Tudou and Acfun-Bilibili.

2.3 A Platformative Account of Douyu

After recounting the history of video streaming platforms in China and their platformativity, the following sections will illustrate Douyu’s platformativity in four practical aspects. First, following the theoretical discussion on genre in Chapter 1, I will explicate Douyu’s directory of categories in detail from videogames to “variety entertainment” as well as role of gender in the institution of categories. Second, I will discuss the design of the attention economy, which is mediated by various virtual currencies. Third, I will expound the
various facets of administrative practice on Douyu including real name registration, event-based censorship, regulations of the female body, and metadata. Finally, I will deal with the interface design of Douyu and the commentary interface danmu.

2.3.1 Categories: Institution of Genre

From Videogames to “Variety Entertainment”

This section follows up my theoretical discussion on liveness and genre in Section 1.2 and will elucidate my points outlined earlier in concrete examples. The seminal argument is that categories on Douyu are not durable structures. In 2014, Douyu launched with the tagline “game livestreaming for everyone” but this has changed multiple times. Each iteration represented the direction the platform was taking at the time. Figure 2.1 shows that Douyu changed the tagline of its iOS launch logo to the new tagline “everyone’s livestreaming platform”.

![Figure 2.1: Douyu iOS Launch Logo with Tagline Changes](image_url)
As I have alluded in the introduction and Section 1.2 in the last chapter, this change of tagline should not be trivialised: it represents Douyu’s shift from its phase of replicating Niconico and Twitch to the eventual consolidation of Douyu as a platform for “variety entertainment” (fanyule), as opposed to videogames. In its early days from 2013 to 2015, the platform was not able to garner enough traffic solely on the appeal of videogames, even with its primary focus on Esports personalities.7 But as the platform grew, it attracted performers of all kinds, who also realised the potential of streaming on the platform. From 2014 to 2016, Douyu went through three rounds of financing; in 2016, it was able to attract 2 billion RMB ($300 million USD) of investment with Tencent’s majority stake. With the investment, Douyu was able to secure the explosive growth of its emerging and growing active channels by offering these streamers contracts as well as enough server space to sustain the huge reserve army of channels who are live on a casual basis.

According to a third-party report (Chaoshi, 2017), in 2016 Douyu already had, on average, over 2,000 live channels daily and over 5,000 live channels during peak hours. With this momentous growth and the number of channels, managing the attention economy on macro-scale became a major challenge. This is why the branching tree of genres and categories, and descending subcategories and tags plays an indispensable role in managing and directing the traffic of flowing attention across the platform. The main directory was split into two main categories: “Videogames” and “Variety Entertainment”.

The first main category is “Videogames” or youxi in Chinese. This broad category is represented by a very limited catalogue of major competitive Esports games such as Dota2, League of Legends, Overwatch, a dozen Chinese MMOGs which sponsored the platform (therefore featuring prominently), some popular indie games (e.g. Don’t Starve), and the encompassing generic category “console games” to cover everything else (see

7 For instance, it was rumoured that in 2015 Douyu offered a contract to an Esports (mainly League of Legends at the time) professional and renowned commentator Xiaozhi to exclusively livestream on the platform. In addition to live broadcast of various regional and international Esports events, Douyu also nurtured several Esports clubs/clans and channels of its own such as ImbaTV and Keahoral.
Figure 2.2). The categories under gaming seem to be created arbitrarily, but they are created and deleted in a process, according to the games’ popularity, sponsor requests, censorship requests, and so forth.

The continuing absence of a game library/catalogue, like the one Twitch has, means that Douyu is hardly a friendly platform for anyone who want to watch a particular game. The only way to find a livestream of a game outside the above list of mainstream games is to search the name of the game but this would require the livestreamer to put the exact name in the stream title, which is heavily censored and limited in number of words. The other issue is translation: many new games are only released in English and fan translation of these titles vary, which further increases the obstacle of finding the right game especially when the game is relatively obscure.
Figure 2.3 is a screenshot of livestream channels in the category of “console games”. Games displayed in these channels consisted of both PC (e.g. *H1Z1*) and console games (e.g. *Dark Souls* and *Mario Makers*). This category of “console games” does not necessarily signify a specificity of different gaming platforms, but a wide range of games outside of the mainstream Esports games in China.\(^8\) For example, *H1Z1* began as a minor game encapsulated in the broad category “console games” (as shown in Figure 2.3), but it gradually grew in popularity. *H1Z1* was then elevated to its own category at some point in 2017, but later deleted as the game was superseded by *PlayerUnknown’s battleground* (PUBG). Popular streamers formerly active in the category *H1Z1* gradually all migrated to the new game PUBG. The reason why *H1Z1* was deleted as a category, as my informants and I speculated, was that Tencent, which partially owned both Blue Hole (PUBG’s developer) and Douyu, did not tolerate competitors.

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\(^8\) This also points to the broader context of how videogames have been received in China in the decade from 2005. The majority of videogame played in China were MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Games), “Esports games” and mobile games (later in the 2010s). Single player games occupied only a small portion of the market. Console games, as well as Steam, were relatively foreign until 2015.
The second broad category is *fanyule* or “variety or pan-entertainment”. This neologism was created to contain the assemblage of various new forms of performativity unrelated to gaming that emerged on Douyu and, to a degree, dominated the attention economy from 2015 onwards. The stereotypes of mundane, boring, vulgar livestreams (to be delineated in the second half of thesis) primarily came from this broad category of *fanyule*, and not from the broad category of videogames. Beginning in late 2015, Douyu institutionalised many new forms of performances formerly in the big bucket of *fanyule* into new majorly populated categories:

- “all-star show”: a gender-neutral category for webcam talk shows;
- “yuanqi (energy) realm”: a major category for outdoor or mobile livestreams;
- “yuxing tianxia (literally fish travels around the world)”: a subcategory for travel or tourist outdoor streams.

And some minor categories:

- “wanshuma (literally play digital)”: a minor category for digital product reviews or technology-related talk shows;
- “wanjinrong (literally play finances)”: a minor category for stock market analysis and discussions;
- “dazhahui (miscellaneous)”: a category for uncategorised events and activities.

Each of these major categories have their own celebrities who are celebrated by viewers who often primarily watch streams in these categories. For example, Chuange (featured in the introduction) was usually active in the category “yuanqi realm” therefore he was often labelled, along with two other zhubo, as the “big three” active in the category “yuanqi realm”. He later moved to the category of “gourmet food”. These categories emerged and existed during my research period (2015–2017). But as they constantly change, some of them had already disappeared at the time of writing and some may not exist at the time of your reading.

**Gendering Genre**
The role of gender in genre reveals how the institution of genre on Douyu is a direct manifestation of power. Like YouTube and Justin.tv’s initial controversies, Douyu has relied heavily on sex appeal since 2014. This content existed in the form of individual cam sites and since 2009 had migrated to larger platforms such as YY. However, the official position of Douyu on female livestreamers had been rather perplexing as the website was promoting female broadcasters and certain often-unspecified forms of erotic performances, while simultaneously prohibiting other “illicit” forms of performances such as nudity. Through the institutions of gendering genre (to be delineated below) in the form of categories and tags, Douyu exerted its power in curating (and encouraging) certain content and orchestrating the navigation of the website and the Android/iOS mobile app.

For instance, within popular videogame categories such as *League of Legends* and *H1Z1*, there were many subcategories or tags specifying the host of channel was female—thus discernibly segregating the female broadcasters from the rest of the streamers playing the same game. Figure 2.4 demonstrates a common *League of Legends* stream setup on Douyu.

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9 Burgess and Green (2009) note in their documentation of early YouTube that its initial campaigns attempted to popularise the site by “offering $100 to attractive girls who posted ten or more videos” (p.2). It is thus a common practice for an online video platform to use sex appeal to gain viewers at the beginning, then censor erotic/pornographic content once it is more established.
(Zhangyue Sama’s channel), in which the webcam window is enlarged while the gameplay window is compressed. These images of female broadcasters playing *League of Legends* gradually became the common perception of the subcategory of *nüzhubo*. Fully aware of these common imageries cultivated by Douyu’s institution of genres, a prominent DotA caster PC Lengleng deliberately avoided setting herself in this subcategory of the overtly sexualised female Esports game streamers and instead just set her channel under the generic *DotA2* category.

From 2016 onwards, Douyu strived to recuperate from this negative public image of putting women dressed in suggestive manner playing *League of Legends* on its front-page. This was done through promoting alternative performances of female streamers who did not explicitly deploy their bodies as their core performativity (such as Nvliu and PC Lengleng), and simultaneously purging the much-denigrated *nüzhubo* channels from the gaming categories. Douyu even designed a separate site as well as a mobile app interface specifically for this traditional “camgirl” content—*yuxiu*.

Figure 2.5 The category of *Yuxiu*. Screenshot taken on 17 December 2016.

The category of *Yuxiu* (literally fish show) is under the main directory of Douyu but it has a different web design compared to the main site (see Figure 2.5). The mobile interface of this category was also distinctive from the rest of mobile app interface. Instead of utilising
the usual horizontal 16:9 aspect ratio video interface used in the rest of Douyu livestreams, the web interface for yuxiu adopted a vertical video interface similar to those of mobile-exclusive streaming apps such as Yinke and Periscope. Even though the section attracts considerably fewer viewers than other major genres, it does generate revenue due to a larger than average percentage of viewer donations. According to a research report by Zhiboguancha (2018), categories encompassing “showroom” (i.e. camgirl) channels only occupied 3% of total active streamers but generated 29% of total donations on the platform in 2017. This data demonstrates, no matter how Douyu seeks to distance from this image of “vulgar” camgirl content, they nevertheless constitute a major source of income for the platform.

Figure 2.6 The category of Yanzhi. Screenshot taken on 17 December 2016.

Yanzhi (literally “face value”, implying a blatant emphasis on physical appearance) is also very distinct from other sections on Douyu because the overwhelming majority of casters are women. Instead of cached screenshots of the ongoing livestream video, the front-page directory of all channels is presented with pre-uploaded profile pictures “beautified” by

10 This goes back to my point in Section 1.3.2, where I discussed the verticality of livestreaming video on Douyu had gradually became a signifier for certain mode of gendered performance.
filters (see Figure 2.6). The performative modalities of livestreams in this section elicited the following: mundane activities such as consumption of food in front of the camera (often broadcast from a smartphone), gaming activities (but only limited to very mainstream videogames), chitchatting with viewers, and occasional borderline erotic performances. Typically these channels amount to an informal industry of mass production of short-lived microcelebrities: wanghong performers are managed by a third-party agency or incubator operating in the background, who train and pay them a salary (see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion). The segregation of yanzhi from the supposedly main content of videogames hints at the different levels of legitimacy bestowed to specific genres of performance.

“Positively” Performative Genres

In 2017, Douyu created a new category called “positive energy”, in alignment with official government propaganda that advocated the dissemination of “positive energy” on the internet. According to Douyu’s own recruitment notice (Douyu, 2017), the platform sought to recruit “government agencies”, “police officers”, “non-profit organisations”, “members of a cultural heritage”, to be “positive energy wanghong (internet celebrity)”. 

Figure 2.7 The category of “Positive Energy”. Screenshot taken on 12 July 2018.
But looking at the channels in Figure 2.7, the top ten channels in the category seem very thin/superficial in their claims to adhere to the official notion of “positive energy”: the first channel is about Mah-jong and it claims to be about urban culture; the second channel sells specific brands of medicinal products and claims to be about traditional Chinese medicine; and the third channel is hosted by a life coach. Three of the following channels are hosted by people with various disabilities and the last two channels are hosted by an English teacher and a musician. In another case reported by Jubb (2016), a chengguan team—the notorious city management officials—livestreamed a “run-in with street vendors to show transparency” (Ibid), presumably under the same category.

As I will explicate later this chapter, administrative acts and censure on Douyu are often motivated by government pressure, which is not a persistent but periodic enforcement. This attunement to the dominant political climate was not only through negatively shutting down channels and punishing transgressions, but also by “positively” building a category that appealed to the dominant propaganda. However, this effort of promoting “positive energy” definitely did not make Douyu a less vitriolic and vulgar place. In this sense, from the perspective of the platform, the propaganda did not care whether zhibo did its presupposed pedagogic job as long as it filled in the blank and satisfied relevant bureaucrats. An anonymous viewer privately confessed in an interview, “[the category] just tells me how desperately the platform tries to survive the crackdown”. In 2017 the category of “positive energy” did not have a sizable viewership despite Douyu proactively prompting streamers to join it.

All the above examples point to the fluid construction of genres/categories on Douyu. The process is often two-way between users and administrators, rather than a strictly top-down or bottom-up model. The platform can instigate a new category, but broadcasters do not necessarily abide by the standard set by the platform. The popularity of a certain genre or mode of performance will compel the platform to align it with the viewing habits and tastes of their viewers. But this is by no means a balanced relationship, but rather a negotiation conducted under a socioeconomic structure. It is a “structured contingency”, as I outlined in the Section 1.2 in the previous chapter. From here I move on to discuss how the attention economy works on Douyu.
2.3.2 Attention Economy: Attentional Capital and “Fish Balls”

Monetisation on Douyu has four components: viewer donation, built-in promotion of browser and mobile games, advertising (mostly Flash-based), and a membership system based on tiers of “aristocracy” implemented in 2016.\(^{11}\) A viewer can pay to be an “aristocrat” in a channel, much like Twitch’s subscriber system. The livestreamer will take a cut from that membership fee. There are multiple tiers of “aristocracy” ranging from “errant knight”, “viscount”, “earl”, “duke”, “king”, to the highest “emperor”. “Aristocratic” viewers will have various badges next to their usernames when they post comments in the chatroom.\(^{12}\)

In this section, I will only focus on the aspect of viewer donation and early Douyu’s virtual currency of “fish balls” and “rockets”. The study of the attention economy on contemporary online video platforms is a very large topic; I do not have the space in this thesis to fully flesh out the topic in its different facets. But I will still explain the practical operation of attention as a currency on Douyu, in relation to virtual currency.

In the book *Ecology of Attention*, Yves Citton (2017) explains that the new scarcity is not of material goods nor cultural goods, but of the available attention of the consumer. As Citton (2017) states, “the dictum of the ‘new economy’: if a product is free, then the real product is you! More precisely your attention” (p.9). Douyu is a platform, an ecosystem, and also a regime of attentional capitalism—a system of capitalism where attention is the hegemonic form of capital. While I mentioned Andrejevic’s “labour of being watched” (2004b) to his critique of surveillance culture of “the work of watching one another” (2004a) in the last chapter, this discussion on attention economy directly treats looking or viewing (whether attentive or distracted) as commodifiable labour.

In 2014 and 2015, the initial design of Douyu’s attention economy was based on a virtual currency called *yuwan* or “fish balls”. Fish balls will drop every fifteen minutes or

\(^{11}\) It is unclear which component is the largest source of income. Douyu used to have a top-level page named “Games” in 2016, which featured several browser games. From 2015 until mid-2017, Most of the Flash ads I observed were also for various browser games.

\(^{12}\) Unlike Twitch, where an individual channel’s streamer has control over the design of these badges, Douyu enforces a universal design for all channels.
half of hour when the viewer stays in any channel. Such currency cannot be exchanged for real money by viewers and can only be donated to their favourite livestreamers, who can then periodically exchange the accumulated currency of *yuwan* for real money with the platform. Before implementing a more complicated system of multiple virtual currencies in 2015, the main economic activity on the platform was the exchange between the attentive labour of viewers—or the presumed attention of a human rather than a bot—and the performative labour of livestreamers, mediated by “fish balls”. The exchange rate between real money and “fish balls” also fluctuates depending on an unidentified complex algorithm, which is calculated in relation to attention measured by viewing hours. Douyu had a team of accountants dedicated to processing these *yuwan* payments. In a sense, the operation of *yuwan* is a very literal illustration of the “principle ‘money now flows with attention’” (Citton, 2017, p.46). The following is a formula of the conversion:

\[(\text{Viewers') time spent watching livestreaming} \rightarrow \text{ Virtual Currency (Fish balls)} \rightarrow \text{ (donated to) livestreamers} \rightarrow \text{ (exchange with the platform accountants) Real World Currency (RMB)}.\]

With this attention economy, Douyu was hoping to encourage hypothetically “uninterrupted” viewing sessions of longer duration—that is, capture the viewer’s full attention—and gain significant traffic to prove its commercial values to prospective investors, who provided most of the costs of operation during Douyu’s formative years.\(^{13}\) In this sense, attention was a marketable resource. But this model of direct conversation of attention into money was not sustainable in the long term. According to a research report published by Zhiboguancha (2017), in which they studied 400 top channels from different genres over the period of one week, more than 80% of the viewers who sent comments never donated.

Since 2015, a more complex currency system has been implemented for viewers to more easily exchange real money and virtual currency. Viewer could purchase a new

\(^{13}\) From 2014 to 2015, the platform initially relied heavily on prior and persistent investment in order to sustain its early economy before it could gradually generate major profits from user donations, advertising and cross promotion of mobile games.
virtual currency called shark fin with real money (1 RMB = 1 shark fin), then use this premium virtual currency to buy various sorts of virtual currencies. The most expensive donation is a “rocket”, which will cost the buyer 500 shark fins or 500 RMB (approximately $74 USD) and the cheapest donation is a zhan or a “thumbs up”, which costs 0.1 shark fin but is usually purchased and donated in bulk to create an effect of combo hits. Various donations have different visual effect on the livestream video itself. All the visual effects are designed and universally enforced by the platform rather than by individual streamers.

For example, the donation of a “rocket” will have the animated effect of a shark riding a rocket flying across the video window. The donation of a “rocket” to one channel will be also notify viewers on other channels across the platform as the same banner flows across their channels— “XXX donated a rocket to the channel of YYY, please go grab your free fish balls”. Subsequently, viewers in the same channel as the recipient of the “rocket” donation, as well as viewers who join from other channels due to the lavish notification, all have the opportunity to open a virtual chest that contains a random number of yuwan within a range of preordained numbers. The livestreamer usually thanks the donor by addressing their usernames; other viewers are also notified, almost intrusively since there is no way to filter out the visual effects. This system not only creates an ostentatious display of the viewer who spends large sum of money but also encourages inter-channel movements.14 Before such practices were abused, the donation of a “rocket” to a relatively small channel could greatly boost its concurrent viewers, at least temporarily.15

Instead of directly monetising attention, these designs help create the mechanism of “circular self-reinforcing dynamic: attention attracts attention” (Citton, 2017, p.48). As he further explains in Georg Franck’s words,

14 One noteworthy difference between Douyu and Twitch is that Twitch’s donation notification message is mostly done by third party plug-ins working with streaming software while Douyu’s donation notification is entirely through the platform itself and third-party notification is not allowed.
15 There were also some reports, confirmed by two anonymous informants working in the industry in 2016, that some third-party streamer clans or agencies had backroom deals with certain livestreaming platforms in a mutually beneficiary relationship. Large amounts of virtual currency were donated to a broadcaster working for the agency; the livestreaming platform then returned the money to the agency. In this way, the platform looks better on paper for investors, while the agency can also hype up their channel and potentially prompt “real” donations from viewers.
Nothing seems to attract attention like the accumulation of attention earnings, nothing stimulates the media more than this capital, nothing increases the attentiveness of their advertising spaces more than the exhibition of the wealth of acquired attention (cited in Citton, 2017, p.48-49).

Attention is at the core of how these virtual currencies work. First, a viewer needs to donate in order to be acknowledged by the broadcaster—to attract his or her attention—which is the core incentive for viewers to donate. Second, the extravagant animation of the donation notification for “rockets” exhibits the communicative act that this viewer donates, and the broadcaster’s appreciation by speech acknowledges the donation by giving his or her attention. Third, this communicative act then attracts other viewers’ attention in the channel and viewers from other channels who come to collect the “fish balls”. Fourth, the inter-channel movements will greatly boost the concurrent views of the channel, which statistically demonstrate the accumulation of attention. Finally, the increase in views also increases the channel’s ranks in Douyu’s overall directory of channels—accumulation of attention therefore attracts more attention.

The larger the viewership of the platform became, the more the attention economy of “fish balls” was abused, and the less valuable “fish balls” were when exchanged for real money from the platform. In 2015, Douyu started to offer contracts which guaranteed a monthly stipend plus a cut of profits earned through viewer donations to streamers who reached a certain threshold of viewership.\(^{16}\) The inflation of “fish balls” over time is inevitable and gradually their worth in terms of real money becomes negligible.

Since 2016, the major income for a streamer, apart from the stipend itself, is the donation of various currencies paid with real money. To be eligible to exchange donations to real money, streamers also need to meet certain criteria or minimum requirements. For example, 60 hours or 120 hours of total monthly streaming time corresponds to different schemes of rewards. These schemes greatly encourage broadcasters to go full-time, as part-time commitment (less than 20 hours per week) usually results in very little financial return.

\(^{16}\) Similar to Twitch’s partnership program, this stipend varies greatly, from several thousands to ten or even twenty thousand RMB per month, depending on how many subscribers and regular viewers the given channel has.
In 2017, as the attention economy became more mature, Douyu no longer allowed broadcasters to exchange “fish balls” for real world currency even though it still functions a mediator of attention flow between viewers and broadcasters.

2.3.3 Administrative Practices

Real Name Registration

The basic premise of Douyu operates on a “anonymity at the front-end and real-name at the back-end”—a viewer may appear anonymous (i.e. only as a username) to other viewers and broadcasters, but all user registrations require a phone number—therefore for the platform administrators no one is truly anonymous.\(^{17}\) It is much more complicated process for channel hosts to verify their identities. In 2014, during the first few months of its launch, to stream on Douyu required no real-name registration.\(^ {18}\) This was quickly changed as livestreaming platforms started being noticed by the Chinese State; previously the State largely ignored earlier iterations of livestreaming sites like YY and 9158.com because they were not open platforms where anyone could register and start broadcasting.

In 2015, the verification method was straightforwardly visual—taking a selfie while holding an identity card. After submitting the application, the team at Douyu would manually assess it and decide whether to give permission to stream. In 2016, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) released a “Notice on Issues Concerning Strengthening Management Over Internet Audio-Visual Live-Broadcast Services” to outline some relatively concrete rules specifically in regard to livestreaming platforms. During the same year, the real name verification method on Douyu became more automated: the applicant had to submit both identity card information as well as his or her bank details and transfer a few cents (a randomly generated sum of less than 1 RMB) to Douyu’s bank account. I registered and verified my Douyu account

\(^{17}\) It should be added that from 2012 to 2017 China was able to fully and practically enforce, with the help from the monopolies of telecommunication companies in China, a law that requires all phone number registration to be done through real identity verification.

\(^{18}\) I can personally verify this as I tried to stream on Douyu in mid-2014, without registering my name nor my phone number.
via the second method, with my Chinese bank account. This real-name registration system
did not prevent certain streamers from performing illicit actions, as they disregarded the
consequences anyway, but it did have an intimidation effect, especially for smaller
channels, because they must avoid getting banned. While for popular channels with large
viewership, a ban or temporary suspension was often a public performance instead of a
matter of strictly enforcing the rules.

Event-based Censorship

In 2016, Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto released a detailed report on the
censorship practices of three Chinese livestreaming services/applications (YY, Sina Show
and 9158) and the authors identified a “combination of strict terms of service, content
monitoring teams, and automated content filtering to comply with regulations” (p.1). This
basic formula largely applies to Douyu as well, but on a larger scale. Crete-Nishihata et al
(2016) have two incisive observations about how censorships operate on Chinese
livestreaming platforms: “inconsistent implementations of censorship. . . [and] events act
as catalysts for censorship” (p.1-2).19

First, this inconsistency of implementing rules is an example of what I argue earlier
on dynamic power relations and how the platform always tries to balance between
accommodating spontaneous vernacular creativity (which is the primary source of financial
security and sustainability as a platform) and temporarily prohibiting the supposedly vulgar
content (which is necessary in order to survive governmental supervision). The platform
has the liberty of translating equivocal official proposals into concrete practices of
discipline and control. Regardless of how the rules are laid out, these acts of censoring or
not censoring certain channels become a key aspect of platformativity.

Second, both the automated structures of algorithms and the manual taskforce of
hundreds of employees working 24/7 monitoring livestreams (see Figure 2.8), correspond

19 Jinyin Li (2016) similarly argues that the Great Firewall’s blocking of YouTube in 2007 also coincided
with the massive Xiamen protests at the time, in that YouTube videos played a notable role in documenting
the event.
to or are triggered by real-time events, as shown by an event on Yezi’s channel discussed later in this section. In 2016 Douyu’s administrative team had more than 300 employees that specialised in real-time monitoring of livestreams. This is another practical reason to focus on events in the study of zhibo, as events operate at the centre of mechanisms of control on livestreaming platforms.

Figure 2.8 The office of Douyu’s team responsible for monitoring livestream channels in real time. Images extracted from Techweb (2016).

Regulation of the Female Body

The female body, as Butler (2006) suggests, is the site of cultural inscription. Cara Wallis (2013) and Wanning Sun’s (2014) work on female migrant workers in China can be especially informative to the cultural inscription of the female body in China. Wallis considers migrant women’s bodies as “the site of numerous configurations of power” (2013, p.12) and highlights dagongmei (literally working little sisters) as a powerful gender discourse that serves to subject the bodies of female migrant worker under various regimes of power. In her work on migrant literature in Southern China, Sun (2014) has explicitly outlined a “cultural politics of agency” through female workers’ literary works in order to understand dagongmei’s sexual agency beyond “the docile virgin/promiscuous whore split image” (p.175). Both authors demonstrate the contested corporeality of the female body in
The vulgarised female body of *nüzhubo* is central to stigmatising discourse espoused by both outsiders such as mainstream media, commentators, and pundits, and the livestreaming community itself. These discourses pressured Douyu to devise very specific rules in disciplining the female body, with the platform dedicating many lines in its brief
and equivocal statement on its official regulations on how to specifically do so. Figure 2.9 is extracted from the Douyu handbook for streamers (2016) and it demonstrates which parts of human skin can be visible on the livestream and which parts are forbidden. For example, the exposed area of female breasts cannot be over one third of total area and the skirt must cover the buttocks. The section on the regulation of streamer behaviours and dress codes (in total 631 words) only refers to female bodies—the male body is not even mentioned once. Figure 2.10 shows how important these rules around the female body are to the administrators monitoring livestreams as they printed it and hung it on the wall of their office.

**Enforcing Administrative Power through Metadata**

This section addresses the ubiquity of fabricated data on zhibo platforms from the perspective of administrative power. This is done through first by contextualising metadata manipulation in the zhibo industry (2015–2017) and second by delineating an event that took place on Yezi’ channel—how his channel was punished through temporary suspension and (un)manipulation of metadata by Douyu administrators.

In 2015, the Douyu channel of an ex-professional Esports player Weixiao had reportedly 1,311,862,416 concurrent viewers (See Figure 2.11). This was a popular image circulated on Chinese social media at the time. It hyperbolically demonstrates the grey business of Taobao shops selling viewer boosting services and the ubiquity of viewer bots across most zhibo platforms. Big numbers, which were intended for a good publicity and a strong case for perspective investors, ended in many scandals across platforms.\(^{20}\) From 2016 to 2017, there were many Chinese media reports and opinion pieces on the immense bubble of the livestreaming industry, partly inflated by the many confirmed cases of “fake data” and how this bubble was bound to burst (Xinhua, 2016).

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\(^{20}\) The inflation of viewer counts was even worse on the newer mobile-based platforms, because the initial survival of these platforms did not depend on their income directly from viewer donations but their ability to finance and attract loans. This promise of profitability was built on the metadata presented to prospective investors.
In 2016, Douyu made the Website API (Application Programming Interface) open to developers via http://open.Douyucdn.cn/api/RoomApi/room/[specified_room_ID]. These entries of metadata, such as “room (channel) ID”, “online” (concurrent viewers), “fans_num” (number of followers), “start_time” (timestamp of current broadcast session), and “owner_weigh” (total sum of donated fish balls) are the publicly accessible official metadata of the channel. However, this data was not very useful, according to most of my streamer informants. Douyu viewer count metadata was systemically inflated according to several detailed analyses (e.g. Zhihu, 2015a)—this was not just due to third party viewer bots but Douyu itself. Speaking from my own experience as I have streamed on Douyu for over 200 hours since 2015: from the very beginning of my livestream, I knew there were no viewers as I had just started, but my channel page showed that I had 15 viewers.

From my interviews of streamers, I learnt that they cynically mistrusted metadata officially released by Douyu. In order to monitor their business, the more serious streamers purchased, or sometime even developed their own software tools, to trace and monitor various metadata such as concurrent viewers, viewer engagement rate, conversion rate (percentage of donating viewers), and so forth.
For example, on 25 June 2016, Xiaojie, one of the top streamers on Douyu, showcased on his livestream how he extracted metadata via unnamed software and analysed the metadata through a statistics analysis software (See Figure 2.12). He admitted that he had been relying on third party programs to extract more “accurate” metadata. During this event, his viewers were warning him that showing the data would “offend” members of Douyu’s censorship team that was closely monitoring his livestream and the offence might result in the suspension of his channel. He then stopped showing the interface of his data analysis software. His diligence was certainly unusual but, to a degree, he has conducted qualitative analysis upon his own channel in a manner not so different from that of social scientists.

Another incident that I witnessed on 21 September 2016 on Yezi’s channel was a pertinent example of how Douyu administrators manipulated viewer count in real time. The incident took place when Yezi breached the code of conduct of Douyu by not only promoting commodities (in this case, dry beef bars) but also selling them (asking his
viewers to complete the transaction via WeChat Pay) while livestreaming.21 The drama climaxed when a chaoguan (official Douyu administrator monitoring streams in real time) warned him in the chat, where all viewers could see the highlighted red warning message.22 Yezi ignored the warning and insisted what he was doing was, in his own words, “to share the good stuff with his viewers rather than for profits”. The channel was subsequently shut down after he ignored the warning. The red text in the middle of the black screen reads: “Dear viewers, this zhubo’s content is involved in transgressing certain rules and therefore suspended” (See Figure 2.13).

Figure 2.13 Yezi’s channel. Screenshot taken on 21 September 2016.

The channel was reinstated after about five minutes, but it was another person holding the camera-phone, who claimed the channel host Yezi was busy packing the goods for the viewers and therefore letting her to temporarily host the channel. The drama went on when the temporary host of Yezi’s channel went on a tirade on the abusive sexist language from

21 In China, various tax evading private transactions, parallel imports and the infamous daigou (literally purchase on behalf) became a sensitive topic in 2016. These merchant activities were rampant and largely supported by digital transaction such as AliPay and WeChat Pay. Douyu banned third-party transactions and trade between streamers and viewers very early on because it wanted all transactions on the platform completed through its own currency system (as shown earlier this chapter).

22 Chaoguan is an actual person with a recognisable username in the chatroom rather than abstracted figure of authority.
viewers in the chatroom. By the time Yezi took back control of the livestream, the official viewer counts had dropped from 80k to around 6k in only a few minutes’ time. Some fans blamed the women for the mass exodus while others accused the chaoguan of abusing his/her power.

I doubt the temporary channel host could cause such a downfall of viewership in a few minutes. During the drastic decline in the viewer count the chat room did not become suddenly vacant, as shown by the chat activity recorded by the third-party program and my own witness. My speculation was that the official administrator punished Yezi for not complying (to stop selling products on stream) after the initial warning. And the punishment was the removal of the inflated viewer count, but ironically the number 6,000 was way more approximate to the real number of concurrent viewers than 90,000.

As I was watching Yezi’s livestream, I was also monitoring the chatlog with a program called “Douyu danmu assistant” (See Figure 2.14). This program fetches data from the danmu server, as opposed to the Douyu’s API. It was designed for broadcasters, so they could keep a record of various user actions such as the number of viewers participating in the chat, detailed records of donations, and logs of bans executed by moderators. In this session of data collection on the channel 244548 (Yezi’s channel ID), which lasted 476 min, there were 1,584 viewers who joined the chatroom during that time, and they were in total 4,090 active viewers (meaning they had sent comments or donated something). At the time of the screenshot, metadata scraped from the official site showed that there were 94,068 concurrent viewers. While acknowledging the proximate nature of the data collecting method of the third-party program, the disparity between the official metadata and the program’s result was self-evident.

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23 This was not my first time to witness this sort of disciplinary act as I witnessed a similar event on Ligan’s channel. Multiple accounts on various internet forums have also shown evidence that Douyu had capped the viewer count of targeted channels (as a punishment), something Douyu did not officially acknowledge.
The point of recounting this event is not to demonstrate that livestream metadata in China was irrelevant as they seemed to be fabricated. As I learnt of my informants’ scepticism, the fabricated nature of official data did not bother me as a morality issue, but rather it was the realisation that the creation of metadata is not neutral nor prior to interpretation (i.e. objective). Boellstorff (2013) shares a similar scepticism toward the neatness of the division between data and metadata. As he writes,

The very division of the informational world into two domains—the zero-degree and meta—establishes systems of implicit control. Indeed, once zero-degree/meta distinction is accepted, it becomes impossible to know when to stop.

The prefix “meta-” induces a loop, which hides the contexts of creation and the implicit operation of hierarchy. In other words, the problematics of big data still centre around the issue of interpretation: “data need to be imagined as data to exist and function as such, and the imagination of data entails an interpretative base” (Gitelman & Jackson,
2013, p.3). Going back to Boellstorff’s (2013) argument on “meta”, which operates on an implicit system of hierarchy, big data carries its own socio-political message and its system of power. Metadata implies power and hierarchy, as demonstrated by how Douyu inflates and deflates viewer count for various administrative or disciplinary reasons. Since 2015, crucial metadata such as viewer counts and conversion rates have been a contested zone, where abusive botting and cohesive enforcement co-existed. Inflated numbers were conspicuous, which was exactly where the operation of power struggle lay.

2.3.4 Interfacial Platformativity: Performativity of Danmu

Danmu bears more information than the video itself. And it engages users to participate.
(Mo Ran, CEO of Acfun)

Danmu is the actual main body.
(Anonymous user)

Basic Interface of Douyu’s Web Page

The basic web interface of Douyu is roughly similar to Twitch: a control panel on the left, the main video window in the middle, a chat column on the right and a channel description at the bottom. To demonstrate with a visual example, Figure 2.15 is a screenshot of Nvliu’s channel. Region (1) and (2) are functional quick menus, universal to the whole site regardless of channels. Region (1) is the website header with five main headings: frontpage, all livestream channels, categories, entertainment sponsored browser games, and yuba (Douyu’s own social network feed). Region (2) is a shortcut version of a directory of categories. Region (3) contains various metadata of the channel: channel name, stream title, tags, concurrent viewers, and “weight” (total donation of virtual currencies).

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24 All donations are calculated according to the weight of one yuwan or fish ball, which is 100g. Here Nvliu’s channel weight is 84.55t, which shows how many fish balls her viewers donated in total.
Region (4) is the chatroom sidebar with the viewer statistics. From the top, it firstly shows that my Douyu account “ethnographer” is level 2 and possesses 55 fish balls. Below that are the leader boards of donations and the column for the chatroom or “chat” (in Twitch’s colloquial term or chatroom. Region (5) is the livestreaming video, which in Douyu’s case is a Flash video. Compared to YouTube or Twitch, the main feature of this video player is danmu—the comments floating across the video from right to left. This feature makes full-screen viewing much easier especially on the mobile screen. When in full screen mode on Douyu’s iOS or Android app, the horizontal mobile interface will be identical to region (5) with its video and moving comments on top of the video.

Contextualising Danmu

Danmu or bullet screen or “the comments-over-the-video” (Li, 2017) is a comment system that has profoundly influenced China’s video cultures over the past decade. According to the Wikipedia entry (2017) on Bilibili.com, danmu is,

a real-time commentary subtitle system that displays user comments as streams of moving subtitles overlaid on the video playback screen, visually resembling a danmaku shooter game.
The definition is relatively precise, but it tells little about its Japanese origin \textit{danmaku} (most prominently on Niconico Douga), subsequent Chinese appropriation, and further developments. In linguistic terms, it literally means “bullet curtain” and it is used to describe a videogame genre in which the player controls an aircraft manoeuvring through barrages of massed artillery fire. In more technical terms (in its second sense as a comment system), \textit{danmu} is a system that utilises specific APIs to display comments, which come in variety of pixels, shapes, colours, fonts, and sizes (sometimes called “advanced subtitles”). Different sites use different protocols: Bilibili uses ECMAScript (JavaScript based) and other unspecified structures; Douyu uses Flash sockets as it has three separate severs—\textit{danmu} servers, \textit{danmu} verification servers, and RTMP (Real-Time Messaging Protocol) servers.

Until recently \textit{Danmu} has received relatively little academic and only some journalistic interest in the English-speaking world, but it is very topical among Chinese academics. In her treatise on the interface of \textit{danmu}, Jinying Li (2017) writes, “\textit{danmaku} restructures the regional media geography in East Asia through virtual unity of a platform-based video culture and a shared interface” (p.237). This resonates with my argument earlier in Section 2.2.2 where I postulated Acfun as the original subcultural hub for online remix videos. \textit{Danmu} as an interface played a crucial role in facilitating a \textit{regional} video culture that “both enables and exposes such an enclosure and potentially open it up for users to negotiate with the platform logic” (Ibid, p.237).

In another frequently cited article, Chen, Chao, and Wang (2013) argue that \textit{danmu} websites are carnivals for a youth subculture that also interacts with mainstream internet culture by means of intertextual referencing, irony, and subtle resistance. In other media reports, \textit{danmu} has been discussed from the perspective of its “postmodern” forms of intertextuality and sociality (Zhou, Gao & Qin, 2017; Li, 2016), and vulgarity and censorship (Xie, 2014). Most of the literature on \textit{danmu} interprets it as a “linguistic network”, whether social interactions between anonymous commentators, commenting on the video (here also reduced to text), or implicit reference to other media texts. However, the ingenuity of \textit{danmu} is exactly its wider implications—not of the textual, but as an
instance of interfacial performativity, following Drucker’s (2011) performatve approach to interface.

**A Theory of Danmu**

In order to understand this performativity, I will go back to the root of subcultural video on Acfun. MC Shitou’s now enshrined video on Acfun (see Figure 2.16) is the epitome of *danmu* carnivals and the living example of the subcultural principle of “*danmu* is the actual main body”. Apart from his unique voice of glorifying a rural style, the core aesthetic of MC Shitou’s video is its “vintage” *danmu* rather than the inherent quality of his music.  

In an act of accommodating the stigmatised aesthetic of the rural and the grotesque, they utilised the comments to simulate the sticker advertisements that are omnipresent on the poles and stairs in suburban and rural China, such as “massive sale of sanitary pads, please contact 5564878”, “assassin for hire, contact 84523”, “coffin sale, contact 484854”, “change your fate, contact 741165”. A textual analysis of these comments does not really make sense since these words are not there for their literal meaning but as a *visual effect* or “affective flow” (Li, 2017, p.243) via its simulation of the illegal posting of handbills and graffiti (see Figure 2.17).  

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25 These comments on MC Shitou’s video gradually accumulated over time (sometimes years, therefore “vintage”) and they were regularly wiped by Acfun after a period of time. However, they often came back as users repeated the same ritual on the same video again.

26 The irony is that when MC Shitou attempted to capitalise on his fame in the thriving livestreaming business, the transition largely failed. His viewership on livestreaming platform Douyu went from the welcoming huge crowd of his former fans to total obscurity in months.
The proper operation of *danmu* as a comment culture thus necessitates a “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988) of what the comments are supposed to perform in specific contexts—a netiquette of *danmu*. The interface structure has been adopted by most Chinese mainstream video sites such as Youku since 2012, but mostly with very poor reception. In the context of both a VoD video platform (e.g. Bilibili) and a livestreaming video site (e.g. Douyu), *danmu* has become synonymous to the word “comment” or *pinglun* in Chinese. Veteran participants in the subcultural scene of *danmu* creation often lamented the
introduction of *danmu* to mainstream video portals like Youku. As an anonymous viewer informant said in an interview (2016),

*Danmu* are not simply comments. As a collective performance, it requires sufficient knowledge of the memes, back stories, and video aesthetics purported by [remix] videos.

This knowledge proliferated on Acfun and Bilibili as they were built on these subcultural identities; other mainstream video portals such as Youku can copy the interface format but not the participatory ethics, which solely depend on its (core) user groups. There are notable differences between *danmu* on Youku and *danmu* on Bilibili because Youku does not educate its users, who are often not dedicated enough—or too casual—to learn or immerse in this netiquette.

Returning to the question of interface, instead of entirely casting away the language of layer and containers, I can operate the interface of *danmu* through them in order to tackle the illusion of transparency. As outlined earlier, the basic components of a Douyu livestream channel are the embedded flash video player, the chat window and metadata such as channel views, follower count, concurrent viewers, and brief introduction. The common perception assumes discreteness of such digital objects as they take shape on the screen: in other words, the video window and the chat window are separate spaces. According to Treske (2013), this arrangement reflects our historical understanding and usage of the video as one-way broadcast and interactivity of the comment system is an “added layer”.

Alexander R. Galloway (2006; 2012) used the game *World of Warcraft* as an example to discuss the separation between diegetic and non-diegetic spaces: the “immersive” 3D virtual world is the diegetic space and the user interface such as the skill bar, inventory, and so forth is the non-diegetic space. Following this analysis, if we can suppose the video as the centre stage or the diegetic space (the coherent narrative of the

\[\text{27} \text{Douyu still uses Flash video (January 2018) while Bilibili Live has entirely switched to HTML5 in 2017. HTML 5 marks a critical divergence from the container logic of traditional Flash video.}\]
livestreamer), comments are feedback (the fragmented, inconsistent, instant responses) and therefore the non-diegetic space, then *danmu*’s entry into the frame totally obscures the distinction. In the layering of the video and the comments, *danmu* invalidates the integrity of an interface of discrete and immutable objects. An Tairan (2016), writes on the interface of *danmu*,

> At any given time, the scene may be overlaid with multiple ‘bullets,’ or comments, scrolling across the screen. The line between the content of the exhibitionists and comments of spectators is ultimately blurred. The viewer and the actor, the articulable and the visible, the word and the image, the subject and the object, literally become one (p.53).

*Danmu* aims at the opposite of externalisation; instead, it wants to be an integral part of the video, which contests the video and possibly reverses the relation between the video and comments as the centre and edge. Galloway (2012) writes, “if the non-diegetic takes centre stage, we can be sure that the ‘outside’, or the social, has been woven more intimately into very fabric of the aesthetic than in previous times” (p.44). Building on Galloway’s (2006) *Interface Effect*, Li (2017) outlines “the key attraction of *danmaku*” as its role in mediating “both the contestation and reconciliation between visual content and platform socialization” (p.244). We have thus arrived at an *aestheticisation of comment culture*. Commentators are actors and performers, not in a speculative sense but in a very explicit sense, “in” the video. That is, according to the subcultural principle, “*danmu* is the actual main body” of the video. *Danmu* comments are not adjunct to but the essential constituents of the video. *Danmu* is therefore not simply textual, it can be graphical, animated, and even moving image (composed or coded as texts)—it conveys a sense of aesthetic while being social.

**Danmu on Livestreaming Platforms**

Due to the full liveness of livestreaming video the social experience of *danmu*, however, operates very differently in VoD and livestreaming video. Li (2017) argues that the social interface of *danmu* on Bilibili help construct a sense of “virtual liveness”. She writes,
To engage in a conversation on *danmaku*, you have to visit the same moment of the same video multiple times, to see how the others respond to your comments. . . Instead of simultaneity or immediacy, what are actually experienced in *danmaku* communications are time shifting, repetition, and delay (p.248).

In the case of livestreaming video, the interface of *danmu* has different implications. First, in the full-window viewing experience on both browser and mobile, the chat messages will not be absent or be a separate column but, instead, “flow” across the screen. Given the limited screen space on a mobile device, *danmu* affords both a full screen video and a whole view of comments.²⁸

Second, in the case of VoD, *danmu* as both a social experience and an aesthetic experience, are carefully composed, both individually and collectively. This reiterates my earlier point on the netiquette of *danmu*, which must inform these very elaborate acts of social interaction and almost artistic performances of *danmu* on uploaded videos. In the case of livestreams, full liveness in a way helps *vandalise* this coherent sense of aesthetics bestowed to the enshrined videos by frequent (re)visitors and “worshippers”, as shown in MC Shitou’s original video. This also resonates with my point in the last chapter on how liveness can be undesirable for some of these early adopters of *danmu* netiquette. For them, liveness banalises and vulgarises the flashy displays of *danmu* comments in previous generations of subcultural video culture on Acfun and Bilibili, as the live reactions no longer possess the quality of *danmu* accumulating according to a collectively understood netiquette specific to the subcultural video platform and the celebrated videos.

As Xima, a livestreamer on Douyu, said in my interview with him, in an ironic tone, “livestreaming platforms are for the ‘masses’ (qunzhong) who are mindless mobs or crowds”. This metaphor of crowds become crucial in understanding the affect of *danmu* on livestreaming platforms. Apart from the narratives on immediacy, *danmu* on livestreaming platforms also accentuates the live performance through the elation of temporal and virtual

²⁸ Twitch and YouTube livestreams did not deploy the design of a chat side column in their horizontal full screen mode on their smartphone or tablet apps until 2016.
co-presence (viewers in the chatroom and the broadcaster in the livestreaming video). As Citton (2017) writes,

The joint attention characteristics of live performances brings about ‘CROWD’ EFFECTS, as it encourages unpredictable contagions of mood that spread directly from a spectator to his neighbours (p.102, emphasis in original).

The performativity of *danmu* is thus the performativity of the crowd and the thrill of participating in the *danmu* of a popular channel is comparable to that of “joyful elation of the Mexican wave” (Ibid, p.102). In a popular channel, comments flow fast across the screen and in enormous quantity. It is thus impossible to keep up with every message. The alternative way to spectate, as viewers are already accustomed to, is to “zoom out” (or even “space out” at times) and view the “bullet screen” *as a whole*, instead of attentively reading individual comments. This imagery of crowds is quite consistent with how viewers on Douyu are called *shuiyou* or “water friends”, which comes from the meaning of ephemeral and anonymous fellowship between viewers and also refers to the literal flow of *danmu*.

This goes back to my earlier statement on the aestheticisation of the comment culture. As shown by Figure 2.16, it is impossible to comprehend all the *danmu* messages at a glance. It is easy to see this as an information overload that even defeats the original purpose or ideal of the “social” or dialogic experience of online chat rooms (such as Internet Relay Chat). One response to such information overload is to formulate an alternative of slow media; alternatively, if we do not see the role of *danmu* as facilitating “quality dialogue” in the first place, we can focus on its aesthetic quality—*danmu* simulates the density of crowds. If we could zoom out, instead of focusing on individual comment, we can observe crowds coalesce and disperse in real time. As Lovink (2011) writes,

This basic rule of how crowds gather, described by mass psychologists, is also operational on the internet, as if the masses want to celebrate their own presence by demonstrating their sheer quantity... the swelling and density of crowd seems unstoppable (p.51).

The sheer amount of comments overwhelms and renders the online video as the background. The metaphor of crowds also explains why so many Chinese official media
opinions have focused on attacking *danmu* as the uncontrolled and unfiltered masses. These vilifications are not necessarily due to the fear that *danmu* may contain critiques of the government, as they are already filtered on the client side by a list of banned keywords before they are even sent, but the fear of the *visual effect of an assembly*.

2.4 Conclusion

Douyu was not the first livestreaming platform in China but it was able to gradually build its own brand in multiple iterations from 2014 to 2018. YY, as the first livestreaming site in China (launched in 2009), has a different outlook (e.g. different sorts of performance are popular) and system of categorising content, which was built on the broad idea of light entertainment rather than videogames. Douyu initially tried to replicate Twitch in its emphasis on videogame-related content but nonetheless settled on the diverse content available on the platform and viewers’ preferences for “variety entertainment”. My key argument is that Douyu should be distinguished from both a replication of Twitch or Niconico and a somewhat isolated space of Chinese specificity. To study Douyu as a platform, it is crucial to acknowledge the multiple sources of influences from the aspects of economy, interface, and administrative practices, as well as provide a detailed timeline of changes.

To situate the livestreaming platform into a broader history of online videos in China since 2005, livestreaming media represents the further expansion of video cultures from the earlier subcultural taste of editing and commenting conventions (especially in the early “netiquette” of the rather exclusive video hubs such as Acfun) to a broader base of ordinary performers and viewers who have entirely different concerns. The rise of livestreaming media is thus a sign of both how dominant online videos are in people’s everyday life and how the earlier practices of subcultural online videos have become so marginalised in the contemporary mass culture of online video.
3 Methods and Methodology

Event-based Ethnography

3.1 Introduction

The ethnographer—specifically situated in particular slice of space-time, and embedded in a social situation he does not control—must take on the risk and responsibility of improvisation, the creative use and perhaps remaking of the repertory. (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p.180-181)

This chapter comes after Chapter 1, which lays out the pivoting theoretical questions of the livestreaming video, and Chapter 2, which includes a historically situated description of how Douyu performs as a socio-technological (infra)structure. The previous two chapters delimit the theoretical and empirical contexts for methods developed specifically for research on Douyu as a livestreaming platform. This chapter consists of both methods and methodological reflections. Methods refer to empirical research activities and this chapter is a written reconstruction of my fieldwork activities. Methodology refers to the post-fieldwork reflexive narrative of why or how I learnt or developed and performed the specific research activity. The process of developing specific practices of watching, notetaking, archiving, and presenting ethnographic data, all coalesce into the documentation and presentation of events throughout the thesis.

As I have drawn on television studies’ many shared theoretical concerns in Chapter 1, traditionally this discipline focuses on either the production or the consumption end, or interpreting television programs as texts. As far as methodologies are concerned, this thesis does not substantiate against the dichotomy of audience or reception and production, nor does it endorse it. I study both the production and reception of livestreams and discuss them in various facets throughout the thesis. This is my choice of research methodology in studying the whole platform, rather than a characterisation of my informants. Whether identifying as producers or consumers in an obvious or oblique sense (e.g. whether watching livestreams is constituted as an exploitable form of attentional labour) is not
usually an important concern for my informants, nor is it the main theoretical concern of this thesis.1

This needs to be clarified upfront because the closely related YouTube studies (a point of reference for livestreaming studies) argues that the past distinction between producers and audience was gradually blurred. In this sense, Burgess and Green (2009) encourage future researchers to,

shift from thinking about media production, distribution, and consumption [of the “old” broadcast media] to thinking about YouTube in terms of a continuum of cultural participation (p.57).

The argument that the audience is active, or viewers’ and creators’ positions are interchangeable—or at least in flux (see Bruns, 2008)—does felicitously apply to the contemporary livestreaming scene in multiple accounts. My streamer informants mostly aspire to be “professional” (i.e. to be financially sustainable to stream full-time). However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4, this aspiration is highly situated in the precarious condition of being a rising microcelebrity on the zhibo platform. Having fun is what motivated many early adopters who obliviously started their streaming “career”. The decision to go full-time depends on a sustainable financial return (at least in the short term). To be called “professional” means gaining a viable income from the profession but this is not the case for many. Moreover, from the perspective of the viewing experience, viewers and broadcasters often do “produce” the memorable event or the banal spectacle in collective and interactive efforts.

1 However, I am not diminishing the importance of studying the platform from the perspective of political economy. It is a matter of different focus. For example, in discussing Twitch audiences, Taylor (2018) challenges the imagery of a passive audience and simultaneously warns against the celebratory narrative on active audience, mostly on political grounds: participatory culture acknowledges the audience’s contribution in constituting culture, but a celebratory stance ignores the gap of participation and the dark side of commercialising audience “work of watching”. Zou (2018) presents a similar but more pessimistic argument: “live streaming in China manifests an emerging trend of capitalist enclosure in cyberspace, which has dire implications for people’s subjectivities and interactions” (p.805).
The more nuanced ethnographic argument, as opposed to arguments on labour practices such as produsage (Bruns, 2008), is that zhibo platforms are not always interactive nor passive. Interactivity or passivity, the active audience’s participation or not, it all depends on the concrete situation of the individual viewer, the specific genre/category of performance, the channel, and the specific event. The livestreaming technology does not presuppose “live” interactions, even though “live interaction” (i.e. the chat or danmu) is arguably the most important appeal of livestreaming technology.

For instance, the interactivity of a channel that primarily broadcasts “background” music—to compliment other activities such as studying—is usually very low, since most people use the channel as background music while they are doing something else. In another example, on a hugely populated channel with more than 20,000 concurrent viewers, the broadcaster cannot possibly interact with every single comment. The interaction is thus selective rather than a taken-for-granted fluid one-to-one communication and miscommunication is common. Participation is uneven in these cases of popular channels: “too much” interactivity results in information overload (see Section 2.3.4). However, in a channel with a few concurrent viewers, fairly even back and forth speech-to-text dialogues do take place. A further issue is the widespread practices of utilising viewer bots on Douyu (see Section 2.3.3). Such bots give a “dead” channel an appearance in which it is active in quantitative terms (i.e. the concurrent viewers) but not in qualitative terms (i.e. the comments in the chat that make dialogic sense). The object of research, the zhibo platform and its channels, is not a durable form of structure.

As the concrete situation is more nuanced, the research design should be adaptive to each individual context as I allude in the above examples. In terms of temporality, “one of the greatest virtues of ethnographic methods is that researchers can adapt them to the contexts of particular fieldsites at particular periods in time” (Boellstorff, 2012, p.54). Participant observation, as the core ethnographic method, is key to capturing this temporal aspect because “it provides ethnographers insights into practices and meanings as they unfold” (Ibid, p.55, emphasis added). Instead of strictly following a pre-fieldwork design,

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2 I have expanded this point in detail in my discussion on hot or cold medium in Section 1.3.2.
the process of my fieldwork is a process of adapting, learning, and developing methods. In Christine Hine’s (2015) words, “‘getting it wrong’ becomes a public event, and the ethnographer learns from the experience of fitting in, or not, as events unfold” (p.55, emphasis added). This adaptiveness (especially in the cases of “getting it wrong”) is thus situated in a spatio-temporality aptly named event-based ethnography, a term I will expand on later in the chapter.

Returning to the issue of adaptive or emergent research design, improvisational methodological principle in doing ethnography is not as straightforward as “going with the flow”. Improvisation is risky as the ethnographer can be stranded in the oblivion of endless non-events and conspicuous observations of livestreams. Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) suggest that in order to improvise well, we also need the right training as groundwork (much like musical improvisation): first, this means the repertoire of methods—such as elicitation methods, surveys, quantitative analysis and so forth—that we learn through training in anthropology or related disciplines; second, this means “context- and time-specific knowledge” (Ibid, p.183).

The process of learning in the field is also the process of “working out which medium deems appropriate for different activities” (Hine, 2015, p.56). Whether it is watching livestreams, archiving chatlogs, web scraping, or fetching mass amount of metadata, each activity has its appropriate medium. In the digital context, Rogers (2013) also calls for specific “methods of the medium” or “methods embedded in online devices” (p.1) that we are studying. “Methods of the medium” are not simply digital methods in the generic sense nor methods for digital contexts indiscriminately, but a set of methods sensitive to livestreaming platforms specifically.

My embodied process of doing fieldwork is deeply imbricated with the media practices of my informants and the platform in general as I claim validity of my methods only within the specific context of Douyu. My toolbox of concrete methods is not a prescribed set of methods situated in an established field (e.g. television studies or even YouTube studies)—nor do I attempt to generalise these methods into an existing field.

My methods are improvisations informed by the embodied process of learning from my informants and the multitude of anonymous contributors active online around the
scenes of *zhībō*, as the platform evolves with the native digital objects and shifts in infrastructure over time. My participatory practices should not be considered separate “from the known, but part of the known [the ethnographed] with all the attendant problems” (Hobart, 2010, p.57). In each specific method as explicated later in Sections 3.3.3 and 3.3.4, my research practices and my informants’ practices are juxtaposed, to demonstrate how my own practices are inspired by and reflexive of livestream broadcasters’ and viewers’ practices. In the following sections I will first provide a digest of fieldwork activities and their attendant issues, then I will go into details of event-based ethnography.

3.2 A Digest of Fieldwork

I will first outline an overview or a structure of my fieldwork from November 2015 until June 2017, when I stopped watching Douyu livestreams. The following table is a digest of my fieldwork: phases, research activities, and duration. It should be noted that the phases are not strictly separated according to a chronological order, but by the priority order and location of research activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.1 Fieldwork Process</th>
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<tr>
<td>Phase I Desk-field-work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary long-term online fieldsites</td>
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3 I stopped doing frequent online fieldwork by the end of June 2017. While there were many new changes implemented by the platforms as well as new notable channels and new celebrities, I needed to find a point in time to stop so the thesis can be written within temporal limits.

4 A *wanghong* incubator is an agency that trains and manages a roster of livestreamers to work on multiple platforms. See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research activities</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>3.2.1 Fieldwork activities</th>
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| (1) Regularly watching and contributing to channel comments, recording livestream, screenshotting, collecting chatlog and other metadata, writing notes, and archiving streams; (2) Participating as a streamer (on Douyu and Bilibili), *chafang* livestreams; (3) Following internet discussions in QQ groups, Tieba and Zhihu; (4) 12 in-depth online follow-up interviews. | (1) At least three two-hour sessions of watching or/and streaming per week from November 2015 until November 2016 (except when I was travelling in China); (2) At least one session a week in 2017 until June 2017. There are in total 102 screen-recorded sessions of *chafang* as well as many unrecorded sessions on mobile devices; (3) Over 200 hours of livestreaming various videogames on Douyu and Bilibili from 2016 to 2017. | In the first phase of fieldwork, I was watching livestreams on a regular basis, recording while watching, participating in the channel chats, monitoring/collectiong metadata, taking screenshots, writing fieldnotes, and organising audio and video files as well as fieldnote entries. Screenshots are catalogued or tagged according to genres, performers, and dated events. I have developed a research practice of *chafang* (room inspecting): I capture footage from my desktop PC, broadcast it onto my own Douyu channel ([https://www.douyu.com/411800](https://www.douyu.com/411800)), while providing spontaneous comments as I browse and watch Douyu livestreams.

As a principle, I always watched and documented a livestream channel for a period of time—to familiarise myself with the performativity of each channel—before
approaching the broadcaster and his/her fans for conversations or interviews. It should be emphasised that the relatively small number of streamers and viewers I interviewed should be situated in the more frequent and consistent work of participant observation on livestream channels for months to years. This is partly why this chapter focuses on the ethnographic work of participating, documenting and commentating on livestreams as opposed to interviews.

I also livestreamed on my Douyu channel beginning in September 2015: playing a variety of different games, engaging in conversations whenever there were viewers around, and also streaming outdoor via a cellular network on three occasions. I ceased to stream on Douyu regularly from late 2016 after my channel was permanently suspended.5 I later resumed livestreaming on Bilibili (https://live.bilibili.com/414565) for the first half of 2017. I will not address these autoethnographic dimensions of my fieldwork in this chapter in detail, but they are interjected in snippets throughout the thesis.

In addition to watching Douyu channels and livestreaming myself, my online fieldwork also included monitoring QQ fan groups of each Douyu channel that I followed regularly; web clipping news items and archiving discussions on Tieba and Zhihu; as well as conducting online interviews, which are reflected in quotes throughout the thesis. This is an ongoing work of engaging with other viewers and fans, observing the circulation of memes, GIFs, screenshots, and recruiting new interviewees among viewers.

Phase II

The primary fieldsites—the livestreaming channels—also serve as the kernel of expanded secondary fieldsites. I visited and interviewed my informants in their homes, workplaces, and public spaces like cafés. In the second phase of fieldwork, I met three streamers in person and had long conversations with them. I also followed the personal connections I established online with viewers active in fan QQ groups formed around the channels I had

5 The official explanation was that I was inactive for six months, which was during my two field visits in China. My channels had been suspended temporarily twice in 2015 and 2016 for different reasons. I did not attempt to repeal the decision.
been following as well as the few individuals who regularly viewed my own channel. From these interactions, I met and interviewed six viewers.

In terms of physical locations, I visited four homes and one wanghong incubator. In the case of streamers, visiting a wanghong incubator gave me a sense of what the working environment viscerally felt like. Even though the major appeal of zhibo is the transparency of its production setting, there are still various degrees of contrivance that can be only observed in visiting the place physically. In the case of viewers, homes can be very meaningful spaces because informants can easily re-enact their viewing practices while talking to me. For instance, the comfort of someone’s home can greatly help them put the inarticulable topic of boredom into stories and scenarios.

3.2.2 Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

Originally out of transparency I named my Douyu account “ethnographer” and my public information on Douyu included my position as a PhD student at RMIT University and a link to a web page that contained the Plain Language Statement in Chinese and English as well as a downloadable pdf of the Participant Information Consent Form. However, this was by no means the extent of ethical participation. The participatory ethics of anthropology, just like improvisation which I discussed earlier, highly depend on each concrete situation.6

In the case of livestreaming on my own Douyu channel, whenever asked by a viewer I always disclosed my identity as a researcher. Articulating my researcher identity was not just a static display through channel information but a communicative process, which was often not so smooth due to various constraints. For example, my username “ethnographer” turned out to be quite a nuisance because my viewers initially did not know how to address me in the chat, as the username was too foreign and alienating. For the

6 Here I omit my view on the issue of privacy according to different categories and interviewee preferences of observees and interlocutors as I have discussed in the introduction chapter.
returning viewers, they knew my name as I had private conversations with them on other media platforms and I usually clarified my research in plain language. For the new viewer, they often addressed me in either the first person “zhubo (broadcast host)” or in the third person “this zhubo” (if they were talking to other co-present viewers). I did not have a nickname on livestream until one viewer started to call me Zongge or “Brown Brother”, and I just continued to use the nickname on livestream.

When I was conducting online interviews, I usually sent the interviewees the web page with the Plain Language Statement and consent form. Some interviewees were interested enough to read and asked me questions. For instance, Xima actually searched my name and institution online, and found my personal website. Transparency in this instance helped my case, because Xima became interested in my project and his reading of my research prompted interesting discussions between us—both of us were prepared for the interview. In other cases, my disclosure did not raise any intense interest from my informants, and they did not mind the interview as long as the conversation was not too intrusive to them. In the situation of face-to-face interviews, I often presented my RMIT name card and gave interviewees time to read and comment on my Plain Language Statement. But even in these cases, the ethical practice lay less in the paperwork than the consistent communicative work of explaining and clarifying.

At times it is crucial to keep a distance and know one’s limit in posing questions about the intricate connections between streamers and viewers, and their relationship to the platform or their employers—especially if they are a member of a guild or agency. This respect for the community’s own inner circles—regardless of whether I agree with their views—is not just from an “external” researcher, but someone who had participated as a livestreamer (albeit in a different capacity). This relatable-ness to what Senft (2008) calls “networked reflective solidarity”: “a political identification that simultaneously hails the viewer/listener as ‘one of us’ and insists that one cannot know everything about anyone, all the time” (p.116). Knowing the limit and respecting the platform’s often unelucidated rules, such as the issue of data fraud I discussed in the last chapter, are crucial for an ethical conduct in ethnographic research.
Monetary Concerns

It had been very difficult to organise face-to-face meetings with popular streamers, without prior connections or mutual contacts. My attempts of contacting streamers often had no replies, especially given that I made the conscious decision of not donating real money. In most cases, donations—especially relatively large sums such as a “rocket” of 500RMB (see Chapter 2)—can guarantee responses from the livestreamers and even an opportunity for a private conversation off stream.

Paying for an interview or compensating someone for their time is not intrinsically unethical nor abnormal in social sciences. However, the practice of donation is already in place on most livestreaming platforms: a donation is not simply a gesture of appreciation and it often comes with the psychological burden (or at least effect) of “customers” paying for a performance. This decision not to donate money to secure a “charity correspondence” (Senft, 2008, p.12) was not only made upon the participatory ethics of anthropology, but also to reduce the risks of reproducing or perpetuating the prevalent pre-existing social expectations on zhibo platforms.

3.3.3 Miscellaneous Technological Issues

This section includes considerations on a number of practical issues and technical matters during online fieldwork.

Internet Connection

The issue of internet connection is not to be taken for granted because I lived in Australia for most of the time during online fieldwork. First, there were no Douyu servers in Australia; second, connections between Chinese servers and Australian ISPs (Internet Service Providers) were notoriously slow. I frequently experienced and endured repetitive

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7 This psychological effect is particularly pronounced on the so-called nüzhubo (female livestreamers) channels because certain amount of donation usually amounts to a guaranteed private method of contact (e.g. WeChat or phone number) and an underlying gendered social expectation to flatter the donator.
refreshing, and long loading times. Even using an expensive fibre broadband plan since 2015, my Australian ISP was notorious for speed throttling, especially during Australian peak hours. Great Firewall of China not only stops domestic traffic from accessing the global internet, but also greatly slows down overseas IP addresses accessing Chinese servers.

Frustrated with the connection speed to Douyu livestreams, I experimented with VPN (Virtual Private Network) services and changing my DNS (Domain Name System) address—in simple terms, I tried to mock the server with a fake Chinese IP address—in order to connect to Douyu’s server faster. There were widespread folkloric beliefs among online video viewers outside China that this would remove or at least help alleviate the obstructive “Wall Effect” of Great Firewall. But this did not work for me, likely because changing IP address does not rectify the issue of slow internet infrastructure in Australia.

Research Devices

Here is a list of equipment I used during my online fieldwork.

**Computer**: Desktop PC. The majority of recording and broadcasting was done on a desktop PC as broadcasting is a CPU and RAM intensive task that most laptops cannot handle.

**Mobile Devices**: iPhone 6 Plus, iPad. Even though the majority of my viewing, recording, streaming was done on my Desktop PC, it should be noted that viewing on mobiles is very common practice. The affordance of mobile viewing and broadcasting as well as mobile

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8 So far English scholarship (see de Seta, 2016; Li, 2016) has only discussed *fanqiang* (literally “crossing the wall”) as a euphemism invented by Chinese internet users to refer to the practice of bypassing the Great Firewall—via VPN and other methods—to access foreign websites and foreign online games servers. I was also practicing *fanqiang*, except that I was trying to get back inside the barbed wire digital fence.

9 According to an iResearch (2017) survey report (N=695), 87.5% of viewers preferred watching on mobile phones and 70.1% preferred watching on computers (the question allowed multiple answers).
exclusive livestreaming platforms is another vast topic, which I cannot engage in full detail in this thesis. But as I have discussed verticality as a crucial divergence of mobile livestreams/videos in Chapter 1, the other main feature of livestreams broadcast from mobile phones and viewed on mobile phones is mobility. The majority of outdoor streams (i.e. from a public environment such as the street or a park) were broadcast from smartphones; mobile viewing sessions (e.g. during one’s daily commute) were possible and very appealing from 2016 because mobile data plans had become more affordable.

Incidentally, Figure 3.1 demonstrates the most complicated mobile set-up I have seen: An Android smartphone connected to a power bank and an amplifier, a microphone wirelessly connected to the amplifier, two lights, and two stands. The amplifier broadcast his singing voice to his audience at the park and relayed it to the smartphone, which then broadcast it to the livestreaming platform. In this set-up, he was simultaneously performing for audiences physically next to him (including myself) and his viewers on the zhibo platform.
Monitors: Dual Monitors. Dual monitors—sometimes dual PC set-up (which requires a capture card—are common set-ups for livestream broadcasters. I also used this set-up for my livestreaming and recording activities.

Webcam: Logitech HD Pro Webcam C920. It was one of the webcams most commonly used by livestreamers.

Microphone: Yeti Blue. It was one of the USB microphones most commonly used by livestreamers.

Capture Card: Razer Ripsaw Capture Card. I used it to capture footage from my PlayStation 4, so I can livestream playing PlayStation 4 games. With the capture card, I can also relay footage from one device to another, so as to relieve CPU intensive streaming work from a single device.

Software: Open Broadcast Software; Microsoft OneNote, and others. OBS is a free and open source software. I used it for both livestreaming and recording my screen. OneNote was used for notetaking, web clipping, and organising fieldnotes into folders and tags. I also used a variety of other ephemeral programs to fetch (meta)data, some of which I will discuss later in this chapter. They are ephemeral in the sense that they are designed for one specific task (such as mass downloading livestream comments) around the platform of Douyu. They usually only worked while the independent developer still updated them according to Douyu’s API (Application Programming Interface).

3.3 Event-based Ethnography

3.3.1 Introduction
Ethnography as a process... is inextricably embedded in relationally structured social lives, quotidian routines, events that become Events, the panic time of deadlines, the elongated time of boredom, the cyclical time of the return of the expected, the spiral time of returns to the recognizable or the remembered, and so on.

(Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p.177)

As I have tackled the problematic concept of liveness in Chapter 1, liveness as an ontology or castigating the ontology as a disguise of ideology flattens the operation of liveness in specific ways. My theoretical perspective is to focus on the sociotechnical beliefs and performativity of liveness rather than a strictly technical matter. The same perspective applies to the regime of real time or real-timeness—rather than an endless optimisation (that technological development leads us to believe), real-timeness highly depends on the specificity of the platform under discussion “at the intersection of real-time processing and experience” (Weltevrede et al, 2014, p.129). “Platforms... produce distinct forms of real-time for specific user” (Ibid, p.130). Again, the operativity of real-timeness needs to be specifically understood within each ethnographic context. The technical specificity of livestreaming (outlined in Chapter 1), and the platformative specificity of the zhibo platform (outlined in Chapter 2) combine to serve as the basis of real-timeness and events under discussion in the second part of the thesis.

Given the set of software tools available, the potentials of “live methods” are plentiful. According to Back and Puwar (2012), potentiality of live methods is “the potential for simultaneity in research and the possibility of re-ordering the relationship between data gathering, analysis, and circulation” (p.7). While such potentiality is perhaps too ideal for the relatively slow process of academic theory-making, this simultaneity can be certainly approximated in certain timely research reports. For example, Crete-Nishihata et al (2016) is an excellent example of a timely and well evidenced report on the censorship regime of livestreaming platforms. I do quote many industrial and short academic reports
of similar nature on various facets of the Chinese zhibo industry throughout the thesis because they do offer useful statistics and preliminary observations.\(^{10}\)

It is at this intersection of theory and method where an ethnographic perspective can help mitigate the conundrum of devising “live methods”. I am not interested in proclaiming that my methods are “live” (part of them are “live” technically speaking), but the specific temporality must be made obvious in my own narrative. In this section, I will first go through the methodological challenges in regard to the politics of temporality and then explicate building blocks of an event-based ethnography. I shall clarify that my event-based ethnography is mostly addressing the online research activities in Phase I (see the earlier section) rather than the face-to-face interviews and hangouts in Phase II.

### 3.3.2 Ethnographic Approaches to Temporality

Timeliness is mandatory; being untimely is too risky professionally.  
(Rabinow, 2011, p.193)

Ethnographies that really report present conditions are future historical documents, or primary sources in the making. The challenge, then, is not to do away with the synchronic ethnographic frame, but to exploit fully the historical within it (Marcus & Fisher, 1996, p.96)

Conventionally anthropology did not need to justify itself via timeliness due to the research subjects, who were often seen as evidence of the vanishing past. For anthropological work in contemporary settings, there is always a sense of urgency to keep ethnographic work timely and relevant. When anthropology is “attached to” the synchronicity of digital media, the discipline seems to be haunted by its desire to remain relevant. This sense of insecurity or anxiety, induced by the aforementioned “trap of the now” (Back & Puwar, 2012, p.8), can be seen as an extension of the crisis of “timeless, situationless epistemological thinking” (Hobart, 1996, p.4) in anthropological ethnography.

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\(^{10}\) This is partly due to my limitation as a solo PhD student with limited resources to conduct large scales of survey or data extraction/analysis, partly due to my decision to put my participation in the centre of research methods and theory-making as the goal of this written product.
Traditional ethnography assumes a status of timeless knowledge as “the structural-functional assumption that a society is best studied as if it were a system replicating itself has long been abandoned” (Moore, 1987, p.727). In fieldwork, anthropologists habitually looked for durable structures and “phenomena that are understood to have withstood the test of time” (Malkki, 1997, p.89-90). This is partly why anthropologists look for “communities” which suggests boundaries and “structural solidity” (Ibid, p.90).

Hobart’s (1996) critique and Rabinow’s (2011) approach of the untimely coincides with the criticism of a homogenous, formal time of scholarship, which is seen discrete from the temporality of everyday life. In Rabinow and Marcus’s (2008) conversation on the anthropology of the contemporary, the contemporary attached to anthropology in “a very unspecific (temporal) way” just entails “your work on something that is generally perceived as important” (p.57, emphasis added). On this level of relevance or striving for relevance in a generic manner (in terms of temporality), it is difficult to distinguish anthropology from journalism.

However, in its second sense, the contemporary can be understood as a “moving image of modernity” (Ibid, p.58). Here the contemporary is thus “a technical term that allows us to decompose the emergent phenomena” (Ibid, p.58). With this definition, Rabinow and Marcus (2008) propose, “now we have to cultivate untimeliness and this runs precisely against the journalistic grain of being relevant immediately” (p.61). As Johannes Fabian (2008) suggests, in contrast to journalism, late-ness is rooted in the “epistemological condition” of the ethnographic enterprise: “problems with assuming that we write about is simply there are complicated by a heightened awareness of a then” (p.4, emphasis in original). If we agree that ethnography is temporal rather than permanent knowledge, it is perhaps always too late to write an ethnography.

However, untimeliness entails not only carefully dated processual research, as I discuss later in this section, but also “an analytical aim” which requires “a certain critical distance, an adjacency, untimeliness” (Rabinow & Marcus, 2008, p.58). This recalls the overall theoretical strategy outlined in the introduction: ethnographic practice is a theoretical practice. Instead of reporting immediately after the happenings of an event,
taking time to consolidate the data into theoretical reflections and trimming them into a narrative of processual development is an important virtue of ethnography.

As Tim Ingold (2014) identifies a “schizochronic tendency” (p.386) in terms such as “ethnographic encounter”. “To cast encounters as ethnographic is to consign the incipient—the about-to-happen in unfoding relationships—to the temporal past of the already over” (Ibid, p.386). Similarly frustrated with the temporal politics in emerging anthropology, media anthropologist John Postill (2017) posits a critique of what he calls “present continuism”—“we tacitly favour the imminent at the expense of the actual and completed, conflating the recent past, the present and the near future in a fuzzy ‘now’” (p.22). The tentative solution, as Rabinow and Marcus (2008) suggest, is “sustained inquiry” (p.61). The practical solution Postill (2017) offers is to write in “the past simple” (p.22) or a “diachronic ethnography”—to simply say what happened according to clock-and-calendar time instead of nebulously implying an unspecified continuity. However, this call to straighten up the thread of temporality in ethnographic enterprise is not necessarily new as Sally Falk Moore (1987) already raised the question of how the present was produced in anthropological literature,

The identification of present processes as historically significant is necessarily provisional. Just as ethnographies are becoming more candid about what cannot be ascertained, so “current history” analyses must be more candid about what cannot be predicted (p.731).

Studying contemporary online media platforms, falling behind the “accelerated temporality” of their development is not necessarily detrimental to ethnographic research. Instead of stating that the internet changes so fast that we cannot remain relevant as a discipline, untimeliness can become an accountability when I candidly and explicitly specify the temporality I am studying (like the periodisation I proposed in the introduction) and carefully updates my account of events, screenshots, video archive, and metadata entries into dates and contexts, as well as demonstrate these temporal intricacies in the written product: the thesis. This explicitness in delimiting the inquiry and “conditions of field research” (p.43) is also key to Wendy Hsu’s (2007) performative approach to ethnography.
However, acknowledging this temporal specificity is not enough to deal with an object of research that is transitory rather than durable. To follow Moore (1987) and Malkki’s (1997) ethnographic theories on “events” in conjunction with Hsu’s (2017) “performative digital ethnography”, I propose event-based ethnography as my key methodology and delineate its operations in the following sections.

3.3.3 Livestreaming Event and Fieldwork Process

Events are to processes what categories are to structures.
(Moore, 1987, p.736)

Events are a process or a becoming rather than being.
(Rodriguez, 2016, p.239)

Sally Salk Moore’s (1987) dilemma was between structure and event. Event has always played a crucial role in anthropology as it was considered “exemplification of an extant symbolic or social order” (p.729). Events were seen as the basic units of ethnographic data to (in)form larger systems of meanings. This was then problematised by Moore (1987), because the emphasis on a coherent structure often overshadowed the “substantial areas of normative indeterminacy” (p.729) in ethnographic events. Events can be swallowed by larger structures and the contingencies in local events are minimalised by the structures.

Moore’s point resonates with the principle of “structured contingency” (Elsaesser, 2008, p.30) in the system of genres on Douyu (discussed in Chapters 1 and 2). Genres/categories on Douyu are the central legitimising institution of categorising contents, and compartmentalising various kinds of celebrities as well as performances. However, as I have alluded in Chapter 1, these systems are not totalising nor coherent to the degree of a durable structure. Events taking place on the livestreaming platform are the contingencies. Some events are transitory, fleeting moments that reveal the operation of power, while other events transgress these structures and disrupt the operation of structure.

Thomas Scheffer’s (2007) thought exercise on the relations between event and process as “a heuristic pair of concepts” (p.173) is very useful here. Scheffer (2007) refuses
to give clear definitions of these concepts, but rather redefines them relationally: “an event can unfold in a processual manner. Processes can appear as events in historical perspective” (p.173). Events as they unfold are certainly contingencies. However, as I have discussed earlier in Postill’s (2017) critique, this fuzziness in the process of field observations and unprecise negligence in the following ethnographic writing are two different matters. The former cannot be avoided as the processual events of a livestream cannot be predicted as ethnographer is watching “live”; the later can be, however, avoided by tidying up the ethnographic narrative in the write-up. The subjective experience of events is not necessarily linear (as backtracking is often necessary to understand the whole context and sequence), but the presentation of a recorded event should be in a clear linear progression.

Following the earlier point that the memorable livestreaming events are produced or performed by viewers and performers interactively. Eventfulness, as a performative resource and effect, vary in situations (see Section 1.4.4 in Chapter 1). The degrees of eventfulness, reminiscent of the degrees of liveness, are a crucial indicator to make sense of selection and annotation of events, and to clarify the written presentation of events. The following three categories of events correspond to different degrees of eventfulness in process of observation, fieldnotes, and the final written product.

(1) Ordinary, recurring, and regular events: Observation

This category of events can be easily ignored, because they appear to be so “ordinary” and anticipated. Chuange sold barbecue, Ligan played League of Legends. They were doing these things every single day when they livestreamed. The majority of the duration of a normal livestream is typically not exciting. It seems as if the “content” of eventfulness were emptied out—the non-event. As Baudrillard (2005) has pointed out, non-event is not zero degree of eventfulness (eventless), nor that nothing happens. It is rather the banality or regularity of certain daily events has repeated so much to the degree that we are no longer sensitive to them. Without the attractions of the rupturing remarkable events, the ordinary events of livestreams seem too stale, unbearable—as a result, the live chatroom remains
unoccupied. The absence of interactivity further exacerbates the unbearableness. The bulk of these ordinary events will not be represented in the written thesis, but they constitute the groundwork of fieldwork routine; the documented and recounted remarkable events must be understood in relation to this groundwork.

If we see the process of a channel activity as a sequence of contingent events, the vital operativity of participant observation of zhìbo is that I watch a livestream within its normal sequentiality and schedules—i.e. I start watching when I am notified by my browser or mobile app. I experience and then remember the events as they unfold, like an ordinary viewer (albeit I also record the events via technological means). The easier path, which is reversely starting with short livestream highlight clips (then possibly go back to the stream replay that contains the clip), is not preferred because the “ordinariness” and development (or lack thereof) would be omitted from the “totality” of viewing experience.

For the participant observer of livestreams, the basic responsibility is to regularly dedicate uninterrupted time to viewing. There is also a practical consideration: most livestreams, unless the livestreamer is not committed or disrupted by more urgent matters, last at least 3 hours in their entirety. As for most popular and dedicated professional zhìbo, streaming 4 to 6 hours is a “normal” working day. Every channel has its own socio-technological particularities and communicative rituals. These particularities are repeated so much that they are considered regular. Only long-term observation can reveal their developments and these background ethnographic data can greatly help the explication of extraordinary events, which sometimes make no sense if viewed in isolation.

From a statistical point of view, at any given times during a day, a large percentage of active Douyu channels are unoccupied by viewers. For example, during peak hours on a typical day (as I recorded metadata in November 2017), there were usually over 1200 channels livestreaming on Douyu. My own estimate is that only 14% of all active channels have more than 2,000 concurrent viewers and only 2.5% have more 10,000 viewers. More than half of all channels have less 100 viewers and 25% of all channels have less than 20

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11 The narration of this not-much-going-on is a crucial device for ethnographic theories of ordinariness and boredom in Chapters 4 and 5.
viewers, which basically translate to almost zero viewers because Douyu’s viewer count is systematically inflated.

Most researchers will likely bypass these “desolate lands” and start with popular channels since the social dimension of these empty channels is so sparse. But these vacant channels are often ideal “ethnographic places” (Pink, 2009), because I—one of the few commenting viewers and fieldworker—have the opportunity to talk to the streamer one-on-one in a non-intrusive way. It is not intrusive because it is a straightforward question (in text) & answer (in speech) interview about zhibo within the setting of a livestream and most livestreamers expect questions about their livestreaming practices from their viewers anyway.12 This form of dialogue is not only unobtrusive to the practice of viewing on the livestreaming platform, but also a proper ethnographic practice within this context.

With a fair amount of luck as well as a good sense of prospects of these initially lonely streamers, I was able to observe the growth of three streamers (Ligan, Chuange, Xiangxi Xiaopang) from almost no viewers to tens of thousands of concurrent viewers over years. In these cases, the sociality of viewer participation was not present or very scarce during my initial entry into the “field” (i.e. the channel) but developed over time as I actively participated in early formation of that channel-specific sociality as a viewer by contributing to the chat. This choice to routinely browse, and selectively observe small channels, brings about the development of a specific way of observation: chafang.

Chafang: Attention Management

Chafang literally means visiting or inspecting rooms. It is originally used in the context of hospital: as a morning routine, doctors visit and inspect hospitalised patients in their rooms. As I have discussed earlier in section 1.3.1, the term zhibojian or “direct casting room”, which originally refers to the news anchor studio, utilises a spatial metaphor that comes from television. In the context of livestreaming, chafang first emerged in Ligan’s channel

12 Most broadcasters I talked on Douyu were fairly open about their own livestreaming practices: what they were doing, how, and why. My common practice was to avoid personal questions directly but, in most occasions, broadcasters ultimately had the choice to selectively disclose his or her personal life.
as a way to “kill time” between gaming sessions or during long queue time (in matchmaking games such as League of Legends). So originally chafang was supposed to be interjections or down-time activities between more “engaging” activities such as playing a game.

In 2014 Ligan often browsed channels hosted by female livestreamers and “inspected” their channels between League of Legends games (his main stream activity), while livestreaming the whole process of chafang on his Douyu channel. He would comment on the appearances of the broadcaster and the activity she was doing, often in sexually provocative words.13 His viewers would flood the inspected channel’s chatroom and if the inspected streamer responded, Ligan would talk to her. This was not done via voice-chat program, but through their own livestream channels—they simply watched each other’s livestream and talked with seconds of delay and echoes (see Figure 3.2). Ligan’s viewers were elated by this unexpected event of unsolicited flirtish conversations, as they commented, “live sex”, “Douyu forbids all erotic performance in response to the recent ‘Cleanse the Web’ campaign, “please cherish your channel”, and “calling the police”.

13 I have witnessed multiple instances of Ligan inspecting other channels. The inspected channel was always that of a woman.
From 2015, *chafang* gradually developed into a very common intermittent activity on livestreams throughout Douyu, although I had never seen a channel fully dedicated to *chafang*. It evolved into a way in which a more established *zhubo* celebrity can help promote and boost viewership of a minor *zhubo*, either obliviously or intentionally. I started documenting these events of *chafang* in 2014 when I was only casually watching Douyu. They were sometimes extraordinary events that ruptured the normal sequence of a livestream. But *chafang* did not occur to me as an inspiration as a research method until May 2016, as I initially separated the activity of watching livestreams (I focused on viewing, recording, typing notes) and streaming myself (I focused on playing videogames on livestreams and talking to my viewers). Here comes a practical problem of watching livestreams: attention.

Just like television, attentive and consistent participation is a matter of choice for most viewers, and this depends on the situation. According to Katherine Hayles’s (2007) research on cognitive modes,

Deep attention. . . [is] the cognitive style traditionally associated with the humanities, is characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods, ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times. . . hyper attention. . . [is] switching
focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom (p.187).

These two concepts are useful for describing the modes of attention when I am in while watching livestreams. Watching in the mode of “deep attention” is the mode of participant observation and taking fieldnotes in audio or text. Watching in the mode of “hyper-attention” is idling or watching distractedly, while multi-tasking such as writing, reading, or doing other leisure activities, and livestreams usually serve as the ambient sound/image. I was also switching between these two modes in various capacities. It is worth mentioning that watching livestreams can be ambient and intermittent activity much like television and radio. The absentmindedness will be discussed again in Chapter 4 (Tactical Boredom) and Chapter 5 (Ordinary Affect).

As a researcher, once I have decided that I would consistently follow one channel through the sequence of events, I have the obligation of not switching it off. The difficulty then lies in the endurance of long-term observation of “not much going on”. Ordinary non-events are crucial to my ethnographic practice and indispensable to the event-based ethnography. However, this theoretical alertness did not help alleviate the excruciating pain of watching long hours of livestreams, which easily led to stasis and indifference. This insensitivity was then further exacerbated by the treadmill of rewatching recordings, transcribing, and writing notes.

*Chafang* was a remedy to the almost ascetic practice of watching long livestreams. I originally began recording a series of live commentary videos while watching livestreams, just to avoid this insensitivity or gradually waning attention. Talking to myself was a way to maintain my attention on the slow (in term of development of events) livestreams. I primarily talked in English in these videos, because I expected my “audio fieldnotes” (i.e. my live commentaries) could guide the later process of rewatching these screen-recordings and transcribing events (more on the archiving of these recordings later this chapter).

In 2016, I also started livestreaming the whole process (described above) on my Douyu channel at the same time as well. During my *chafang* streams, my livestream channel was entitled “inspecting Douyu rooms with me” and I talked primarily in Mandarin.
While Ligan’s “inspecting rooms” was an intermittent activity, I made *chafang* the main content of my livestream. The original intention was to attract my viewers to watch with me if they also happened to enjoy my commentaries and my selection of livestreams. But no one seemed interested as I usually watched small channels instead of popular ones. During my *chafang* streams I barely had any interactions with viewers in my channel if there were viewers at all.

But even without my viewers’ participation, this exercise still helped me to manage my attention to a large degree. With the knowledge that my distractions would be recorded and livestreamed, self-discipline was much easier, and I kept alert for interesting unfolding events to talk about. My live comments during my *chafang* streams were in fragments: sometimes in spouts of excitement and a seemingly coherent summary and critique of the ongoing events; sometimes in very slow and broken sentences as my thoughts drifted.

![Figure 3.3 Bilibili contestant’s video of drawing a QR code. Screenshot taken on 16 October 2016.](image)

Figure 3.3 is a screenshot of my livestream in which I watched a livestream of a person drawing a QR Code for half an hour. The QR code livestream was a part of a Bilibili contest for “the most boring video” thus it aimed for an intriguing boredom (see Chapter 5). The idea of drawing a QR code in order to test if it would work was interesting, but watching
the whole process was not. My own livestream, with the webcam recording my own face, captured my attention gradually waning as I went from being excited about the idea when I first started watching, to occasionally being distracted by emails and messages on my phone, to typing notes and taking screenshots, to the eventual climax when I saw that the drawn QR code actually worked when scanned by the streamer’s phone. The case of this livestream is quite unusual, but it demonstrates how attention management can be difficult during certain livestream genres. Even I could not keep my full attention for the entire duration of the livestream, my own distraction due to the long period of not-much-going-on is still an important unfolding prelude to the extraordinary climax at the end.

I originally intended to make my archive of chafang videos open, preferably on a platform like YouTube where they can be publicly accessible. Instead, I kept these recordings on my hard drive, to avoid potential copyright infringement issues. These video files are all dated, and each corresponds to one or several timestamped chatlogs (depending on how many channels I watched during the session). I have recorded 102 chafang sessions from 2015 to 2017.

(2) Extraordinary and disruptive events: Fieldnotes

Extraordinary events are automatically recognisable from the “normal” sequence. They occur when the normal rhythm of sequences (as described in the previous section) is disrupted, interjected or suspended by actions, dialogues, or interventions from unusual actors (e.g. most spectacularly by the regulators such as Douyu administrators and the police). A good example of extraordinary event would be the temporary censorship of Yezi’s channel discussed in the previous chapter. These extraordinary events are privileged in fieldnotes and video archives, but they are not to be discussed in isolation from the last category of ordinary events, which are the crucial ethnographic foundation to make sense of extraordinary events. During my viewing sessions, these events are documented both in written/audio fieldnotes and screen-recordings.

Moore (1987) argues that certain events can help make the “historical sign visible in fieldwork” (p.730). She calls these certain events “diagnostic events”. In the process of
ethnographic fieldwork, identifying these events during observation will greatly help evaluate their value in ethnographic analysis as well as historical significance. But again, the ability to effectively identify these diagnostic events effectively can only be learnt through long-term observation.

Ethnographic Commentary

As eventlogs accumulate, I gradually built an archive of hundreds of entries of eventlogs in OneNote. Some of these notes untranslated and “raw”, some translated and even annotated (discussed in detail in the next section). Returning to this ethnographic archive after fieldwork, Fabian’s (2008) practice of commentary as a specific genre of ethnographic writing—which is based on the virtual archive of ethnographic text—is a major inspiration to my approach to ethnographic archive; “the condition of writing in the mode of commentary is. . . the presence of an ethnographic text” (Ibid, p.11). The existence of the previously discussed archive of eventlogs constitutes a substantial ethnographic text.

Furthermore, Fabian makes an interesting analogy: if comments are fieldstones (as in “fieldwork”), commentary is a house. Commentary is built with comments. Fieldstones are found in the field and “we pick them up in whatever shape they come and put them together in a structure that holds up” (Ibid, p.12). In my case, my “live reactions” to events—my live comments—are the first level “fieldstones”. When I rewatched my archived livestream videos, my own “live reactions” (in YouTube terminology) were “reminders, anything between what the text (in this case, my own words in the chafang video and first level of unpolished fieldnotes) reminds us of and what we think should be remembered when we read a text” (Ibid, p.12). Here lies the disparity between what I thought it was noteworthy at the time of watching a livestream, and what I think it is important at the time of rewatching my own archived recording. The second time rewatching prompts me to reformulate impromptu stream of consciousness “live comment” into a structure of commentary of written words.

(3) Transformative events and turning points: Ethnographic text
This category of events are often recollections as their significance is only revealed in the long term rather than in the immediate context. Their influences in transforming the livestreamer, his/her channel, viewer expectations, and even the entire climate of the platform, can only be assessed retrospectively. In tracing the entire livestreaming career of Ligan, there are certain events that are assessed as turning points for his channel, and some that even changed the platform overall. Ligan represented the few Douyu celebrities who started at the very beginning of Acfun Namahōsō and survived until 2017. For example, in 2015 he was allegedly the first streamer to sleep on a livestreaming platform (see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion). His sleeping stream was a violation of Douyu’s rules (that the performer must be “active” during livestreams), but some viewers fondly remembered it as a major event for the platform in Douyu’s transition towards “variety entertainment”.

These transformative events are first recorded as extraordinary events in fieldnotes but not yet identified as transformative events. The second level ethnographic reflections—through talking about these events with informants and reading accounts of the same event on the internet—serve as the filter to select certain events to be presented in this thesis in the form of eventlogs.

In many occasions my own witnessing and documenting—such as screenshots, chatlogs or transcripts—was not enough to figure out the correct sequence of events. Further work across various websites and multiple temporalities (e.g. cross-checking in the aftermath) are necessary for the reconstruction of the whole sequence of events. As Senft (2008) writes on the limitation of the researcher relying on fans’ “screen grabs” as “research at fan sites are often challenged to piece together what happened on a particular night in a camgirl’s life by stitching together various viewers’ selected shots that may or may not represent the entirety of the evening’s events” (p.47). In my fieldwork, the accountability come from both my participant observation and consistent crosschecking work such as following streamers’ social media, “lurking” in QQ fan groups, and additional interviews.

I will give a concrete example of how extra work across the internet as well as talks with long-term informants after the livestream event will help reconstruct the event or even put it in a new light. On 29 June 2015, under the stream title “what is my dream????[sic]”,

after getting drunk Ligan went on a three hour long livestreamed tirade on his real-life job, the work of livestreaming, and marriage. He complained about the tedium, exhaustion, and the pitiful pay of his day job, which he contemplated quitting. Viewership surged and peaked when he passed out in front of his webcam. Unfortunately, when the event took place, I was watching in a hotel room deprived of my laptop and only equipped with an iPad—which did not support screen-recording at the time. Fearing that I would forget, I made plenty of screenshots. When I returned to these screenshots weeks later, I was not sure what to do with them—not that I have forgotten the event but my memory of the context in which the event took place did not make sense for me. From his Weibo posts around the time of the livestream events along with the information provided by one informant, I realised that he had been working as a low-level policeman, was paid a meagre salary but always overworked. He was quite conflicted at the time about whether to go full-time or remain a part-time streamer (he made these fragmented confessions on Weibo but never explained the contexts on the livestream). His viewers thought he was joking when he said he wanted to establish a streamer studio. But he eventually did it in 2016 and his channel became one of the top channels on Douyu. This event of drunk confession turned out to be the crucial turning point in the microhistory of Ligan’s Douyu channel.

Eventlogs

In the following section 3.4.4, I will discuss the three components of fieldnotes in detail, so I will outline the format of fieldnotes here first. In my fieldnotes managing software OneNote, the eventlog is the most common format of fieldnote—which consists of chatlogs, speech and action transcripts (of the broadcaster), and screenshots.

The screen-recording and digitally fetched chatlog (in Chinese, untranslated), along with the manual transcription of the streamer’s voice (in Chinese, untranslated) and notable actions (in English), are the first level material. There are many entries of raw eventlogs archived in OneNote, each corresponding to a dated screen-recording video on the hard drive.
With more backtracking, internet research, and interviews, a synthesised written account of the unfolding process of the event (in English) and screenshots (extracted from screen-recordings) is the second level material. This account contains selective translation of the original Chinese chatlogs and transcripts, as well as other accounts found on the internet and online/offline conversations with my informants. It should be noted that only what I considered to be extraordinary events get this treatment. Due to limited resources and time, I can only afford to selectively translate the chatlogs and transcripts. Thus, as I discussed earlier, identification of transformative events is thus an important situated knowledge.

The third step is producing a coherent, contextualised, chronological narrative of the events unfolding within a specified temporality. This finalised format is what appears in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 as eventlogs and exhibits.

3.3.4 Digital Events and Digital Archive

If events garner a kind of immanence by dint of their collected enunciation. . . so data garner immanence in the circumstances of their imagination. (Gitelman & Jackson, 2013, p.3)

Digital Events

Ethnographer Wendy Hsu (2017) treats the “digital as events” because “even after the digital event is over, there are traces that point to a time-based actuality” (p.43). This points to the great potential or convenience of the documentation of digital events. In arguing for an “event-based approach to digital ethnography”, Hsu (2017) writes,

    time-bound, event-based expressions can account for the dynamic nature of culture. . . [and] a time-based, in-flux engagement with field materials, one that embraces liveness, spontaneity, and openness to uncertainties in execution (p.42).

    All digital files are time-stamped. This gives temporal accountability to digitally recorded data: screenshots, screen-recordings, and chatlogs are automatically dated and
come with various metadata. For various ways to engage with field materials, “the digital system affords scholars a time-space in which to engage with the iterative cycles of observing, documenting, organising, field notetaking, annotating, reflecting, analysing, writing, etc” (Hsu, 2017, p.44). These processes are not the same as digitalisation of ethnographic data (such as transcribing interviews onto a word document). They should be building blocks or steps towards a multilayered ethnographic archive. As I explicated in the last section, fieldnote entries are input in the form of eventlogs. All eventlogs are then organised in folders sorted according to the name of streamers. The following sections each deal with one specific method of data collection and, as in the last segment, my own research practices are discussed in relation to digital practices by users (broadcasters and viewers) on Douyu.

**Livestream Archiving and Screen-recording**

The digital offers great promise of accuracy and convenience in preservation of data especially within the digital context; in practice it is not so straightforward. The practice of archiving livestream videos and screenshots is especially time-sensitive and requires consistent effort and gradual accumulation. In this section, I will explain the context in which livestreamers, viewers, and the fieldworker (me) develop methods of archiving videos.

Before November 2016, there was no official video archive for Douyu. Most livestream archives were inconsistently built on third party online video databases such as Bilibili, Youku, and YouTube by livestream enthusiasts and fans of particular streamers. However, these archives are precarious since they are guerrilla archives and are never institutionalised or protected by copyright, nor are they maintained consistently.

14 YouTube is blocked in China but curiously there are still many Douyu livestream archives on the platform.
Douyu launched its own video archive and automatic archiving in November 2016. This function is only open to broadcasters who meet certain criteria (such as a contract with Douyu).\textsuperscript{15} Up until mid-2017 when I stopped watching Douyu livestreams, many smaller streamers that I followed still had not adopted this function. Moreover, the automatic archived video still could not archive and replay the chat messages.\textsuperscript{16} However, the official livestream archive did not render the auxiliary archives entirely inactive, because the long duration of unedited replay footage without the participatory liveness (i.e. chat replay) makes them less fun to watch compared to highlight reels. Short video clips cut from the original livestream circulated often on multiple video and social media platforms.

Initially when I started in late 2015, there was a natural desire to preserve the livestreaming video in its most “original” state without filters and trims. The accuracy of preservation was a great concern for me. It was possible to batch download livestreaming videos from the server while the channel was live by a PC program called “Douyu Recording Little Assistant”. I only need to input the room ID of the channel I want to archive, then the program would keep downloading and generate two files when the stream ended: a video file of the duration of the livestream, and a text file that contains comments (see Figure 3.4). However, this program was not stable since it would not work if Douyu switched server connection ports. It involved multiple trials and technical chores of tweaking its code since the original coder was not updating it. The other problem of this program was that the text file of chat replay, which was supposed to load as a subtitle file, was often out of sync with or simply incompatible with the livestream video file in most video players I tried, due to how \textit{danmu} works (as opposed to the conventional one-line subtitle at the bottom of the video).

\textsuperscript{15} This feature of automatic archiving is then overshadowed and confused by Douyu’s attempt of building a VoD site. Instead of being simply the archive of Douyu’s livestreams for replays, Douyu also encouraged edited videos (sometimes entirely unrelated to the livestream channels) on the VoD site.
\textsuperscript{16} Chat replay is extremely helpful for the researcher who misses the livestream, because the replay of both video and chat messages (sent during the livestream) in synchronised timestamp can reconstruct the livestreaming video (or at least all audio-visual and textual contents if not the affective experience). For example, archived livestream videos on YouTube can be replayed with livestream chat messages if the streamer chooses to turn on the function.
The easier alternative was to simply record whole computer interface of my PC with Open Broadcast Software. This method sounds very manual compared to the automatic method of mass fetching data streams from the server directly, but it does have benefits for the ethnographic archive. The screen-recording captures the entirety of my activities on the desktop surface: loading the website, logging in by entering my username and password, entering the captcha code, reloading, going to the front page, redirecting to the page of followed channels, right clicking on image cache to open several tabs, closing tabs due to limited internet bandwidth, staying on one channel, and starting to observe and participate in the chatroom. With screen-recording, I have recorded and logged my entire process of various activities on the digital interface. In contrast to normal livestream archives, which basically consist of only the livestreamed video itself, my video archive records the entire browser including the channel page, the video, the chat, and other distracting digital objects on my desktop. It is a first-person view of my own viewing practice.

**Jieping or Screenshots**

_Jieping_ literally means “cut the screen”. _Jieping_ is interchangeably used with _jietu_, which means “cut the image”—they both imply the image is cut (cropped) from something. This
“cut” is both spatial and temporal: *jieping* is a cropped still image that captures the liveness of the animated window or screen and is also a snapshot of an unfolding digital event—screenshots usually automatically contain metadata such as a timestamp. I thus define screenshot as a still visual reproduction of the disposition of digital objects and interfaces at the time of capture.

Following the discussion on screen-recording in the last section, my screenshot is either a still image snapshot of the screen-recording video, if I have screen-recorded during the viewing session on desktop, or a screenshot of the mobile interface of the livestreaming app. It is a “compromise” to accommodate the written thesis format and to alleviate the reader from watching videos. Screenshots occupy a crucial role in both my data collection (fieldnotes) and rubrics of presentation in my event-based ethnography (thesis). In my fieldnotes, screenshots are clues to help recollection of the livestream event; in this thesis, screenshots serve as visual evidence of a livestream event.

Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge the divergent roles *jieping* plays for Douyu viewers. First, as a common archiving practice, screenshots of livestream broadcasters are taken, saved offline by viewers, and accumulated as libraries on their hard drives and smartphones. In this sense, screenshots are personal collectibles of memorable events and proof of witnessing the events live. Continuing my earlier discussions of viewers’ memories of events, screenshots often appear between paragraphs in viewers’ recounts of livestream events on other platforms such as Zhihu and Weibo. This usage of screenshots is thus very similar to my own practice of writing fieldnotes.
Second, screenshots are also cropped, appropriated into GIF *biaoqing* (literally “expressing emotions”) to be used in chat messages on WeChat and QQ, and recirculated across multiple platforms as memes, beyond their original purpose of providing evidence of one’s presence at a livestream event. These *biaoqing* are thus recognisable currencies of *zhibo* fandom. Figure 3.5 is an example of this kind of *biaoqing*. It was originally a screenshot of Ligan’s livestream, but his facial expression is cropped out, decontextualised, and captioned: “Me always force a smile [sic]”. This image was seen in a number of contexts—Ligan’s fan group QQ Chat, other streamers’ fan group QQ chats, and private WeChat messages (the person whose sent me it was oblivious of the image’s origin).

In these practices, screenshots thus imply less of a permanence of storing a digital object or evidence of a disposition of digital objects, but a *temporal object always in circulation*. Image fidelity deteriorates in recirculation. Data decays, quite literally in the case of screenshots, through practices of reposting across platforms. For Boellstorff (2013),

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17 *Biaoqing* is “a general term that encompasses multiple genres of visual content shared by a user as part of a chat conversation, a comment reply or a forum discussion—a category that is also sometimes stretched to include animated GIFs, as well as cropped or edited screenshots” (de Seta, 2018).

18 This decontextualised circulation of face-based “emoji” or stickers also exists on Twitch. However, on Twitch, this practice is officially recognised and institutionalised as a specific platform subculture. Partnered channels can add more custom stickers to the growing library.
the materiality of data refers to the issue of hardware mostly—the decay of data storage (such as a hard drive) and “the immediate challenge is not preserving the information but preserving the means to get it” (Hayles cited in Boellstorff, 2013). In my case, the extension of this argument of “rotted data” is how practices of circulation impact the preservation of data, rather than simply the decay of storage devices.

The decontextualised re-appropriation of screenshots in biaqqing highlights the performative dimension of screenshots beyond the function of screenshots as a means of remembering or evidencing an event, which is still rooted in the common approach of data preservation. Continuing my earlier discussions on the performativity of danmu as a metaphor of the crowd, the performativity of the poor image “presents a snapshot of the affective condition of the crowd, its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction” (Steyerl, 2012, p.41, emphasis added) as opposed to the fetish of the high-resolution image “as if its lack amounted to castration of the author” (p.35). de Seta (2016) further pushes for “circulationist understanding” (p.463) of biaqqing through Steyerl’s (2013) circulationism, which is “not about the art of making an image, but of postproducing, launching, and accelerating it” (p.7).

Chatlog and Transcription

Even though I have tried a variety of methods extracting different categories of metadata, the most important textual data for the event-based ethnography are chatlogs. Nardi’s (2015) reconceptualisation of chatlogs as “fieldnotes” in World of Warcraft is relevant here. According to Nardi (2015), chatlogs from the guild channel are “a mélange of natively produced/automatically recorded notes and the usual handcrafted ‘personal, parochial, subjective’ fieldnotes of traditional ethnography” (p.207). “The point-to-point fidelity of digital texts” (Nardi, 2015, p.195), with the variety of digital tools (such as qualitative analysis software), make them very manageable in software-assisted analysis.

Livestream chatlogs do not constitute the entirety of a livestream event but they are the already available as “texts”. As I have argued in Chapter 2, in the case of the massive volume of comments sent at the same time on popular channels, textual comments or
*danmu* are not necessarily to be interpreted in their basic meaning as words but an overall visual effect of the whole livestream video. But in the case of slower back-and-forth dialogues between the broadcaster and his or her viewers (which includes my own *danmu* comments), chatlogs can be analysed as a conversation along with transcripts of the livestreamers’ speech as well as the contexts of actions and facial expressions.

In the following chapters, chatlogs of viewer comments and transcriptions of streamer speech, along with screenshots, will be the main components of an eventlog. I extracted most of the chatlogs with the help of a program called “Douyucrawler”, which batch downloads chatlogs from a given channel, then archives them in OneNote—attached with tags such as the name of broadcaster, dates, genre of performance, notes on the details of the notable events, and so forth. These chatlogs are also linked to a screen-recording file and screenshots from the same viewing session. My digital archive is the combination of all above components of OneNote entries (chatlogs, transcripts, fieldnotes), screenshot files, and video files of screen-recordings.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In outlining my fieldwork activities in such detail, I am also anticipating and contributing to a broader dialogue on research methodologies in the research of livestreams, which can be studied from a variety of perspectives and for different purposes. In calling my approach event-based ethnography, I highlight the role event plays in data collection, analysis and presentation. In conjunction with a renewed theory of media events for livestreaming media in Chapter 1, I am devising a set of methods specifically for livestreaming media, which I hope can be useful for future research.

Douyu also employs data scientists to study the massive amount of user data they collect on a daily basis and the reports produced by them are often instrumental in Douyu’s decisions about modifying the platform. As I have read many Chinese reports of this sort, the grand scale of data often cannot compensate for the vacuity of meanings. I am not invalidating these reports as they are extremely helpful in identifying trends (so the
platform can timely respond to and even anticipate changes), but they cannot sufficiently explain many of the questions asked by livestreamers and viewers themselves as I will expand in the second half of the thesis.
4 Richang

Ordinariness, Affect, and Authenticity

4.1 Introduction

While terms such as real and authentic are as problematic as 2,300 years of philosophy, we gain little by explaining away the more commonly felt experiences of the YouTube generation. (Strangelove, 2010, p.70)

Those whose unedited thoughts and immediate impulses are to act as source of truth in this way are not the journalists, . . . ethnographers. . . themselves, but especially, the ethnographic subjects, the “ordinary people”. (van Leeuwen, 2001, p.394)

Even if it is drawn into the oceanic rumble of the ordinary, the task consists not in substituting a representation for the ordinary or covering it up with mere words, but in showing how it introduces itself into our techniques. (de Certeau 1984, p.5)

This chapter starts with the question of how streamers perform being ordinary or richang in Chinese. Ri means daily and chang has at least three connected meanings: (1) “often” (an indicator of temporal frequency); (2) “to remain constant” (an indicator of stability and regularity); (3) “ordinary”. Richang is an equivocal adjective that can describe the generic everyday life, or a regular daily activity or a routine, an everyday object, and an ordinary and average person. Richang can also be a noun to invoke a documentation of a person’s everydayness and regular activities: a zhubo richang or a livestreamer’s everyday life.

Perhaps the most evident feature of zhibo is that they look resolutely ordinary—an average person doing average things—even from the distracted glimpse of the most disengaged viewer. Ordinariness in many cases seems tautological: an ordinary person does ordinary things and an ordinary viewer ordinarily enjoys watching the ordinary event. This resonates with Stephen Heath’s (1990) comment on television,
Television and its programs are projected as value... because of their everydayness and their popularity in a circle in which the mass existence of something is proof that value and proof of the validity of its acceptance in the name of everyday (p.286).

If ordinariness is to be found everywhere, then how should I locate it in zhibo? For a start, as I have suggested in Chapter 1, television or at least the televisual persists as a relational yardstick for both academic and colloquial understanding of zhibo. Liveness is the crucial theoretical device that “both fuels and is fueled by a belief in television’s capability to present an unmediated reality” (Daubs, 2011, p.82, emphasis added). This desire for unmediated reality is acutely problematised in the sub-field of reality TV studies: the first but always slippery question that emerges out of the rise of reality TV is its reality status. The banal argument is that “reality TV is not really real” (Andrejevic, 2014, emphasis in original). In many instances in discussing reality television, ordinary people/life and real people/life are used interchangeably (Deery, 2015, p.31), in which the ordinary is recast as “previously unmediated” (Ibid, p.32) therefore real. The same issue applies to the context of zhibo.

Paralleling with Senft’s (2008) discussion on how cam site viewers engaged in “sustained critiques of the ‘so real’” (quoted in Section 1.2 in Chapter 1), Andrejevic argues that “viewers have much the same reaction to reality television as the savvy punditry who reflexively emphasise the mediated artificial character of reality formats” (Andrejevic, 2014, p.42). In the literature on reality television, there is often a perceived deficit of the real, which leads to the popularity of reality television (Hill, 2005). Fetveit (2002) attributes this deficit to the rise of digital photography and the resulting loss of indexicality. Similarly, Strangelove (2010) speculates on the popularity of the format of video diaries on YouTube as “an indication of a contemporary crisis of the real, the self, and the authentic” (p.68).

Andrejevic (2014) calls this a “panic-stricken production of the real. . . it is not the promised access to the real that participates in the logic so much as the incitation of a savvy response that desperately seeks to preserve the principle of a seemingly threatened reality” (p.42). In other words, viewers being attentive to the “unreal” aspects of reality TV is exactly a method of production of the real. Questioning or assessment of the unreality of reality TV is thus a crucial if not intrinsic part of the televisual performativity (Hill, 2014)
and it will not be resolved within the medium of television. As YouTube takes over as the dominant platform of video consumption (at least in the West), we arrive at another contradiction. As Strangelove (2010) writes,

On the one hand, the YouTube audience tends to see amateur video diaries as more real than what they see on television. On the other hand, the audience has greater awareness of the constructed nature of media artefacts (p.75).

On the brink of contemplating starting his career as a “professional streamer” and his streamer studio (discussed in Section 3.3.3), Ligan also declared, in his own words, that “zhibo is infinitely superior to television”, because: one, the overseeing producer is non-existent, and two, a livestream is “interactively real” (in Ligan’s words). The validity of his argument aside, Ligan’s narrative on zhibo barely strays away from the televisual discourse—the televisual is always the yardstick. A brief revisit to a few defining moments of reality TV in China is therefore helpful in understanding zhibo in relation to its “predecessor” reality TV and the televisual conceptual anchors inherited by the lingo of livestreaming, which I alluded to in Chapter 1.

In China, reality TV is called zhenrenxiu or literally “real person shows”—in this case, “real people” is a substitute for “ordinary people”. Its predominant format in its early period of development since 2005 was mainly adapted from the US, Europe, Japan, and Taiwan (Berg, 2011), but the divergent development was that in China “rather than a reflection of reality, reality television is understood first and foremost as entertaining programming” (Yang, 2014, p.517). The popular reality programs were exclusively in two subgenres: “reality talent contests and dating programs” (Ibid, p.517)—first due to their intrinsic public appeal as entertainment by including ordinary people as the main proponents; second because other prominent subgenres (at least in the West) such as “current affairs analysis or political talk shows are not encouraged or permitted” (Shei, 2013, p.59).

Seen from the limited literature on the viewing culture of Chinese reality television, the relative lack of concerns with authenticity seem to contradict the arguments posited by Andrejevic (2014) and Hill (2005). As Yang (2014) writes,
Audiences are not necessarily motivated to discuss the authenticity of the contestants. In a country where telling the truth from a lie, genuine from fake, has been a basic survival skill... as far as some China’s Got Talent viewers are concerned, all they care about is getting some fun out of the show (p.534).

Surveying the hugely popular dating show If You Are the One, Shei (2013) similarly argues that Chinese audiences are “apparently believing or wanting to believe this to be real and helping to make it real” (p.62). While I cannot confirm the validity of Yang and Shei’s argument ethnographically (since I have not done research on television viewers), they certainly raise a point of contention.

The other possible influence for zhibo, in terms of its obsession with the portrayals of “real life” or everyday life, is the rise of documentary films in the Post-Reform era. As June Deery (2015) argues that “RTV (reality television) can be regarded as remediating documentary” (p.46), a similar argument can be made in the Chinese context. However, whether documentary is a direct influence on zhibo performers remains unclear from my own ethnographic data, as the documentary cinema remains a very small market in China despite being critically acclaimed by Western academia (Berry, 2007; Voci, 2010).

Chinese media scholar Michael Keane (2003) writes of the reality show Into Shangrila, that “recent Chinese attempts to exploit the genre draw on a tradition of socialist realism, socialist ‘mock’ documentary, and myths of collectively” (p.101). However, as Chris Berry (2007) rightly points out, socialist realism “carries a connotation of fakery or at best reality as the authorities wish it were” (p.115-116). Instead of socialist realism, Voci (2010) emphasises the term “on-the-spot-realism” in discussing the New Documentary Movement, which is “characterised by such a drive towards an observational, unobtrusive style that could capture reality more truthfully” (p.28). The New Documentary Movement in China represents a striving towards authenticity in the hybrid form of “smaller screen cinema”—“neither Reality TV nor investigative reports” (p.77) in Voci’s characterisation. If the documentary movement represents an artistic reaction against the hypocrisy of socialist realism, zhibo can be seen as more of an organic—albeit very contradictory—desire towards the “real life” against the backdrop of fakery on Chinese reality television.
On a side note, it should be emphasised that the ordinariness on display on television is sanctioned by the State. As the censorship organs gradually learnt to elaborately regulate the reality programming sector (such as banning any formats of audience voting), reality television production also became competent in “dancing in spite of, or perhaps even because of the chains” (Sun, 2007, p.201). *If You Are the One* serves to “reinforce and approve good social practice, moral courage, and conventional values” (Shei, 2013, p.62) of the legitimate cultures, while sanitising the portrayal of the uninhibited “real” or ordinary people—that is, whatever considered uncivilised will not appear on television at all.

While there is already a system of censorship in place for *zhibo* platforms, they are certainly not as controlled as reality television, despite multiple waves of crackdown and the machinery of real-time censorship on Douyu (see Section 2.3.3 in Chapter 2). At the very least, broadcasters, if not employed by an agency, often have the freedom of deciding what they want to do on livestream—this also leads to the varied levels of agency that will be explicated through the categories of *xiaozhubo* (small livestreamers) and *wanghong* (literally “internet red”, internet celebrity) broadcasters in this chapter. Furthermore, in terms of the digital infrastructure, the liveness of livestreams also promises them to be more “real” than heavily produced and not-actually-live reality television. Viewers are also present in the chatroom and can directly challenge the broadcaster if they question the authenticity of the performer.

As seen in my eventlogs and interviews, *zhibo* viewership is certainly not passive or “not caring” as seen in Yang’s (2014) research on reality television viewers. In contrast, there is often heightened awareness on the issue of the authenticity of the livestreamed *richang*, precisely because how *zhibo* is defined as, or at least promised to be, superior to television: “no more fake ordinary people”, as Ligan puts it. He declared, quite similar to how Ana Voog did (discussed in Chapter 1), “now ordinary people on livestreams can take the initiative to eliminate distorted representations”.

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1 Ligan’s opinion was common among many streamers who refused to push their careers to more mainstream platforms such as television, while other streamers such as Tianyou actively pushed their fame outside their platform of origin, especially seeking to expand to television.
My contribution to this debate is not on whether viewers’ savvy assessment of the authenticity/ordinariness claims of streamers exist or not. Instead I demonstrate that zhibo viewers’ savvy suspicion is mostly not motivated by rational assessment against a set of objective standards, but the channelling, circulation, and management of affective flow. As Sorace (2019) puts it, “affective knowledge precedes cognitive recognition and elaboration” (p.153).

As I will demonstrate through eventlogs later in the chapter, viewers and streamers regularly have all sorts of dialogues on the subject of realism and authenticity of the streamers’ richang, sometimes to the point of nausea (at least for the streamer who has endured the repetition of such arguments). For instance, Pili Wuwang was always defending his claims to ordinariness and authenticity by exhibiting more personal trivialities; Yuwen was more cynical and would not make claims similar to Pili Wuwang. This chapter will be broadly divided into two sections which delineate two kinds of zhibo celebrities on Douyu, xiaozhubo and wanghong, and their corresponding methods of performance, production of affect, their labour, their different claims to authenticity, and how their viewers understand or contest their authenticity.

4.2 The Ordinariness of Xiaozhubo on Douyu

4.2.1 The Spectrum of Zhubo
Douyu pours most of its resources—exorbitant lock-in contracts (sometimes multiple millions RMB annually), unique design for their channel pages, promotions, and so forth—to a dozen of top broadcasters, who generate the majority of the platform revenue in garnering viewer donations and premium membership. This is then followed by the middle level of the fame meter occupied by hundreds of channels that are relatively successful in their own categories. At the bottom, there is the long tail of tens of thousands of casual channels that constantly emerge and phase out.

For this PhD project, my ethnographic observation mainly lies in the majority of Douyu channels that never ascend to the top-level of fame, regardless of their
commerciality and involvement with third party agencies. This middle stratum of broadcasters is the main focus of this chapter. To start with the discussion on ordinariness, I will outline a basic topology of the middle stratum of broadcasters on Douyu according to a spectrum. This spectrum does not indicate level of authenticity (as each category and individual channel has their own specific claim to authenticity), nor performative skills (they can be either trained or completely untainted by third-party agencies), nor scale of popularity (a wanghong is not necessarily more popular than a xiaozhubo), but only their level of professional commitment.

(The most committed) Wanghong — Xiao zhubo — Casual zhubo (The least committed)

The left end represents the most professionalised wanghong: the vocation dedicated to generating profits from internet fame. Wanghong literally means “internet red” or “famous on the internet” but the term has developed multiple meanings in different contexts beyond a general reference to fame on the internet. It should be emphasised that, within the context of the zhibo industry, the term has developed to refer to (1) a specific mode of manufacturing fame online and capitalising on this often-ephemeral fame, and (2) a profession with its pertaining skills (see the detailed discussion later in this chapter). On Douyu, wanghong, as in someone trained in the profession, is not necessarily more popular than an independent streamer. Wanghong is often a full-time job paid by a third-party agency or internet celebrity incubator. The financial security of a monthly salary (plus a share of viewer donations) is a main attraction for people to initially get recruited.

The right end of the spectrum represents the least professionalised—the casual zhubo who just experiments with the technology of livestreaming for a few days but never commits to livestreaming as a regular activity nor as a job. Casual streamers are usually not at all economically compensated. They livestream often for a brief period of time for various reasons (mostly out of curiosity), but rarely does this transform into a more regular activity. However, in terms of the number of channels, they represent a large percentage of total channels live at any given time.
The *xiaozhubo*, or literally “small casting host”, lies somewhere in between. They are usually not trained in an agency and start as committed individuals who regularly (if not daily) broadcast, and exhibit one specific mundane activity in one designated category of the livestreaming platform—e.g. cooking and eating as the mundane activity in the category of “food”; playing indie games in the category of “console games”. Although *xiaozhubo* streams are certainly not short in length, their schedules are more erratic than stable as they have other job(s) and life responsibilities. While the majority of viewers are concentrated in the few top channels, viewership of *xiaozhubo* channels are quite distributed ranging from a few hundred to ten thousand concurrent viewers. They are usually compensated for their livestreaming work, from viewer donations and, in some cases, a monthly stipend from the platform. However, these incomes are often not substantial enough for them to become full-time or if they are, they often live a thrifty life.

These roles in the spectrum are by no means fixed as individuals can start as a casual *zhubo*, then become more committed as a *xiaozhubo*, then decide to join an agency to receive training and become an employed *wanghong*. Some *xiaozhubo* are even offered contracts by Douyu or/and members of a *zhubo* clan, but the crucial difference is that they enjoy significantly more independence and control over their own channels, compared to a professional *wanghong* whose channel is managed and legally owned by their agency.

It should be clarified in locating *xiaozhubo* I was responding to the socio-economic precarity disclosed by various broadcasters I followed during fieldwork (See Yuwen later in this section), rather than imagining an ideal participant of livestreams—as Burgess and Green (2009) summarised the similarly imagined ideal research subject in YouTube studies, “an ordinary, amateur individual, motivated by a desire for personal expression or community, whose original content either expresses the mundane or everyday” (p.90). Indeed, apart from certain genres such as *nüzhubo*, it is difficult to separate the “amateur” content from the so-called “professional” content in terms of styles of presentation and content on livestreams. I do not attempt to push the amateur and professional divide nor insist such a divide is obsolete (as previously explicated in Chapter 3). While I do emphasise the aspect of “professionalisation” in the *wanghong* industry, I do not argue that *xiaozhubo* are devoid of any commercial incentives but theirs are often motivated by
different matters and rationales. The point of contention between wanghong and xiaozhubo is not commercialisation versus community values, but rather the existence of an influential intermediary actor and relative level of independence. Not that one category of incentive is superior as both have their precarities and advantages.

4.2.2 Locating the Xiaozhubo

Jeffreys and Edwards (2010) identify three major phases in the analysis of celebrity, which has moved from a critical theory-inspired dismissal of celebrities as mere products of mass media, through a fandom-oriented praise of talent and authenticity, to a more prudent scholarly attention to the processual construction of celebrity across cultural industries and everyday life (p.5-6). Here lies a conceptual confusion in translating the term xiaozhubo. In response, I will navigate between two English concepts: ordinary celebrity and microcelebrity. Ordinary celebrity serves an all-encompassing conceptual anchor for celebrity studies that emerges from the context of reality TV. Microcelebrity is a relatively new concept that is often more embedded within the ecologies of online platforms (e.g. Abidin & Brown, 2019). In the following, I will go through both of these two concepts and work out what xiaozhubo means in the interstices between them.

Ordinary Celebrity

“Ordinary celebrity” is a very ambiguous concept as it attests to two highly malleable concepts: What is exactly an ordinary person? And who counts as a celebrity? Television scholar Laura Grindstaff (2012) implies that “real” ordinariness is “rooted outside media visibility” and “real” celebrity is “rooted inside media” (Ibid, p.23) visibility: on television, ordinary celebrity is a “programming strategy” (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015, p.110) and “institutionalised space” (Grindstaff, 2014, p.325) situated between these two ends. The ordinariness in this sense merely means the person is not famous for assorted reasons.

In other words, ordinary celebrity is an oxymoron if ordinariness is defined against fame and a celebrity is literally the personification of fame. As Graeme Turner (2004) writes, celebrity is by definition “a hierarchical and exclusive phenomenon” (p.83). If the
“master frame” (Couldry, 2002, p.289) of reality TV is the passage from an ordinary person to a celebrity, then the term ordinary celebrity intrinsically reinforces the binary between ordinariness and celebritydom, especially when the successful transformation from ordinary status is often considered the ultimate goal.

In the context of livestreaming, the *xiaozhubo* seems to refuse such a passage. There is no plan or even desire to transgress the binary in most cases, although their lives are inevitably changed by the sustained practices of livestreaming. There is a certain sense of lethargy in *xiaozhubo*’s livestreaming ethics of “carrying on whatever I am doing in my daily life anyway while livestreaming” (in the words of Xiangxi Xiaopang), as well as a lack of ambition for an end game or shifting performativity until extremely appealing opportunities are present. Most *xiaozhubo* are not compensated enough to make *zhibo* their sole source of income while *zhibo* still entices them as a tremendously satisfying experience on many levels from the social to the therapeutic.

Xima, born in 1984 and a “house husband” who stayed at home taking care of his daughter and playing videogames the rest of the time, was very conflicted and tormented by his mother-in-law’s grievances towards him because he did not have a “real” job. Xima had been streaming on Douyu since 2015 and gathered more than 5,000 followers over two years, which was decent for a *xiaozhubo*, but not enough to score a contract that could give him the financial security of a monthly stipend. In order to convince his family (mainly his mother-in-law) that livestreaming could be a properly paid job, he switched to another platform Longzhu because they promised him a monthly stipend.

Being an “unemployed” father living with in-laws, the legitimacy—how he could justify playing games at home as a form of meaningful work and even a sustainable career—was what he desperately needed. The mental precarity came with the realisation that he might never convince his in-laws and he had to find the appropriate timing to compromise without losing his hobby all together. The other level of precarity is his irregular Live time due to his daughter’s schedule (he later reuploaded his stream recordings to compensate this), his unexplained absence, and his long silence and push-to-talk mic during his streams because he must avoid disturbing his family.
As Longzhu failed as a platform in 2017, Xima moved back to Douyu and remained a part-time streamer and his family issue remained unresolved. He never achieved the leap to a more sustainable celebritydom. The basic level of commerciality was simply a way to legitimise his daily routine—playing games he was passionate about and taking care of his daughter in various facets of her life—as a proper productive *richang*. Firmly grounded in the categories of “console games” and “indie games”, he was never willing to sacrifice his method and ethics of broadcasting indie games simply for profitability (such as turning on a face-cam or switching to other genres orientating towards exhibiting more private life) nor accommodating to viewers’ tastes in videogames (such as switching to popular games such as *League of Legends*).

In the case of a prospective *wanghong*, the transition from an ordinary celebrity to a “real” celebrity was in fact the main aspiration—the job of *wanghong* was merely a stepping-stone. However, the reigning order of the binary persists when the “real” celebrity who has accumulated more “intertextual capital” (Collins, 2008) remains and an ordinary celebrity on reality TV who is “dispensable” (ibid) disappears. This precarity of being dispensable applies to *wanghong* since they are paid employees of an agency (see Section 4.3.2). While for the *xiaozhubo*, their lack of ambition and the absence of a direct manager protect them from this level of exploitation by the “factory” of *wanghong* production. This relative independence also comes with other facets of precarity as indicated by Xima’s case. For the *xiaozhubo*, as donations are relatively scarce and without the support of third-party agencies, a stable monthly stipend is a crucial resource to justify the livestreaming work as a properly paid job.

**Microcelebrity**

Originally written in the context of camgirls, Senft (2008) coined the term “micro-celebrity” to distinguish the camgirls from mainstream celebrities. She emphasises two aspects: self as brand and the emotional labour of sustained connection with viewers. Instead of speculating who the celebrity “really” is outside the spotlight (in the case of a mainstream film star), viewers of cam sites “tend to debate the personality’s obligations to those who made her what she is” (Ibid, p.26, emphasis in original). This obligation is often moralised
and must be met with meticulous levels of emotional labour. If traditional celebrities are known for extraordinary skills and, microcelebrities are known for responsiveness to their viewers and displaying their private everyday life. Their selves are branded and they must build their “taste performances” against perceived competitors.

The obvious connection between microcelebrity and the xiaozhubo is the micro-ness as xiao literally means “small”. This is on the first level a matter of scale: a microcelebrity does not have a global appeal (not even a national appeal in most cases), and their fame is often limited to a specific platform. The xiaozhubo’s popularity is even more limited as they are confined to a specific category within a platform, as many viewers only watch specific genres of performances or particular videogames. For example, despite his gradual ascendance to Douyu’s own hierarchy of celebrities, Chuange’s fame barely spread across the entirety of Douyu, but was limited to viewers who persistently enjoyed this mode of performativity—conversations while cooking or consuming food—and the broader category which he was rooted in.2

This leads to the second aspect of this micro-ness: “microcelebrities exercise a popularity that while narrower in breadth is far deeper” (Abidin, 2018, p.12). The longevity of a xiaozhubo channel depends on the habitual engagement with viewers and building intimate connections over time, as opposed to unsustainable growth and “cash conversion rate” (see Section 4.3.2). Xiangzi, a casual zhubo who only streamed intermittently but was inspired by his favourite broadcaster Chuange, contemplated Chuange’s success during our face-to-face interview,

I think Chuange is one of few zhubo on Douyu who truly started low and made it to the top. I think the main reason of his success is his perseverance. He is able to adhere to what he does for a lot longer [than others]. Chuange has been broadcasting for over two years so the followers were slowly accumulated on a daily basis [as opposed to an explosive growth]. His hard work makes up for his lack of talent. Like I think Douyu started as a platform mostly trying to bombard you with eye candy, and very few shizai (genuine and grounded) content like Chuange.

2 This is in stark contrast to the wanghong’s versatility across platforms. See a detailed discussion in Section 4.3.2.
Xiangzi’s reflection on Chuange’s success clearly emphasises his slow accumulation of fans and regular viewers over time. On the first level, this slowness is in itself an indicator of authenticity as the viewers are not bots. On the second level, it is the intimacy established between viewers and the broadcasters over time. As Senft (2008) writes on camgirls, “intimacy is one hallmark of social richness; immediacy is the other” (p.61). I have already discussed immediacy and co-presence in Chapter 1; this intimacy—the hallmark of Chuange’s success—is a result of complex operations of affect.

As I have shown in the introduction, Chuange has all the traits of desired ordinariness: his daily routine of any typical street vendor; his disclosure of almost all his life details over time (including his relationship with Huihui); explicit confessions after getting drunk; and finally, the irresistible lure of witnessing his meltdown Live. All these emotional ecologies are quite ordinary for those who are familiar with reality TV but for a xiaozhubo like Chuange, these are produced and circulated, without the “performative context” (Grindstaff, 2012) set by a producer or director. In the following section I will exhibit these emotional ecologies through two eventlogs on two very different xiaozhubo channels—Yuwen and Pili Wuwang.

4.2.3 Ordinary Affects of Zhibo

This section is greatly inspired by Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) work Ordinary Affects. I do not just draw on the concept but the way she extrapolates the often-fleeting ambivalence and unpredictability of the everyday through a series of ethnographic anecdotes. Kathleen Stewart (2007) defines ordinary affects as “public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they’re also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of” (p.2). It should be clarified that I will not engage with the “affective turn” in theoretical detail but rather to “find something to say about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that make them habitable and animate” (Ibid, p.4). In my case this performance is done through the format of eventlogs instead of hasting towards a social/cultural critique.

Yuwen on “Programmatic Effect”
Yuwen is young disabled man living in rural Sichuan. I followed his channel from July 2016 to July 2017. His channel grew from 848 followers in July 2016 to 3,364 in July 2018, which is quite significant considering Yuwen never attempted to co-opt his channel into any zhibo clans, agencies, commercial Multichannel Networks (MCNs) or guilds. He repeated similar performances over the years: his everyday life from cooking, having lunch, doing evening stretching while listening to music, playing Dungeons and Fighters, and chatting with viewers, albeit with variations such as the different kinds of food he cooked. This following conversation took place on 30 July 2016 (see Figure 4.1), not long after he started livestreaming on Douyu when he was just initially exploring what he could do on livestream. I recorded the session during one of my chafang livestreams (see Section 3.3.3 for my method of chafang).

Me (chat message): Good evening.

Yuwen (verbal speech): [responding to a comment sent before I started watching and recording] Real can be fake, fake can be real. How do I put it?
It’s all to entertain everyone. When you watch livestreams, you do not care too much about whether it’s real or not. All that matters are the effect. All you see is just a jiemuxiaoguo (literally programmatic effect). Say, in the case of those big zhubo (livestreamers), you know everything they are doing are just performances (yanxi); while in the case of xiaozhubo like myself, if you are accusing me of being fake or whatever, I would rather you say I am just acting.

Yuwen (verbal speech): Good evening. Thank you [for watching]. I cannot recognise your English name [Yuwen was referring to my English username “ethnographer”].

Me (chat message): You are simply living your ordinary (richang) life, no?

Yuwen (verbal speech): More or less yeah. [But] now it is better, that I am livestreaming, there are some friends and brothers come to see me. Although there are not that many people every night, or during the day, for that matter. When you are watching me, it’s the biggest encouragement and support for me so I will try my best to live every day.

Me (chat message): Do you livestream to deal with the loneliness?

Yuwen (verbal speech): More or less yeah. Before I just watched television or play games at night. Or just spaced out . . . Just to waste my time yeah, waste my youth yeah. No, no, yeah, I am in it mainly for the money. But until now I haven’t made a profit, but I made some friends. Yeah, there are all kinds of things [on livestream]. When people start to livestream for the first day, then when they livestream for a period of time, they will fall in love with this profession (hangye). So, they feel weird when they just stop livestreaming for a day. Even I feel like this now. When I haven’t livestreamed today, I just feel the day is meaningless. I would rather die. Yeah, there are a lot of things: materiality (wuzhi) [I think he was referring to money], psychological, spiritual, and bodily. Sorry, a slip of tone, no bodily (routide) involved [embarrassed face because the term “bodily” usually refers to lewd things in Chinese]. Actually, all the stuff other livestreamers can think of, I can think of them as well. All the stuff you can think of, I can as well. It is just sometimes, no matter how hard I try, I gain nothing.

Me (chat message): I think I am the only one talking now?
Yuwen (verbal speech): Please follow me if you are watching, although there are 6 viewers now. I think I still have not found the right method, to livestream.

Anonymous viewer 1 (chat message): I am also here. We can talk.

Me (chat message): I think this livestreamer is very placid (pingjin).

Yuwen (verbal speech): That’s because there is just me. If there were more people here, the channel would be alive (renao).

Anonymous viewer 1 (chat message): You are good at talking.

Yuwen (verbal speech): There aren’t that many people who like my method of zhibo, people won’t just simply support you for some reasons [alluding to his disability]. Good at speech? Nah. Just normal. My so-called “good at speech” is very lowbrow. I think a person is good at speech because they are more intellectual, read more books, more experienced. Mine is not “good speech” [long pause] it’s just that I am forced to be like this.

[he started doing some stretching exercise while playing some background music]

Performativity and Affect

Yuwen’s emphasis on jiemuxiaoguo or “programmatic effect” is a term directly borrowed from the context of television. It refers to how television structures performances and manufactures effects. In claiming “real can be fake, fake can be real”, Yuwen is already approximating the idea of a “performativerealism” (Gade & Jerslev, 2005), which alludes to a state that vacillates between artifice and reality without a point of resolution. On television, an ordinary celebrity is often located between transparency and artifice. The ordinariness cannot be just raw, which renders ordinariness banal and invisible, but “a form of improvisation that encourages structured spontaneity” (Deery, 2015, p.29, emphasis added). As Grindstaff (2012) writes,
incorporating ordinary people into television entertainment. . . to create or control the performative context—that is, to erect the conditions of possibility for maximalising emotional expressiveness. . . in other words, it is a form of ‘readymade’ or ‘pre-made’ television in which the scaffolding for a successful performance is contexts of performance rather than the contexts of scripts, rehearsals, etc (p.25-26).

Pertaining to the performative context of zhibo in China, it first depends on their independence from the external role of a “producer”: a wanghong’s performative context is highly influenced by the manager who trains and supervises them. However, a relatively self-reliant xiaozhubo co-produces this performative context with his or her viewers, which goes back to my earlier argument on the channel specific danmu culture (see Section 2.3.4 in Chapter 2). As Yuwen says, “if there were more people here, the channel would be alive (renao)”. The aliveness of the channel is not simply a technical matter, i.e. the affordances of the livestreaming video, but also an affective matter of interactivity and circulation of different emotional energies through danmu. Yuwen’s “methods of livestreaming”, as he emphasised, are slightly different. Yuwen is bound to his wheelchair but he could talk, doing so in a specifically “placid” manner, in contrast to Chuange and Ligan’s conversational styles of agitation.

Furthermore, this exposure of the inner self is the foundation of xiaozhubo’s authenticity claims. In the example of Yuwen, this intimate disclosure has a therapeutic effect. As Grindstaff and Murray (2015) write,

In exchange for full access to their thoughts, experiences, emotions, affect, body, image, and ‘entrepreneurial spirit’, reality participants may acquire not only wealth and fame but an enhanced sense of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and well-being (p.115).

This self-enhancement of the “talking cure” is particularly important for Yuwen as a young man immobilised within his rural home by his disability. He might not earn much as livestreamer, but as opposed to merely being sympathetic about his disability, his
viewers were able to respect his banter and personality over time.\(^3\) *Zhibo* for him is as much as a window to the outside world than for me to his world. As Brian Massumi (2002b) writes, “when you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn” (p.212).

However, this sense of self-development should be not taken uncritically as we can learn from the case of reality television. The “everyday pedagogy” of reality television “mobilises the intensity of such passions as shame and contempt for its intimate cultural politics” (Highmore, 2011, p.16). Yuwen’s constant self-effacement, humility, and his sense of shame—especially when encountering insults and repetitive and insensitive questions on his disability—can be seen as a form of pre-emptive self-defence but also an example how the governing role of shame and scolding (McCarthy, 2007) enforces the politics of (in)civility on livestreams. Pili Wuwang’s confession in the following section is another example of how viewer comments can drive the streamer to the point of abjection.

**Pili Wuwang’s “Money Shot”**

In addition to the idea of performative context, Grindstaff (2002) also builds on the term “money shot”—“the eruption of raw real emotion on-screen” (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015, p.111). These moments of spectacular outburst of confessions, stressful arguments, volatile situations, and emotional expressions are the best examples of the unpredictable production of affect, which often become the most memorable events of livestream channels. Going back to my earlier argument on liveness in Chapter 1, liveness presupposes not just routine and regularity—that is, ordinariness—but more crucially the potential disruptions of such normalcy. As Patricia Mellencamp (1992) reminds us, “anxiety is television’s affect” (p.80). And the same can be said for *zhibo*.

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\(^3\) It should be added that the spectacle of freak bodies and disability is one of the attractions on Douyu and viewers of these channels can be disturbingly insensitive and even abusive (I will discuss this vulgarity in Chapter 6). The channel of Kuaizige or “Chopstick Brother” is one such example. Chopstick Brother is a limbless man who does all his daily chores with a single chopstick. The spectacle of his “freak” body was the main attraction and the comments in his channel were vastly different from the relatively supportive viewers in Yuwen’s channel.
Pili Wuwang (literally “the King of Breakdancing”) or Dawang (literally “King”, as his fans call him) is a migrant worker who used to work at Foxconn on an assembly line in Shenzhen before he started working as a streamer full-time. His main stream activities were dancing, eating, and chatting with viewers. His livestream channel lasted for almost two years, before he eventually quit streaming due to low pay as a streamer and returned to factory work. The following event took place on 13 August 2016 (see Figure 4.2), which was a regular day for his channel.

Dawang (speech): You all want to watch a real zhibo. Like Xiangxi Xiaopang, he just streams his day-to-day life. Eating, talking with viewers, that is enough. He didn’t go to fancy restaurants. My stream is all about my daily life plus some dancing. That’s already very good. We need the real side, not the hypocritical. If they want to make or [already] have money, that’s their business. I am not jiangdaoli (reasoning with you or lecturing you in this case), the content of my show is like this. I am not zhuangbi (flexing or pretending to be someone “cooler” than someone actually is). Let me be honest, I already have plenty of content with my ordinary stuff and dancing. If I can stream while I go to work, that’s really great. Say, I go to somewhere and eat dayudarou (literally “big fish big meat”), so what? I am not even jealous. I am just a diaosi (literally “dick hair”, an impoverished person). [Responding to a viewer comment] Yes, they are simply consuming [the expensive food] for the “face”.

Figure 4.2 Pili Wuwang’s channel. Screenshot taken on 13 August 2016.
Dawang (speech): Just now somebody told me my life is “warm” (wenxin). That’s not true. Apart from livestreaming, I still have other things to do. I have no girlfriend. I don’t know who to talk to. I talk to you [the viewers] when I stream but when I get off the stream, I don’t know who to talk to. My family is not at home. I sometimes watch others livestream when I am not working. My mum is not at home most of the time. She just goes straight to sleep after working at the vaccine station. My dad works at a construction site and is rarely home. I am truly happy when I talk to you guys. Zhibo is my job. After I finish streaming, I need to feed the chickens... I wish I had a girlfriend, so I can lie in her arms when I am tired and take a stroll after dinner... 

Anonymous viewer 1: Just hire a prostitute.

Dawang (speech): No, I cannot hire a prostitute. It takes money. My money is hard earned. I rely on you guys’ donations: fish fins, fish balls. I cannot spend this money on prostitutes. This is totally against my morals. I’d rather save this money for my own future [business] endeavours...

Anonymous viewer 2 (chat message): You are totally drunk.

Dawang (speech): I am not drunk. I don’t deserve this. I have worked for many years. I have known quite some women. After I quit my job at Foxconn, I started working as a zhubo. Then I stopped going out with women. It has been over half a year. I just chat with you guys, then I shower, do the laundry and sleep. And repeat the next day. I did have some girlfriends but still ended up single. I believe 85% of the post-90s [males] are single and will not find wives.

Anonymous viewer 3 (chat message): Bullshit. You must be drinking fake booze.

Dawang (speech): Sure, I can find a girlfriend but getting a wife is totally a different matter.

Anonymous viewer 4 (chat message): In this society, everything [referring to relationships] is easy once you have money. What is your monthly income?
Dawang (chat message): Stop asking this question. I cannot say it here. Ask again and I will commit suicide.

Anonymous viewer 5 (chat message): You are pretentious. Are you actually from the countryside?

Dawang (speech): I spend about 15RMB grocery shopping every day and I do not buy expensive stuff. . . I am of course from the countryside. I remember when I was working in the factory, right after getting the monthly salary, a lot of workers I knew just went straight to brothels and karaoke parlours. At the end of the month, these people often run out of money. So many young people are like this.

Anonymous viewer 6 (chat message): Dawang, do you know how long I have observed you? Since you were drinking from the electric water boiler.

Dawang (speech): I don’t know what I am doing. I just talk. I don’t know I can do.

Anonymous viewer 7 (chat message): You parents are working every day and you just are idling your days away.

Anonymous viewer 8 (chat message): Dawang is working right now. How is this idling?

Dawang (speech): Zhibo is my job. I work hard to provides zhibo content. This is my work.

Anonymous viewer 9 (chat message): I am picking my nose, you are eating a chicken, and you are telling me you are working.

Anonymous viewer 10 (chat message): Dawang is truly honest, unlike some people.

Dawang (speech): I know my limits. I am not going beyond my confinement and try to be someone I am not. Some people are telling me I am not dancing. But my performance (jiemu) is still mainly comedy and entertainment. Although the
dancing Dawang is not dancing as much now, I never forget my original purpose. I cannot dance here [in the kitchen]. I will dance for you tomorrow mid-day.

_Diaosi as Ordinary Affect and The Politics of Ordinariness_

The concurrent viewers of Dawang’s channel grew by hundreds during his “money shot” (i.e. the eruption of his emotion). The point of contention was Dawang’s authenticity as an ordinary person. Dawang attempted to prove his “membership” as a _diaosi_ by claiming that he had no money and no girlfriend. In this case, Dawang equates _diaosi_ with ordinariness—by default he acknowledges that monetary as well as emotional poverty is the societal norm. This resonates with Grindstaff’s (2014) point on the mentality of “ordinary-man-as-lower-class” and cultural hierarchy on reality TV. The dilemma of ordinariness as a crucial resource of performativity is that once the performer is accepted as “being ordinary” in one specific performativity by their viewers, shifting or transcending this accepted performativity of ordinariness or poverty will invalidate the earlier structures of legitimacy. As Grindstaff (2014) writes, “performativity becomes a quality of the cultural construction of ordinariness and the cultural construction of ordinariness requires performativity” (p.341). This circle is also related to contradictory nature of the term _diaosi._

_Diaosi_ as an internet slang term first emerged on Baidu Tieba and then evolved into a popular gesture of self-deprecating humour. It then became slang officially adopted by mainstream media (hastily disposed due to political incorrectness) before its current use as a term that is understood by many academics and journalists to be explicitly associated with internet subculture, stagnant class mobility, and disillusionment (Szablewicz, 2014). The term became widely adopted in _ad hominem_ attacks of class hatred. If everyone from migrant workers, to the middle class, to billionaires is calling themselves _diaosi_, then the term becomes devoid of any precise class politics. _Diaosi_ are not necessarily the innocent victims that intellectuals rally to patronise nor is the term the epitome of vicious vulgarity.

In Dawang’s confessional outburst, _diaosi_ is perhaps better understood as an ordinary affect, in which he affects and is affected by his viewers. In validating his claims to ordinariness, the nebulous definition of _diaosi_ demonstrates exactly the politics of ordinary man, in which “the unfinished quality of the ordinary is so much a deficiency as
a *resource*” (Stewart, 2007, p.127, emphasis added). Ordinariness is performed in relation to the established roles of gender and class—this performativity vacillates greatly depending on the situation (e.g. who you are arguing for/against)—rather than as an accurate representative of class and gender hierarchy. In Dawang’s own terms, “I work hard, eat cheap shit, and I do not have a girlfriend. . . [but] I just put up with it”. It is more of a politics of affective withdrawal as opposed to a politics of entitlement.

One of the most popular accusations against a *xiaozhubo* who gradually achieves fame is *pengzhang*—literally “swell”. It describes someone who transitions from an ordinary person prior to media exposure to a self-obsessed celebrity, however ordinary they remain even after fame. As it has become a popular slang term on Douyu, *pengzhang* is often used in situations of memes, jokes, and daily rituals of *danmu* rather than as a serious allegation. Dawang cannot afford to “swell” not only because he is indeed poor in real life but also because poverty is the indispensable performatively resource of his ordinariness.

**The Flow of Ordinary Affect in Zhibo Talk**

Be it Yuwen’s “placid” and self-effacing introspective confession or Dawang’s agitated defence against trolls and anxious insistence on being an ordinary *diaosi*, the two eventlogs culminate on the crucial way of producing ordinary affect on *zhibo*: talking. Much like television—Paddy Scannell (1996) considers “conversational style. . . [as] the most fundamental aspect of broadcasting’s communicative ethos” (p.23). The majority of an ordinary livestream is also fundamentally dependent on talk. By talk, I am also referring to a “communicative ethos” but not necessarily conversations because a streamer does not always have a person (either viewers or co-participant on the stream) to converse with.

The first issue is how to endure being on livestream by yourself, as just immersing in videogame is usually counter-productive in attracting and maintaining viewers for new streamers. From my early experiences of streaming in 2015 and 2016, I learnt that it was in fact difficult to maintain a viewership early on. At the very least, I needed to continue talking (e.g. commentary on the games and other banter unrelated to the games as it comes to mind), no matter how unintelligible and disconnected, and must never pause the stream.
Streaming for three hours uninterrupted at a time is a minimum, because this would leave enough time for viewers to discover the channel, give it a try, decide to stay, and possibly leave some comments.

The second issue was that in learning from my own struggle and reflecting on what other streamers experienced during the early phase of their career, I realised bantering on livestream is a delicate skill in itself. During my interview with the popular streamer Nvliu in 2015 (before her ascension to one of the top streamers on Douyu), she expressed her concerns over the superficiality of livestreaming media during her early phase of being a broadcaster on Douyu. Livestreaming was, for her, a complete surrender to the arbitrary impromptu nature of the moment, especially in comparison to Youku (Video on Demand) which she migrated from. She said,

The purpose of me uploading those recorded videos [prior to livestreaming] was to share my experiences. When I recorded those videos... I usually already had an idea of what I wanted to talk about [a script] and wouldn’t stray away from that too much. In recorded video, I can be more literary, and I can use my linguistic/literary style to express my thoughts [by writing a scripting and editing]. While in livestreaming, improvisation is very important... It requires an intuitive presentation and a natural reaction—no enriching the language or contrived facial expressions. And the most important thing is to interact with viewers... At the beginning, I was quite worried about it when my boss asked me to experiment with livestreaming. I am an introverted person and... I was worried what I was going to talk about for four hours every day... After half a year, I discovered that during a livestream, most viewers just want the most everyday conversation. Don’t think about it too much... it is a continuously dialogic and repetitive process.

Building on her pre-existing fanbase accumulated during her tenure on Youku, in 2015 Nvliu started on a higher platform compared to most emergent livestreamers on Douyu and yet she still struggled at adapting to the new medium. “The most everyday conversation” sounds straightforward but it is not. At the beginning of my own livestreams, it was awkward for me to maintain even the basic banter because most of the time there were no chat messages to converse with. In many cases, “talk is talk’s sake” (Scannell, 1996, p.24). The talking or commentary while playing a game sometimes just dried out and I got impatient trying to find a subject to talk about when I had nothing in mind (which is related to the issue of attention management I discussed in Section 3.3.3). The Chinese
term *galiáo*, literally “embarrassed (and forced) chatter”, is a fitting description of the affective state of trying to find stuff to talk about on livestream. It is not the same kind of awkwardness when people recognise I am talking to a mobile device in public. On *zhībo*, talking to myself has no utilitarian purpose, such as to remind myself and entertain myself, other than making the livestream relatable or bearable for the (prospective) viewers.

To conclude on this section on ordinary affects of *xiaozhubo*, I want to highlight how the circulation of everyday affects on livestreams often attempts to exceed closure. Seen from Yuwen and Pili Wuwang’s channels, the emotions on display—emotion here defined as “the qualification of affect into narrativisable action-reaction circuits” (Massumi, 2002a, p.28)—vary to include shame, anger, anxiety, solidarity, hope, and self-defeating despair. This points to how excess of affect always escapes; it cannot be contained. As Seigworth (2000) writes, “everyday life escapes; it exceeds” (p.231). This “pure process in excess” (Morris, 1998, cited in Seigworth, 2000, p.231) anticipates a “potential politics” (Ibid, p.231). Affect theory and cultural politics of banality thus converges on the point of “processual excess of everyday life” (Ibid, p.231) and how affective surplus becomes affective knowledge of being ordinary. The ordinariness of *zhībo* may seem imperceptible, as I questioned in the introduction, but it is in these moments of affective excess—when affect crystallises into emotion in the extraordinary events—we can viscerally “feel” the intensity of *richang*.

### 4.3 The Banal Production of *Wanghong*

... the brushstrokes of internet celebrity translation may heed to some cultural specificities, the benchmark and characteristics of being an internet celebrity can also vary drastically across ecologies. (Abidin, 2018, p.3)

#### 4.3.1 The Specificity of *Wanghong*

For most qualitative research on livestreaming industry in China, it is very compelling and almost unavoidable to focus on the phenomenal rise of *wanghong*—literally “internet red”. *Wanghong* is adjacent to the concept of “internet celebrity”. *Wanghong* is the abbreviation
of *wangluo hongren* (literally “internet red person”) but the two terms seem to have diverged. A quick query to the Baidu search engine data (see Figure 4.3) shows evidence of how *wangluo hongren* (in green) preceded its abbreviation *wanghong* (in blue) in 2012. *Wangluo hongren* is a declining search term, while *wanghong* is rarely used prior to 2012 but grows exponentially between 2015 and 2016. The initial emergence of *wangluo hongren* in the early 2000s was already a heatedly debated socio-political phenomenon, but by no means explicitly commercial.

Roberts (2010) chronicles the rise of Furong Jiejie (literally “Sister Lotus”) since 2003, an online personality famous (or notorious, depending on the perspective) for her boastful performances as a successful and good-looking woman despite being harshly disparaged for the vacuity of her blog posts. Emerging from the identity experimentation of early BBS culture and flourishing on the self-presentation venues provided by blogging websites, Furong Jiejie and other early *wangluo hongren* are “the culmination of a series of circumstances and events that in many ways highlight the illiberality and capriciousness of the internet” (Roberts, 2010, p.220). These experiments by early internet celebrities are also related to what I discussed in Chapter 2 on the early phase of online video: performatively intriguing but barely commercialised.

In contrast to *wangluo hongren*, the term *wanghong* has moved past being a simple abbreviation of *wangluo hongren*, and has come to signify a variety of meanings in different contexts. Within the context of *zhibo*, I want to define *wanghong* as a desirable, replicable and profitable economic model that at the same time entails the ethically problematic occupation of the internet celebrity, especially given that the majority of employees in this profession are women.
Once the term *wanghong* gained momentum in public discourse in 2014, the term started to retrospectively encapsulate earlier internet celebrities in a historical narrative of evolution from “*wanghong 1.0*” (e.g. Furong Jiejie) to “*wanghong 3.0*” (e.g. Papi Jiang). The problem of this historical narrative is that it uses a contemporary term with very specific connotations to describe a yet-to-be-written internet history. Furong Jiejie was not a manufactured product of entertainment industry, but a self-made unique online personality situated in the infrastructure of the early internet—not idolised nor hugely financially compensated. Papi Jiang, championed as the most popular *wanghong* in 2016, is *not* representative of the majority of women working in the so-called *wanghong* industry either. She worked as a creative producer of comedy videos, much like a relatively independent YouTuber, and was then absorbed by the *wanghong*/marketing industry—she started her own agency with various investments—after achieving viral fame.

I tentatively argue that the *wanghong* industry is a recalibrated and extended complex network of the familiar agency-based entertainment/marketing industry that employs a range of specialists to manufacture *wanghong* in standardised production lines and on a variety of internet platforms. The livestreaming industry does not encapsulate but, rather, intersects with the more versatile *wanghong* industry. The *wanghong* economy is embedded in massive and dynamic interrelated networks of *wanghong* agencies or
incubators, streamer guilds, social media platforms, livestreaming platforms, Ecommerce companies, fan groups, and so forth. A wanghong incubator hires and trains wanghong and has business connections with potential advertising clients as well as Ecommerce platforms such as Taobao.

Wanghong thus has much in common with Abidin’s (2018) definition of “internet celebrity” in conjunction to the newly emerged “vocation like Influencers” (p.14) as opposed to the concept of “microcelebrity”: firstly, internet celebrities’ operations and influences extend to multiple internet platforms rather than confined within one platform; secondly, their audiences are way more distributed and varied in level of engagement; their professionalisation as “they are pursing fame professionally as a vocation” (Ibid, p.15). As I suggested earlier, the emergence of wanghong does not diminish nor replace the microcelebrity, who widely exists on internet platforms in relatively distinct forms.

However, the (re)professionalisation in the wanghong industry does occupy a considerable role in the attention economy, if not pushing the self-made microcelebrities to the margins. If reality TV is “emblematic of a turn to a presentational, entrepreneurial self” (Bennet & Holmes, 2010, p.66), then the wanghong industry resembles less of a turn but, instead, the establishment of the already existing but not yet nurtured entrepreneurial self in the television industry. In the next section, I will discuss standardisation as the core logic of this entrepreneurism and professionalisation of the wanghong industry.

4.3.2 Wanghong Factories of Standardisation
The industrial practices of standardised professionalisation are conspicuous on most livestreaming platforms including Douyu. In the bourgeoning livestreaming industry since 2014, there has emerged a whole chain of production and specialised jobs: recruiting, training, personal branding, marketing, video production, cosmetology, and so forth. A large percentage of broadcasters on zhibo platforms are employed, trained, and

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4 Multichannel Networks (MCNs) are quite similar to some of these agencies and guilds. However, one crucial difference is that while MCNs are mainly for management of advertising revenues, copyright claims, and other background activities for existing YouTube creators/channels, they usually do not involve too much training (except for some workshops) nor are they responsible for content creation.
manufactured *en masse* by agencies and incubators to work for multiple livestreaming platforms as quickly consumed *wanghong*. The following subsections will demonstrate how these *wanghong* factories and individual *wanghong* operate in relation to the similar concerns (authenticity, ordinariness, and affect) outlined in the first half of the chapter.

I visited a *wanghong* incubator X in Wuhan in 2016. I was quite shocked by the scale of operation in promoting and selling various products for their impressive repertoire of clients, ranging from dairy products, to cosmetics, to electronics. The workplace is in an office building divided into segments each with a specific setting or background: bedroom sets, dancing studios, and recording studios that have high-end equipment including microphones, green screens, and studio lighting. The employees—the professional *wanghong*—work in shifts across multiple platforms from short video platforms such as Weibo and Taobao, and multiple livestreaming platforms including Douyu. *Wanghong* incubator X was not simply a guild of associated livestreaming channels, but a comprehensive commercial entity—a factory of *wanghong* with a streamlined assembly line. The following sections will discuss the aspects of recruiting and training.

### Recruitment

This assembly starts from recruitment, often first according to appearance; or at least “potentials to be found in them, which can be nurtured and made apparent through training and practice” in the words of the manager at the *wanghong* incubator X. In this sense, quite like the production of any celebrity described by Graeme Turner (2006), “ordinary people. . . have always been ‘discovered’, suddenly extracted from everyday lives and

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5 I was not given permission to take photos nor give any names.
6 The manager admitted that incubator also had connections and deals with certain livestreaming platforms, which helped promote their employees who broadcast there in unspecified methods.
processed for stardom” (p.154). These practices of scouting and “discovering” celebrities have existed in both the film and television industries for a long time.

The difference is, however, the rise of the internet has shifted the discourse towards how the spontaneous celebrification of ordinary people—by simply having a voice on the internet—eliminates the intermediary role of the traditional scout.\(^7\) The emergence and establishment of *wanghong* brought attention back to the tradition of recruiting talent and (re)professionalisation of the supposedly untainted waters of the early internet that celebrated amateurism or a blurring of the line between professional and amateur.

According to an agent at a *wanghong* agency interviewed by Tie Lin (2018), the selection is by no means strict nor are they looking for special innate traits or extraordinary gifts. When asked what she wanted from a prospective *zhubo*, she responded, “because now *zhibo* is still growing strong, there is only one requirement to be a *zhubo*: a girl with good looks”. While *wanghong* is a gender-neutral term, the majority of employees in these “factories” of *wanghong* are women—as they are called *nüzhubo*. Many women, before or after entering the *wanghong* industry, decided to undergo cosmetic surgery in order to meet the beauty standards of the industry. The faces of *wanghong* (or *wanghonglian*) gradually become a vaguely derogatory term to disparagingly describe a typically female East Asian face that has undergone cosmetic surgery, stylised make-up, and in-app camera filters in order to meet a certain standard of beauty.

For one anonymous interviewee who used to be a female broadcaster, beauty is not seen as an innate trait, as she is highly critical of the naturalist beauty standards imposed by “ignorant straight males who are unaware of the work we put on our faces” (in her own words), but a quality that can be improved through (1) “hardwork”, of applying the proper make-up and regular work of skin maintenance, (2) “hardship”, of enduring the pain of multiple cosmetic surgeries, and finally (3) “a form of investment”, that does not necessarily have immediate or short-term returns but numerous socioeconomic benefits in

\(^7\) See Section 1.1.1 for a detailed discussion on how the early adopters of the webcam technology moralised the internet as the opposite of television.
the long term. This then leads to the following discussion on the processual nature of *wanghong*-making.

**Training**

The second step is training, which comprises a variety of skills from applying make-up, dancing, singing, bantering (or effectively maintaining a conversation), playing an instrument, and so forth. It should be emphasised that the process of training is not a hidden process but is made explicit to the audience. As Crystal Abidin (2018) writes, “the quality of celebrity does not naturally attach to or arise from specific people but is constructed through a *process*” (p.4, emphasis added). Selling the process of cultivation or celebrification as the product is by no means an invention of the *wanghong* industry. In the reality TV industry,

> cultural economy devoted to the cultivation of ordinary celebrity. . . and a growing infrastructure of guiding and supporting the acquisitions of ordinary celebrity in the form of casting calls, instructional blogs and videos, and training sessions. . . geared towards cultivating, shaping, and displaying certain expressions of ordinariness, the emotion economy is what feeds the thickening layer of ordinary celebrity (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015, p.111-112).

Another example of this transparent processual mode of celebrity production is the Japanese idol industry, epitomised by AKB48 in Japan and SNH48 in China. The pillar of the idol industry is being able to witness the process of, and even directly participate in, the prospective idols’ growth to be eventually a “real” idol. Transforming from an ordinary person is the *raison d’être* of the genre *yangchengxi* or “fostered idols”. The authenticity thus lies in the transparency of the entire production process—e.g. how the idol trainee works on her dancing moves, how she develops relationships with her fellow trainees, and so forth. The *wanghong* industry seeks to simulate this ethics on a larger scale, albeit with many downgrading qualities due to its shorter cycles, cheaper production values, and larger volumes of candidates. Similarly, the success of a *wanghong* certainly does not simply rely on the blatant emphasis on physical appearance, but the gratifying feelings of authenticity derived from processual ethics of witnessing the amelioration.
The other important aspect of standardised training is replicability, which applies to all aspects of livestream performativity. As wanghong agencies predominantly operate according to marketing logic, the most important yardstick for measuring success is often not just popularity but the “cash conversion rate”—how many of their viewers purchase the products or donate virtual gifts. As Abidin (2018) write on the specificity of wanghong, it is “premised on the acute ability to convert internet viewer traffic to money, relying less on content production than ability to hold an audience’s attention visually” (p.3). It is not that wanghong do not produce content at all; they do in various forms such as short videos, social media posts, and long hours of livestreams, and they are encouraged to do so by their managers. In fact, interviews with industry insiders as well as my own interviewees at the wanghong incubator X all point to the importance of producing “content” but such content must be produced efficiently.

The originality of this content is not as important as the commercial logic of replicability—taolu. Taolu refers to stylistic routines that are easy to follow and can be repeated without effort. While it also carries a pejorative meaning of repeating the same practice and waiting people to fall for it, it is imperative to instil various performative taolu into the minds of prospective wanghong through extensive training before they start working. These performative taolu include certain ways of talking, addressing viewers, facial expressions, and so forth. This logic of taolu resembles what Grindstaff and Murray (2015) call “celebrity branding”: “brands mark and standardise, rendering people and thing legible within a commercial logic” (p.130).

For example, a guide published by a wanghong incubator Tangfeng wenhua (2017) outlines the following methods that help avoid lengchang (literally “cold atmosphere”) or awkward silences when interacting with viewers on livestreams:

(1) Be patient and calm when dealing with situations. Interact with viewers when possible and make everyone feel participative. Develop a diverse repertoire of facial expressions and gestures such as the V and heart shape hand signs, sticking out a bit of tongue. Don’t underestimate these small details, they help stimulate the viewers’ sensory system and make clear to them you as a zhubo are enthusiastic and heart-warming so they are more willing to donate.
Whenever a viewer donates [virtual currency], regardless of the amount, always show your respect and gratitude: “thank you, XXX brother!” and push on the interaction with your fans;

If a nüzhubo is already talented at jokes or a sense of humour, then she can gain likes from viewers very easily. If not, accumulate more duanzi (jokes and stories) from your own everyday life. If not, recite stuff you’ve read on the internet. If you cannot remember these things, write them down on a piece of paper and read them on stream.

There is one significant advantage of female zhubo over male zhubo: talking about trivialities in your everyday life so as to close the distance with your viewers. These trivialities can be about where you travelled recently, or whatever handbags or dresses your saw on Taobao but could not afford, and so on. If a male zhubo talks about these trivialities, it would be weird [i.e. not masculine enough]. Furthermore, if a viewer really likes you, and he gets your message of not being able to afford something you like, he will donate.

These tips may sound basic, but they showcase the repeatable patterns of affect production. I am not arguing the emotions on a wanghong are necessarily fake, but they involve a sense of tenacity in developing or tuning their performance. As Gade and Jerslev (2005) write,

Realism operates not through simple denotative “likeness” but rather through a connotative reference to the real as a category. Techniques of citation and repetition are employed to achieve this effect, a laborious theatre of reiteration (p.11).

Following the earlier discussion on the mental and physical toll of maintaining conversation, I argue that the affective labour of livestreaming is intensive. Instead of figuring out the necessary mental and physical skills themselves—which is pivotal for xiaozhubos’ claims to authenticity (as the “performative mistakes” are also on display)—the training provided by wanghong incubators engenders another form of authenticity, which will be delineated in a later section through the example of Hani9.

4.3.3 Affective Labour as Authenticity

The dilemma of wanghong is that, if professionalisation precedes their live impromptu performance, does this professionalisation and commoditisation of their performative
labour necessarily diminish *wanghong*’s claims of ordinariness or authenticity? The answer varies. In Zhang’s (2017) asters thesis on how *zhibo* audiences make sense of authenticity, his interviewees posited “commerciality” against authenticity. One of his interviewees said,

> If the female streamer belongs to a commercialised streamer agency, she’s more like an actor [sic]. I think that’s inauthentic (p.21).

While not denying this is a popular opinion, I aim at giving a more nuanced account of how *wanghong* and their viewers understand performative authenticity. First, the binary of commerciality and authenticity should be questioned as suggested by Banet-Weiser’s (2012) work on brand cultures. As Banet-Weiser explains,

> Explaining the labour of consumers as commodification or corporate appropriation usually presumes the co-option of an “authentic” element of a consumer’s life by a marketer. . . explaining brand culture as a sophisticated form of corporate appropriation, then keeps intact the idea that corporate culture exists outside—indeed, in opposition to—“authentic” culture (p.8).

Similarly, when a viewer accuses a *wanghong* of being inauthentic because of their association with explicit commercial incentive or very formulaic performativity (in the case of *taolu* outlined above), the viewer presumes an untainted mythical “authenticity” existing outside commerciality. As I have shown in the earlier example of the idol industry as well as the relatively less sustainable model of *wanghong*, the progression must be exhibited and documented through livestreams and other circulated online videos. Commerciality, if exhibited and explained properly, is part and parcel of the whole authenticity claim (while it must be noted that the whole discourse of authenticity is not circumvented).

Second, the imageries of *wanghong* as an easy but well compensated job do not capture the complexity of performative work. For example, Michele White (2003 & 2006b) argues against the popular imaginations of the webcam as a device that only empowers the male voyeuristic gaze. She highlights the power female webcam operators have in maintaining control through particular modes of performativity. White (2006b) uses the term “webcam operator” to “emphasize the significant work that women do in technologically, visually, and conceptually sustaining this practice” (p.67). The word
“operator”—following Benjamin’s (2008) allegorical connection between the surgeon and cameraman (p.25)—implies the many subtle tasks in the work of being a livestreamer. Similarly, nüzhubo’s “work of being watched”—to borrow Andrejevic’s (2004) words—is not as simple as it sounds. It involves applying make-up before the livestream, adjusting other paraphernalia, twisting the software settings, being social during the stream itself, interacting with fans off-stream, and so forth. The labour is intensive, whether physical, technical, or emotional. In the following I will go through the case of Hani9 to demonstrate my above arguments on affective labour, authenticity claims, and how Hani9’s viewers understand it.

Hani9

Hani9, who was a contracted employee of a wanghong agency, used to livestream on Douyu as a weiniang, which literally means “fake woman” or a cross-dressing man. He initially took up cross-dressing for a lucrative career in livestreaming but gradually he gained a subcultural following among Chinese queer communities for being “respectfully authentic” and “being weirdly straight” (according to one of his viewers). Hani9 always referred to himself as a “he” on livestream but he operated under the category and domain of nüzhubo.\(^8\) He was a heterosexual male performing femininity in a serious rather than ironic manner. He was also fairly frank about his intention of making money. Hani9’s weiniang identity was normalised as a way for commercial gain, but the “sincerity” of conceding “I am doing it for money” served as the foundation of trust among his viewers. Since this intention was no secret, viewers who were attracted to him did not see it as an ethical issue.

In Hani9’s own narrative, this meticulous labour of maintaining the body of a nüzhubo—for instance, the tenuous and subtle “feminine” bodily gesture of covering up his “cleavage” when leaning forward the webcam—is a very technical skill that is acquired through conscious practice. The labour includes not only the set-up for the livestream, but

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\(^8\) This is closely related to the discussion in Chapter 2 (Section 2.3.1) on the gendered division of categories on Douyu.
tenacious practices of skilfully applying make-up, dressing up in various styles both indoor and outdoor, and learning dance moves. His repetition of this technical and affective labour on his very mundane livestreams has gradually perfected his skill to wear an idealised feminine face. As Butler (1988) argues, “gender reality is performative which means. . . that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (p.527). Hani9’s body of nüzhubo is materialised and “authenticated” through the incessant repetitions of performing gender.

Authenticity is not utilised as an absolute standard and it does not burden Hani9’s viewers’ perceptions of the gender and corporeality of his nüzhubo body. Instead of adopting a sensational narrative of a behind-the-scenes reveal of a fake personality due to Hani9’s financial motive, three of Hani9’s enthusiastic viewers I interviewed already knew that Hani9’s image of an accessible nüzhubo was performative. They nonetheless acknowledged and even respected the labour and efforts Hani9 put into maintaining this consistent image of nüzhubo.

I personally witnessed a very intriguing conversation between Hani9 and one of his viewers over a phone call broadcast on his Douyu livestream on 11 September 2016. This viewer confessed to be a 15-year-old biological male undergoing a hormone therapy to become a female. Hani9 was quite shocked and responded in a caring voice, “as your older brother [emphasising his gender is male], I wish you the best and please do not take too many drugs and be healthy”.9 I contacted this viewer afterward and asked her opinions on Hani9. She said,

Hani9 is my role model, but not merely because of his behaviour [meaning his act of cross-dressing] but for his looks. I aim to become a girl who looks as good as him, insofar Hani9’s successful transformation [by simply applying make-up] represents a possibility, if I work hard enough [in doing the make-up, for example] there is hope for me to become a good-looking woman. I admire him for his body.

9 Hani9 was clearly oblivious of the transgender spectrum in China during that livestream session. Weiniang (literally “fake woman”) is someone who is only interested in surface level of cross-dressing, whereas yaoniang (literally “drug woman”) is someone who is proactively using therapy or/surgery to undergo a physical transformation.
Curiously in this case, a young transgender does not consume Hani9 as a queer symbol nor a politically motivated transgression but a practical goal of physical transformation to work towards, because she is quite aware of the difference between Hani9 and her: Hani9 never intends to fully become “a woman biologically”. Hani9 is not an “authentic” transgender person per se but his serious and consistent efforts in learning to be a nüzhubo is the ground of his claim to authenticity, which is understood by his followers—whether cis males or transgender. In 2017, Hani9 stopped livestreaming on Douyu and relocated to another platform, because his channel was taken back by his agency after a dispute. This naturally leads to the following discussion on the precarity of wanghong.

4.3.4 Precarity of Wanghong

One of the consequences of this standardisation is the precarious work of a disposable wanghong. The turnover rate is often very high as the agencies will quickly replace the wanghong if their ephemeral popularity wanes or they are not efficiently converting their popularity into profits. A large percentage of wanghong also quit during probation as they find out the income is not as lucrative as they expect, or the labour conditions are too harsh. According to an agency manager quoted in an interview by Runstyle (2018), “after three months of probation, only 30% of the recruited employees remained” and the rest either voluntarily withdrew or were fired due to inefficiency.

If what Chris Rojeck (2001) called “celetoid” on television was initially speculative and diagnostic, the establishment of wanghong industry seems prescriptively built on the mass production of celetoids as the primary way of generating fast cash. He writes, “celetoids are the accessories of cultures organised around mass communications and staged authenticity” (Ibid, p.20-21, emphasis added). The main point of the term celetoid was to distinguish its short lifecycle from the celebrity proper. Here I want to identify the process in which the celetoid transitions from how the mainstream preys upon the “accidental celebrity” and then disposes them, to how an aspiring young performer voluntarily joins the wanghong industry which then disposes them whenever their channels are no longer lucrative.
One of the best examples of the disposable “accidental celebrity” is “Brother Sharp”. Jeffreys and Wang (2012) write about the story of “a vagrant beggar” who became an internet sensation as an “accidental celebrity”. In 2010, a photo of a homeless man smoking on the street became widely circulated on internet forums and praised for his “authentic”—i.e. uncultivated by fashion pundits—good looks and the protagonist then became the character of the internet meme “Brother Sharp”. The internet soon went on searching for the real person behind the meme and “Brother Sharp” turned out to be a sad tale of “escalating poverty and mental distress” (Ibid, p.578). The revelation led to his internet fame fading as the character turned out to be not commodifiable by the companies that invited him to events, as he was already mentally derailed in his tragic degeneration into extreme poverty before media fame. This raised many discussions on the ethics of attempts on temporarily capitalising on these “accidental celebrities” as “disposable” celetoids.

If celetoids were the accidental accessories of television or online media as in the case of “Brother Sharp”, wanghong is “the effective industrial solution to the problem of satisfying demand” (Turner, 2006, p.156) in the zhibo industry and a “manufacturing process into which the product’s planned obsolescence is incorporated” (Ibid, p.155). The cycle of ephemeral fame is very short in the wanghong industry—often as short as three months.10 Given their replicable patterns of their performativity, most wanghong careers are never projected to last long in the first place and most are certainly dispensable or replaceable.

To be clear, while these full-time broadcasters are employed, trained by agencies and paid a monthly salary, they do not even own their livestreaming channels, which are valuable assets of the agency. They can be recycled with the followers/viewers accumulated on the channel, a clause that is often written on their contracts. The fame of wanghong is thus manufactured, heavily monitored by these agencies and incubators in almost every aspect of the job. It is a very precarious job until they achieve a relatively

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10 This goes back to my earlier point that Papi Jiang is not a good example of demonstrating how the wanghong industry works. Sustainability of fame and profitability in the long term is very rare in the livestreaming industry.
sustainable number of donating viewers and, even then, breaking with the agency will cost the wanghong a large early termination fee according to their contract.

The manager working at the wanghong incubator X suggested in the interview that the profession of a livestreaming wanghong was rarely related to personal interests in the first place,

>[the industry of] livestreaming is showing us a process of professionalisation. It is just like how we work in our [conventional] jobs: does everybody work on something because they are passionate about it?

An employee working at wanghong incubator X confessed that she could not see this occupation of wanghong as a legitimate future in itself, but an “accumulating phase” or a springboard to a more “stable” and “legitimate” future such as running her own agency in the industry or becoming a “real” celebrity, which is improbable.

4.4 Conclusion

Echoing Chapter 1’s discussion on continuing relevance of televisual anchors, this chapter has demonstrated how the questions of authenticity, ordinariness, and performativity continue to be debated on livestreams. The danmu comments from Yuwen and Dawang’s viewers are often not logically consistent but they are certainly emotionally charged. Yuwen’s self-deprecating monologue and Dawang’s uninhibited exhibition of anxiety demonstrate the emotional and economic precarity of being in the middle strata of the attention economy. The wanghong workers in the incubators are trainees and half-finished “products” of the entertainment commerce complex that relies on standardised production of performers. In exchange for viewer donations, affect becomes a precarious commodity.

The dilemma between the professionalism of regularly streaming and the affective fatigue of repeating the same arguments almost every single day cannot be resolved, even when these streamers never had the ambition to elevate their fame to the point of proper celebritydom. Withdrawal from the profession is a given but timing of the exit is the issue.
I have intentionally avoided the top tier streamers because I think the emotional struggles of being a livestreamer is often overlooked in most of the narratives on zhibo and this vulnerability is usually not willingly disclosed when coupled with too much fame. With the cases of xiaozhubo and wanghong incubators, we can gain useful insights into the otherwise invisible flow of ordinary affects.
5 Wuliao
Boredoms, (anti)Aesthetics, and Tactics

5.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with the question how boredom is performed by streamers and practiced in viewership. Boredom is a prominent issue in zhibo as it is captured by both survey results and my own observation. According to a survey conducted by Tencent (2016), the highest rated (67.8%) reason for viewers to watch livestreams is “to kill boring time [sic]” and highest rated (66.4%) reason for viewer to stop watching is “zhibo is uninteresting”. The highest rated motivation (31.2%) for prospective livestreamers to join a zhibo platform is “to make profits”, followed by “to kill boring time” (25%). From my own field interviews, forum browsing, and participant observation, the most common impression for onlookers is that livestreams are “meaningless”, “containing nothing”, and “quintessentially boring”.

There are certainly captivating events on livestreams, which can be organised around an active chat, spectacles of gameplay, exhilarating moments of intense arguments, and social dramas. It is undeniable that these events are partly why viewers keep returning to livestream channels. However, the often-ignored aspect of events on livestreams is the durational factor and the “down” periods during which none of the above exciting events are unfolding and there is not much going on.

From the perspective of the statistical majority, if we look at the majority of causal Douyu channels—the long tail of ephemeral channels unoccupied by viewers—we observe a total lack of sociality. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated statistically that more than half of channels on Douyu were occupied by less than 100 concurrent viewers. The relative, but not total, lack of interactivity proves to be a productive situation for participant observation. In Chapter 4, where I discussed the spectrum of streamers or zhubo, casual zhubo make up a majority in quantity while their channels often last from a few hours to a few weeks. The channel in Figure 5.1 is a representative example of a casual zhubo.
For instance, I observed a livestream channel of a very static video (see Figure 5.1). The stream title of the channel in the screenshot above is “A diary of the cute baby”. The public announcement reads,

Cute baby in the house, male, born on 20 October 2015. (His) name is XXX. Let’s witness his growth. Please do give us suggestions if you are also parents. If you have never brought up a child, try to experience the tough life [of parenting].

The two surveillance cameras were pointed towards the baby cradle while the baby was absent. I tried to watch this livestream for twenty minutes and there was barely any movement: the baby was never returned to the cradle. The motionless, soundless, and eventless non-content of this channel was hardly bearable; I went on to read a book while leaving the channel page on. The channel was offline when I returned to it after I finished reading the book. When I tried to find it again a week later, the entire channel had been deleted. This channel started with an ambition for a collective witness of the baby’s growth on livestream, but was quickly absorbed by insufferable boredom, stagnated by lack of danmu sociality, and finally deleted due to demoralisation.

From the above examples (both quantitatively and qualitatively speaking), it is clear that boredom, for both viewers and performers, is a crucial factor in deciding to join a
livestreaming platform as well as in leaving. Moreover, boredom is articulated as a central issue in the popular discourse on livestreaming. Among observers of zhibo, be they critics, analysts, or scholars, one of the most frequently asked questions is: “Why are so many people watching these livestreams if they are deemed so boring?” As One online commentator Shilianzaizhegeqitian (2016) responds to the question “why are people watching these boring zhibo?” on Baidu Tieba,

How can you pre-emptively give a definition of what constitute a zhibo, that they are boring? Let me ask you. Do you know much about zhibo? There are videogame livestreams, showgirl livestreams, outdoor livestreams, and many other genres. Have you watched any of them? How do you know its core value without knowing much about it? . . . I thought like you before: ‘why would anyone watch this empty non-content? The viewers must be so impoverished [both monetarily and culturally speaking]’. But all these doubts come from the fact that you do not understand the word “respect”.

The above question is a point of departure to various dialogues and polemics on boredom, rather than a lead to a definite answer. The research question for this chapter is not the question of why—instead boredom is to be circumvented through ethnographic terms. Corrigan’s (2006) essay on “doing nothing” provides a compelling ethnographic perspective on boredom. He writes,

   to ask the kids why they smash milk bottles is to ask a meaningless question. . . the answer to the last question. . . is not really possible within the boys’ own terms (p.85).

I also tried posing the why question to my informants during interviews as a provocation, but it is not necessarily helpful if the subject itself is too ambiguous for the informant to articulate. Thus method is the first difficulty in researching boredom of zhibo. I have improvised with various methods of teasing out discussions on boredom from casual interviews to watching livestreams with several interviewees followed by subsequent discussions. However, ironically, these interviews became exercises of boredom themselves to the point of exhausting the momentum of the conversation, and some of my participants grew impatient and withdrawn.
In addition to the above difficulties in methods, the second challenge of addressing boredom lies in the vertigo of navigating the existing theoretical articulations from classics in philosophy and aesthetics to the emerging sub-field of boredom studies. As boredom studies is gradually emerging as a field, its intellectual history is told in predominantly two ways. First, boredom can be identified as a major trope in a study on something else such as particular genres of literature (Clare, 2012; Spacks, 1995), experimental music (Priest, 2013), youth subculture (Corrigan, 2006; Mains, 2007; O’Neill, 2015), and so forth. Second, boredom can contribute as a connecting knot through a synthesis of multiple studies from entirely different areas of inquiry—boredom studies. This “vital avenue of research” (Halaydyn & Gardiner, 2017, p.3) often portrays boredom as epochal symptoms of modernity or information overload, depending on which period is under investigation. Boredom is rarely a legitimate or sufficient subject in itself. In my case, boredom is studied as a key performativity of livestreams that draws on the above theoretical approaches while rooted in ethnographic observation.

I discovered two research gaps: first, the near vacuum of research on the topic of boredom or wuliao in the specific contexts of Chinese modernity; second, the relative lack of literature that address the specific kind of performative boredom I observed and documented on livestreams. In the next section of this chapter, I will first discuss the specificity of wuliao in Chinese modernities to fill in the gap of boredom research in China and better situate the contexts in which zhibo emerges not simply as a medium but a social phenomenon. To tackle the above methodological and theoretical challenges in the second research gap, I have been looking for a solid terrain to build my own theory on boredom. While acknowledging my home territory is anthropology concomitant with media theories, I find aesthetics a very incisive entry point to address and counter a lot of inarticulable issues encountered in the field interviews.

I want to make the boredom of watching and performing livestreams perceptible to readers rather than further obscuring the already ungraspable metaphors of boredom present in the literature. Instead of asking why, it is vital to ask the question how is boredom performed and manifested on zhibo and examine the performativity of boredom in the unfolding of a livestreaming event—its inaction, repetition, duration, and waiting. In
exhibiting *zhibo* events of sleeping and drudgery, I will demonstrate performative affinities between *zhibo* and contemporary art/cinema that celebrated aestheticised boredom as subversion, then compare the profound boredom in contemporary art and the vulgar boredom of *zhibo* viewers (not in a pejorative sense). This leads me to consider boredom as a “tactic” (de Certeau, 1984) as opposed to an aesthetic subversion, especially in the broader context of moral panics about smartphones in China.

5.2 The *Wuliao* China: From Modernity to Digital Culture

By ideology atavism, we are creatures of decipherment, hermeneutic subjects: we believe our intellectual task is always to uncover a meaning. China seems reluctant to deliver up this meaning, not because it hides it but, more subversively, because it undoes the constitution of concepts, themes and names. (Barthes, 2013, p.97).

Many of [livestream viewers] are still in school. So, they do not have an advantage in real life and social life, be it from the standpoint of finances, social status, or social ability. So, turning to the small circle of the “two-dimensional world” is great for seeking recognition. This is one of the reasons why “boring livestreams” are so popular.¹

(Wu Zhe, CEO of Zaizhibo, cited in Jiang, 2016)

5.2.1 Metaphorics of Wuliao

*Wuliao* is originally an abbreviation of the phrase *wuhua keliao*, which literally means “nothing to talk about”. *Wuliao* is a highly nebulous term that has a multitude of meanings. I quote Helen Grace’s (2014) exposition of *mouh liuh*,

As a precise generative state that in Cantonese is called *mouh liuh*—a sense of wandering, doing nothing, in between more important events, a state of being without consequence. It is a languid, partially distracted state, bored even (a less nuanced, direct translation of the phase), a state of having nothing better to do, from which a more meaningful world might be imagined if thoughts could wander far enough (p.2).²

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¹ “Two-Dimensional-World” or *erchiyuan* is borrowed word from the Japanese phrase *nijigen hairetsu*. It means the world of anime, manga, and videogames, as opposed to the “real world”. It is often used by anime and manga fandom as a positive self-identification. Zaizhibo was a popular mobile livestreaming platform in 2016.

² *Mouh liuh* is the Cantonese pronunciation of *Wuliao* and its meanings are roughly the same in Mandarin and Cantonese. It is not an exclusively Cantonese word. However, I must clarify that I only discuss *wuliao* in the context of contemporary Mainland China.
I agree that the translation of *wuliao* or *mouh liuh* into bored/boring/boredom would be “less nuanced” and too “direct”. However, instead of devising a new translation or scouring for an equivalent word in English, a more situational and historical explication of the term *wuliao* is more helpful. I am no literary historian, but a brief etymology is still necessary to provide some background information on how Chinese metaphors of boredom have shifted over time.

In classical Chinese text, the comparative emotional state to boredom was often described as *xian*. For example, *toude fusheng banrixian* is from a Tang Dynasty poem and can be translated as, literally but less literally, “steal [time] from the floating life and gain idleness for half of a day” (this literal translation is my own). Therefore, the ancient metaphors of boredom in China were not built upon *wuliao*’s “nothing to talk about” but “idling” or “not doing much”. This noble kind of *xian* described by ancient poetry is very similar to Kierkegaard’s (1987) distinction between vulgar and transcendent boredom—“those who bore others are the plebeians, the crowd, the endless train of humanity in general; those who bore themselves are the chosen ones, the nobility” (p.270). Although *xian* is still very commonly used in contemporary Chinese, its meaning is often limited to idleness whereas *wuliao* is associated with more modern settings such as the urban and the digital.

The first common instance of utterance is the literal sense of *wuliao*: nothing to talk about. As I recounted in the last chapter, this situation of “nothing to talk about” is very common on emerging and unpopular livestream channels where the streamer is often not very good at banter (myself included) or has no comments to respond to. Therefore, the livestreaming is deemed *wuliao* or conversation-less.

The second meaning of *wuliao* is beyond speech and extends to other experiential realms such as the social atmosphere of a given space such as a school, a nightclub, or the city, as well as objects such as videogames and books. In this instance, *wuliao* describes an emotional weariness directed at something for its lack-of-meaning, usually due to not poverty but an affluence of objects or options to entertain oneself. The above-mentioned
spaces and objects are merely temporary distractions that further exacerbate the emotional state of *wuliao*.

The third commonly implied meaning of *wuliao* refers to a disdain for banality. This is perhaps the most divergent meaning of *wuliao* compared to terms like boredom or *ennui* or *langeweile*. The word connotes a sense of vulgarity of the common people who have nothing better to do than idling, loitering in the streets, cheering at the expense of others’ miseries, rejoicing at unfunny jokes, harassing women with vulgar words and committing petty crimes that are annoying but do no actual harm. This vulgarity, or *su*, can refer to both a lack of sophistication of the common people—how one passes time is a great indication of one’s taste—and an obscenity that temporarily eludes the all-seeing police state as *wuliao* does not necessarily aim at transgression.

Another point worth mentioning is that *wuliao*, especially when it manifests as literary and quasi-aristocratic *xian*, is sometimes called *fuguìbìng*, literally “disease of the wealthy” or, in Maoist language, a petty bourgeois sentimentalism. In this case, *wuliao* is very similar to the French word *ennui*. It implies that *wuliao* is a privilege in itself, and the poor do not have time nor energy to be self-indulgently bored, therefore *wuliao* is intrinsically “counter-revolutionary” according to Maoism. The Communist Party has always tried to maintain the image of persistent and timely engagement with the masses and social issues, while portrayal of its disengagement, boredom, and lethargy of officialdom is not allowed in the mainstream media due to boredom’s intrinsic ties to the “leisure class” rather than the proletariat. For example, images of government officials sleeping and drooling during party congress meetings are often quickly censored. By denouncing boredom as “counter-revolutionary”, the intention of the Communist Party is not the same as the Situationist International, for which “boredom is in itself patently counter-revolutionary because it typically leads subjects back into the grip or fold of the spectacle” (Haladyn, 2008, p.12). In contrast, the Communist Party’s prohibition of boredom is based on a very mechanical black and white opposition of two classes, and the claim to the Party’s unwavering spirit in resisting corruption, be it spiritual or economic.

Today this grassroots obscenity can be greatly amplified on livestreams where the subalterns take the *zhìbō* stage without too much supervision, and unfetteredly broadcast
their “deviant” behaviours, which are deemed “uncivilised” by all official narratives on the matter (see Chapter 6 for a detailed discussion). However, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), this vulgarity, in alignment with anti-intellectual sentiment of the time, was exalted and weaponised against the “old” intellectual regimes of the imagined feudal China. This seems to contradict the notion of boredom as a malaise of the rich, but boredom should be discussed in relation to the shifting political climate. Wuliao thus points to an equivocal denunciation of both the rich and the common people, depending on the frames of reference: from elitist boredom of Communist China to the indiscriminate mass boredom of Capitalist China.

5.2.2 Wuliao and Chinese Modernities

In sketching the metaphors of wuliao, I argue that the meanings of wuliao shift according to the epochal changes from Maoist China to Reform China. In the sub-field of boredom studies, one of the most prominent arguments is that boredom is a symptom of the crisis induced by modernity. As literary scholar Elizabeth Goodstein argues in her seminal work Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity (2005), “boredom embodies a specifically modern crisis of meaning” (p.5). In Arcades Project (1999), Walter Benjamin specified dates of the “epidemic” rise of boredom: “boredom began to be experienced in epidemic proportions during 1840s” (p.108).

For Joe Moran (2003), boredom is not merely an effect of the perceived crisis of modernity but the “quintessential experience of modern life” (p.168). The contrast between erlenis and erfahrung is indicative of the dividing line drawn between modern life and the romanticised pastoral premodern life. The German word erlenis connotes a “fleeting momentary experience” (van Leeuwen, 2009, p.187) of immediacy and sensory experiences. Erfenis represents the estrangement of the modern man and failure to create momentous experiences—an “atrophy of experience” (Salzani, 2009). Erfahrung is thus mystified as the pre-modern “experience presented in connectedness and durability which implied to memory and community” (Ibid, p.129). In the following sections, I will delineate the different boredoms in China’s Maoist and Post-Mao modernities in relation to the above theories on boredom and modernity.
Boredom in the Cultural Revolution

Boredom was understood in particular way during Cultural Revolution. Yiju Huang (2014) provides an alternative account of youth boredom in the Cultural Revolution through the film *In the Heat of the Sun* (dir. Jiang Wen, 1994),

A bored youth may very well tag along with overwhelming historical culture and devoid of purposes or interests. . . In this, a bored youth transcends the suffocating historical context in his very aimless, idleness, and disinterest. . . yet this “boring” story harbours immense emancipatory power from overwhelming history (p.113-114).

Boredom emancipates the protagonist from the “emancipatory politics” of the Cultural Revolution and is effectively an antidote to the engulfing tide of history, at a time when participation in politics was a matter of life and death. When teenage Red Guards toppled schoolmasters and excessive recitations of political rhetoric and slogans became mandatory, politics nullified everyday life and even interstices of the quotidian were filled with politicised performances (which were far from authentic). Roland Barthes, despite being a visitor during the Cultural Revolution, provided one of few surviving candid discussions of boredom of that era:

the disappointment continues when Barthes describes China as insipid, filled with repetition, clichés, and what he calls “bricks” – solid, pre-formed units of discourse. All that China offers for reading, he concludes, is its “political Text” (Badmington, 2016, p.310-311).

Barthes’s “can’t be bothered” (2013, p.110) with even taking notes during his visit because he was immensely bored by the politics on display. Doing something for the sake of it, without attaching a political meaning to it, was consequently very transgressive. During the Cultural Revolution, boredom was supposed to be eradicated as a “counter-revolutionary” malaise of bourgeois intelligentsia. It was under this context that incidental boredom became alarmingly subversive.
Boredom in Reform China

In the decades after the opening up of the 1980s, Maoist times were often imagined as a premodern time or an alternative, parallel, or malformed modernity. Post-Mao reforms are thus construed as the back-on-track normal modernity or even a super-modernity epitomised by the accelerated speed of industrialisation and urbanisation as well as the massive expansion of digital platform capitalism, entertainment industries, and neurotic consumerism across all levels of society. The growing nostalgia for the slow-paced life during the Maoist era often romanticises the very guided and regulated nature of work and life at the time—in Yunxiang Yan’s (2009, p.229) words, an “organised sociality”.

I conducted a semi-formal interview on video art with an elderly Chinese artist Z in Beijing. Z was originally retelling his traumatic experiences in the Cultural Revolution and reminisced about the “old simple days” of his teenage years spent during the Cultural Revolution,

Social life was organised rather than fragmentary; social relations were simple because everyone was equally poor instead of being manipulated by the underlying incentive to prosper economically; leisure life was providing a sense of security, despite being highly repetitive, rather than being overwhelmed by choices of contemporary consumerism and everyone was easily bored.

Z proceeded to disparage his grandchildren for their obsessions with their smartphones, and finally fulminated against the media-saturated contemporary Chinese society. At the end of the interview, he asked for my help to navigate a music streaming app on his Android smartphone (presumably his grandson downloaded it but did not teach him how to use it) and download some Chinese operas. He seemed very excited about finally being able to watch Chinese opera videos on his smartphone. In the example of Z, the older generation who experienced the major societal overhaul—i.e. modernisation—understands boredom relationally. The two epochs of the Maoist era and Post-Mao capitalist China are juxtaposed as antitheses, especially in terms of sense of temporality, affect, and media consumption: slow versus accelerated pace of life, “nothing to do” versus “too many things to do”, monotonous State media channels versus the information overload of digital media.
This comparative approach resonates with the distinction between *erlenis* and *erfahrung* discussed earlier. On the one hand, the Cultural Revolution is imagined as a metaphysical void and a cultural desert, affluent in mind-numbing political fervour, but deficient in terms of leisure activities and commodities (thus “nothing to do”), while the digital age is celebrated for its plurality, spectacles, and commodities (thus “too many things to do”). On the other hand, Maoist time is also mystified as the “simple life”—therefore enjoyment can be achieved easily—whereas contemporary city dwellers cannot take delight in the simplicity of life but indulge in ever-ending pursuit of novelties, “artificial pleasure” so to speak. The connection between boredom and modernity is certainly drawn and the manner in which both concepts are strategically summoned depends on the context of the argument. When modernity is deemed negative, it would be framed as a “Western” influence that corrupts “traditional” virtues protecting Chinese people from vicious boredom. When modernity is deemed positive, it has mutated with Chinese characteristics and is no longer “a sole preserve of the West” (Lewis, Martin, & Sun, 2016, p.4).

5.2.3 Chinese Critics on Boredom and Zhibo

Loneliness and Boredom

After the previous sections that delineate the histories of boredom in Chinese modernities, this section will address the prominent criticisms of *zhibo* within Chinese scholarship. In response to the rise of the livestreaming industry, Chinese scholars, journalists, and critics were perplexed at first and soon become obsessed with asking the *why* question raised at the beginning of the chapter. In a widely circulated opinion piece titled “Boring *zhibo*, why are so many people addicted?” (2016), media critic Wang Xinxi compares contemporary

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3 This is especially apparent in how Chinese intelligentsia twist Marxist critiques from the Frankfurt School and Henri Lefebvre, which I will return to in the conclusion of the thesis.
Chinese livestreams with the *Truman Show*, Slow Television in Norway, and YouTube videos. For him, all the above examples are culturally specific ways to tackle loneliness. Wang (2016) writes,

> These livestreams of ‘awl faces’ barely exist in the US. Because livestreaming is also a culture of socialisation, which needs an appropriate soil. In Norway, slow television is a necessary companion during the polar nights. In the US, famous YouTube personalities are more likely to be cultured, they rely on videogames and performances of certain skills. Americans are extroverts and open therefore there is not fertile ground for boring livestreams to exist in the US. In China, livestreaming, as a format, matches with introvert personalities of Chinese people.

Wang’s cultural determinism is crude in the sense that he does not realise that the so-called Chinese specific gender stereotypes are not an exclusive Chinese phenomenon as Senft (2008) has extensively demonstrated through the case of camgirls. *Zhibo*’s boredom is thus posited a consequence of a uniquely Chinese societal problem—loneliness. While admitting *zhibo* does not necessarily encourage sociality on an equal ground, Wang argues that *zhibo* nonetheless help fill the void of social life of young people. He continues,

> The prosperity of *zhibo* reflects the younger generation’s loneliness in modern life and their barren spiritual life. *zhibo* satisfied the desire of some to be famous and other people’s *diaosi* mentality. The performance on *zhibo* lacks seriality and meanings and obviously has nothing to do with deep reflexive thoughts. People just fight boredom with boredom.

As Wang postulates the *Truman Show* as “a moral denial of technology from a Western tradition that worships freedom”, China is considered to be lagging behind the West in terms of its collective and societal reflections on the question of technology. Modernity comes across as a stage which the West has already gone through but is still ongoing in China. As a result, China is not only celebrating economic development and technological advancement but also dealing with the consequences of existential pains and a deprived spiritual life.

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4 “Awl faces” refer to faces that underwent cosmetic surgery, which is very common among Chinese online celebrities (see the discussion on this issue in Chapter 4).

5 I have discussed “the *diaosi* mentality” in detail in Section 4.2.3.
Schaeffer (2018) arrives on a similar argument on loneliness in her speculation of why *danmu* videos (discussed in Chapter 2) are so popular. She associates the abundance of comments on *danmu* videos with the psyche of the “‘empty nest youth’—young, unmarried single living alone”. *Danmu* videos, and especially *danmu* on livestreams, help alleviate “a certain isolation, and a need for closeness and validation”.

The problem of fixating on loneliness as a societal problem is that it exacerbates the society’s expectation for people to socialise in particular manners while invalidating others. Modernity, with its uncritical obsession with technology (especially smartphones), is posited as reason why the malaise of boredom proliferates in Chinese society. The imageries of boredom in Wang’s article also pathologise boredom by default and reflect the State’s position on the issue of boredom: a social disorder, most likely induced by the rise of internet technology. Profundity, as defined by the intellectual establishment and ideologues, is also necessarily what people (or at least all individuals) are after in their private leisure time. This builds a pretext for my later discussion on the conflict between profound and vulgar boredom.

**The Boredom Economy: Fans versus Water Friends**

The influential cultural critic Ma Xiaoyan (2016) penned a provocative essay titled “Online Livestreams as Feasts of Informational Dildos: Always Erect but Bored”. This article represents the fiercest and most quoted intellectual critique of *zhibo* in 2016. Following the popular catchphrase “fensi (fan) economy”, Ma (2016) proposes the concept of the “boredom economy”.

In the postmodern society, people not only profit from the fan economy, but also the boredom economy... Benjamin’s flaneur is transformed into a ‘visual’ feast of the cyberspace... The so-called ‘fans’ on various livestreaming apps, are actually not fans in nature; they are merely bored loiterers and novelty seekers... They do not have the loyalty and honesty of the so-called dedicated fans, they are just creatures with nothing better to do. *They are believers of boredom, the ideal embodiment of the boredom economy*—they are the biggest contributors to this thriving industry (emphasis added).
The boredom economy sounds a lot like the attention economy or perhaps the economy of distraction but it is still somewhat under-defined in Ma’s article. Building on a similar idea of boredom economy, Chinese media scholar Liu Chang (2017) argues that livestream viewers are consuming boredom as a commodity. Liu shares a negative view on boredom: “‘a sense of fulfillment’ is simply the accumulation of time spent getting bored. ‘Meaning’ is the empty feeling of being occupied by boredom. This then simulates the viewers to want more intensive boredom” (p.6). Ma’s harsh denunciation of zhibo viewers as “creatures with nothing better to do” demonstrates the exact issue outlined by the commentator quoted in the introduction of this chapter: “Have you watched any of them?”. Livestreams are a medium that require long-term engagement just to understand and even enjoy its value, as I have emphasised in Chapter 3. A glimpse at zhibo is just not enough, especially for scholarship.

To a degree, Ma is right in casting her aspersions on livestream viewers: a large majority of viewers are indeed bored loiterers with little patience to wait, especially with small channels (while viewers are way more likely to endure boring livestreams of popular channels). However, Ma is not providing any particular insights, at least not in the enlightening sense she would have hoped for. Viewers already do not refer to themselves as “fans” of particular livestreamers but shuiyou or “water friends”—viewers have already recognised and even embraced the ephemerality of the sociality on livestreams before theorisations were made upon them. As a specific comment culture, ephemeral sociality, and communal intimacy coexist among “water friends” on livestreams, and a given instance oscillates between the two depending on the livestream channel and situated events. Following a socio-historical background of wuliao in China, the next section will proceed to analyse the (anti)aesthetics of boredom through ethnographic examples of how livestreams perform boredom.

5.3 From Aestheticised Boredom to Vulgar Boredom

If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.

A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it... by contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. (Benjamin, 2008, p.33)

5.3.1 Aesthetically Boredom

The aforementioned critique of modernity was most fierce from the proponents of Situationism. In Guy Debord’s (1983) formulation of the society of the spectacle, boredom is considered “a by-product of the modern subject’s increasing dependence on the spectacle of new commodities to mediate or provide meaning for her/his life” (Haladyn, 2008, p.5). We are permanently stuck in a recursive loop of, as Lovink (2008) succinctly puts it, “Boredom-Surprise-Boredom” (p.9). To propose a solution, Situationism declared war on boredom. “Total revolution” was “the only ‘cure’” to the “unrelenting boredom” induced by routinisation and banalisation of everyday life (Gardiner, 2012, p.39). However, according to Haladyn (2008),

Situationism failed to recognise that boredom represented a modern subject’s inablity to be seduced or enamored by the spectacle, the resulting sense of meaninglessness making the interrelated system of culture and capitalism visible (p.7).

Haladyn’s critique of Situationism alludes to a possible aesthetic strategy that transcends boredom as a byproduct of modernity but rather “a treat or escape from the spectacle because it makes visible, through the lived reflections of an alienated individuation, the subject’s isolation from the soceity” (Ibid, p.7). The avant-garde also saw the potential of boredom as an aesthetic strategy: boredom can awaken the reflexivity which would otherwise be incapacitated. In the Arcades Project, Benjamin already posited a “good” kind of boredom, mental relaxation, the “dream bird” that “hatches eggs of experience” (1999, p.91). This boredom is a “trojan horse... by which a gradual mode of awakening can stealthily enter our commodified dream-world and transform it into dialectical possibility” (Gardiner, 2012, p.53). In the essay “boredom and danger”, artist Dick Higgin (1968) states that “boredom often serves a useful function: as an opposite of excitement and as a means of bringing emphasis of what it interrupts, causing us to view both elements freshly” (p.2). Boredom is thus a device of criticality for the avant-garde.
As a pioneer of this aesthetic strategy, Andy Warhol effectively made “boredom both a career and an alibi for his career” (Priest, 2013, p.57). The subversion of Warhol’s films lay in how he challenged the cinematic conventions of the time, namely immersion, engagement, escapism, and a moral prohibition of wasting time. He “dispels the viewer’s reliance upon illusionism or fantasy of film by allowing the camera to capture mechanically whatever is located in front of the apparatus” (Haladyn, 2011, p.107) and purports an “uncompromising insistence on meaningless” (Svendsen, 2005, p.101). Just as artist Kenneth Goldsmith (2004) summarises, “the 20th century avant-garde liked to embrace boredom as a way of getting around what it considered to be the vapid ‘excitement’ of popular culture”. In short, boredom was supposed to disrupt the logic of the spectacle by exacerbating it—e.g. through duration or anti-eroticism—and subvert the modernist impulse to imbue meaning in everything by aestheticised meaningfulness. In the following exhibit, I want to draw parallels between the themes of Warhol’s “furniture films” and one subgenre of sleeping streams on Douyu.

5.3.2 Exhibit A: Sleep and Surveillance

In this much quoted livestream event in my interviews and recounts on various internet forums that took place on 8 July 2014, 34,449 viewers were watching Ligan—known as Dianjinliboqin or Esport Liboqin at the time—sleeping in bed during livestream (see Figure 5.2).6 His stream title reads, “I want to take four consecutive days off, livestream eight hours a day”.

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6 I unfortunately did not witness this event live and all the following information comes from watching the archived livestream video, reading online discussions, and conducting interviews.
Ligan mostly streamed gameplay of *League of Legends*, but also spent a large portion of his time on livestream bantering or ranting on various aspects of his life from work, relationships, and Esports, to the state of the *zhibo* industry. On several occasions, he was intoxicated and passed out during the livestream. Two of my informants believe Ligan was the first streamer on Douyu to sleep during a livestream. During his career on Douyu from 2014 to 2017, Ligan gradually became a professional in “staging” and manufacturing livestream events: sometimes by making outrageous statements, sometimes by doing nothing. Ligan was (in)famous for his regular “abstinences” from his “proper” livestreaming work of playing *League of Legends* as a livestreamer active in the category of *League of Legends* (e.g. his events of *chafang* discussed in Chapter 3). The stark contrast between his supposed commitment to Esports and his usual indolence on the livestream was almost comical and a key performativity that attracted many viewers, according to one of my interviewees.

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7 I chronicled another event on Ligan’s channel in Chapter 3, when he lamented about his day job as a police officer before quitting and confessed his plan to transition to full-time streaming.
Although the sleeping body of Ligan in Figure 5.2 is curiously reminiscent of Warhol’s *Sleep*, Ligan did not intend to provoke but to entertain his audiences. In 1964, “at the movie’s New York premier, two of the nine audience members left within the first hour” (Fisher, 2017); in 2014, over 30,000 viewers were exhilarated while witnessing this event of Ligan sleeping and snoring. *Danmu* comments were hyperactive during the event:

“I heard [from others] someone is sleeping on livestream, so here I am”
“The Sleeping Dragon of Esports!”
“This is so fucking!”
“Why the hell are there so many people watching this?”
“Obscene Zhubo (livestreamer) dies at home, fans not leaving him alone.”
“There are more people watching him sleep than him playing games”
“………………”
“Just masturbated just masturbated just masturbated just masturbated”
“Can not look straight at this”

This event was a collective participation of spectators in a livestream event, which is a common on a popular channel but a rare occurrence on unpopular channels (e.g. see Figure 5.1). Following the discussion on viral affect of *danmu* in Chapter 2, it is undeniable that the interactivity of livestreams contributes to the excitement: jokes, memes, arguments, and the overwhelming visuality of *danmu* certainly exhilarates the “crowd”. In other words, the crowd made the crowd itself excited and the elation was contagious and grew exponentially both within and outside the channel, as viewers passed news onto other livestream channels on Douyu. In this event, Ligan’s livestream was anything but boring. His act of sleeping—quite novel in 2014 (later many channels tried to replicate this performance)—set the “performative context” (see Section 4.2.3) and his viewers can “perform” the rest through contributing *danmu* comments.

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8 _Dianjin Wolong_ or “The Sleeping Dragon of Esports” is a playful tease on his Douyu handle Dianjin Liboqin or Esport Liboqin. In 2014, it was quite popular to call oneself “X Esports”. This X was usually a name of a celebrity not associated with the Esports scene. For example, Liboqin is a famous local comedian in Sichuan. By naming himself the “Esports Liboqin”, he was implying that he was a good comedian in the realm of Esports.

9 Sleep streams became relatively common after the initial emergence on Ligan’s channel. Although sleeping on a stream is technically against Douyu’s terms and conditions, Douyu had been ambiguous in terms of censoring this genre of performance.
Another pertinent example, also found on Douyu, is BBQ’s channel of surveillance footage. The livestreamer’s “main” stream activity was playing *League of Legends*, usually after 8pm in the evening. During the day, the stream video consisted of two real-time footage from two surveillance cameras installed on his fourth-floor open balcony, facing upwards (see Figure 5.3).

He wrote in the description text above the two video streams,

For some time, people have been tossing stuff from the high rise, every single day, from glass bottles, various garbage, leftovers. I cannot take it anymore. I bought two surveillance cameras. . . the red numbers are for marking the floor numbers. I thank my viewers for helping pay attention to the surveillance footage while I am away.

This set-up was indeed a novel way to engage with his viewers while he was not even in front of the computer. I watched this livestream, while reading a book, for a few hours to observe there would be any turn of event (i.e. captured acts of high-rise littering). The newcomers to the channel were also curious but soon they were bored by how static the surveillance footage was—there was nothing to see. But the channel chat was active as viewers debated the point of this livestream and requested songs via text commands in the
The conversations in the channel chat were fragmented and short-lived most of the time, as I observed, but sometimes became intensively active as viewers started an argument on issues completely irrelevant to the surveillance footage.

As the above two examples demonstrate, the discussion of boredom on livestreams cannot be generalised, even within the same genre of performance (e.g. sleeping, eating, digging a hole in the bush), but narrowed down to each event, as the livestream of an empty baby cradle stagnates (the chat room is vacant) while a sleeping male body excels (the chat room is active).

5.3.3 The Burden of Aestheticised Boredom

On the level of content, there are no intrinsic differences between Warhol’s Sleep and the five-hour long livestream of the streamer sleeping: both involve a static camera and an actor sleeping for a long duration. The difference, as explained by Ligan during his rants against television, is interactivity. It is undeniable that the interactivity of a livestream, especially viewer participation, makes the supposedly boring livestream exciting. As the Nanfang Weekly columnist Wang Qianqiu (2016) writes,

> The content [livestreams] is so empty so the key is not the content. . . we have to go back to the medium. . . livestreaming as a technology is an extension of sight and hearing senses, but it also contains an allegory of gaze. . . as the Truman Show predicates the advent of quanming zhibo (everyone is livestreaming).

> The sociality of online videos overwhelms the content itself, especially when it is denigrated as “non-content” and it becomes difficult to legitimise or probe the aesthetic quality of these videos without “the social” of the synchronous chatroom.¹⁰ I am not equating livestreams to slow cinema or anti-cinema but to highlight the difference between profound boredom and vulgar boredom as outlined by Richmond (2015), which I will unpack in the following section. Even though the strategies of aestheticised boredom

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¹⁰ I discussed the aesthetics of danmu in Chapter 2, where I posited danmu, in its most celebrated form, as a visual or aesthetic rather than textual (i.e. content) culture.
performed by the artistic avant-garde were powerfully transgressive given the contexts of their emergence, the operativity of this aestheticised boredom is so abused that the life/art divide effectively dissipates.

For the art critics, “perhaps afraid of embarrassment and the risk of fraudulence, [they] cannot bring themselves to declare Warhol’s films merely boring” (Richmond, 2015, p.28). Instead, as Priest (2011) puts it while re-elucidating Paul Mann’s (1991) point,

The current interest in aesthetic boredom would seem to lie not in how it affects someone, but in how a work’s senseless drifts and empty feints persuade someone to talk or write about it (p.20).

The issue, however, is how these films are received by ordinary spectators who are not going to write about or comment on them professionally. One cannot expect the operativity of this aestheticised boredom as “dialectical possibility” to automatically be clear to the average spectator. As Richmond (2015) contends,

Profound boredom, as a matter of aesthetic, is largely impersonal. Part of the allure of profound boredom is that it requires its spectator to have successfully received enough of an aesthetic education to recognize the glint of interesting behind the veil of boredom (p.28).

In the case of Warhol’s films that force an ascetic formalism, spectators are often forced to reflect or be reflexive; in other words, one is pressured to “feel” something responsively—an existential crisis of sort—and supposed to be intrigued enough to produce an interpretation. This is the burden of aestheticised boredom: the spectator is forced to reflect upon the aesthetic nature of boredom. However, if the spectator refuses to reflect on it, as Baudrillard (2005) puts it eloquently, “he [the spectator] literally consumes the fact that he understands nothing and that there is no necessity in all this except the imperative of culture, of being a part of the integrated circuit of culture” (p.107). As the purpose of art melts into ordinary life and vice versa, “democratisation of arts has paradoxically merely strengthened the privileged status of the idea of art, culminating in this banal tautology of ‘art is art’. . . [and] as a corollary, the consumer circulates in all this in order to experience his non-enjoyment of the works” (Ibid, p.107, emphasis added). In
other words, while aestheticised boredom instigates and even reinforces a hierarchy of taste, the ordinary viewer without aesthetic education finds the joy of viewing boredom elsewhere—in their own acts of making fun of the meaninglessness on display.

5.3.4 Exhibit B: Drudgery and Repetition

Kuaishou: Performing Chinese Idioms on Drudgery

In the following sequence of four images of stream archives from the mobile-based livestream platform Kuaishou or Kwai, the streamers performed four Chinese idioms or allegories on repetition and difference. Although there are a number of livestreams similar to these imageries across many platforms, these four images capture the seriality and length of such performativity of drudgery that I observed on multiple livestreaming platforms.

Figure 5.4 The first man of Shuidishichuan’s Kuaishou page (left) and Huge’s Kuaishou page (right). Images downloaded from Weibo on 15 October 2017.
In Figure 5.4, the image on the left is a daily documentation (the highlighted red text displays the number of days it has recorded) of water dripping from a plastic bottle onto a stone and the corresponding idiom is *shuidi shichuan* or “water drops penetrating the stone”. The image on the right is day-to-day video documentation of the same guy pickaxing the surface of a hill and the idiom he performs is *yugong yishan* or “stupid man trying to move a mountain” but he colloquially changed it into *quanwang yishan* or “the whole internet trying to move a mountain”, implying that the internet is also participating by watching him ploughing a hill.

In Figure 5.5, the screenshot on the left is a series of streamed videos (daily) that attempt to re-enact the well-known idiom/legend of *jingwei tianhai* or “jingwei (the name of a bird) landfilling the sea” by throwing rocks of various sizes into the lake. The screenshot on the right is a re-enactment of the idiom *tichu mochengzhen* or “metal stick grinded into a needle” by grinding a metal stick on a whetstone every day.

This performativity of repetition is similar to Tehching Hsieh’s widely celebrated work *One Year Performance 1980–1981*. The livestreams on Kuaishou and Hsieh’s work
both engage in the ascetic repetition of drudgery and meaningless labour: in the first case, the livestreamers seek to shock and intrigue, attract attention, and eventually financial return; in the second case, Tehching Hsieh seeks to provoke reflections through exhibiting his sufferings of boredom, fatigue, and waiting, all culminated on the wall of photos of Hsieh’s punching card. However, the difference is that the performers on Kuaishou are not artists but peasants by occupation and the performances are not funded by art foundations or galleries but advertising revenue of a video platform. The livestreamers are not bound by “privileged status of the idea of art” (Baudrillard, 2005, p.107) but motivated by financial gain from public attention.

Bilibili Boredom Competition: Repetition and Waiting

The second part of this exhibit is Bilibili’s yearly fadai or “spacing out” contest, where anyone with a verified Bilibili account can upload and submit their videos or archived livestreams to the contest and viewers can vote for the videos that are the most boring (Bilibili, 2016). During the competition in May 2016, I reviewed 60 videos that were selected for the showcase of the contest. Some of the videos submitted to the competitions are recorded one-take videos and some are time-lapse of long livestreams. These videos are the most revealing examples of popular perceptions of what boredom entails in the video format since they are submitted to the contest that seeks to find the most boring video. In this contest, meaninglessness is not an accident but a deliberate point of contention.

One prominent performative trope emerging from these submissions is simple but repetitive labour over a long period of time—often abbreviated by the time lapse in the version submitted to the contest as Bilibili did set a time limit to the submissions—which requires a great deal of patience and dedication but not so much professional expertise nor ingenuity. These videos do not aim at boring the viewer but exhibiting their dedication to a monotonous activity over an extended period, thus validating to the audience the video-makers’ tenacity in enduring boredom.
For example, in Figure 5.6, the contestant Wang cuncun was counting grains of rice by relocating the uncooked rice from one plate to another while counting on an iPhone calculator, for six hours. The time lapse is only three minutes and therefore alleviates the viewer from ascetic waiting for the expectant eventual outcome: the digits on the iPhone display the number of grains of rice and the left plate is entirely emptied. To borrow Priest’s (2013) words, the video is more “attuned to the singular and pure time of its own happening—its event-hood—than to the mixed and impure time of an immediacy mediated by deferred desire” (p.73). The video predetermined its own event-hood: instead of a long period of inattention and waiting for nothing, there is a clear objective/expectation established for the waiting.

As temporality is accelerated in time lapse, edited videos are way more accessible in the sense they are an abbreviated form of livestreaming boredom. Time lapse of the edited video vaporises the actual “mixed and impure” (Priest, 2013, p.73) temporality of boredom on a livestream. The exhausting duration is thus cancelled by the accelerated time lapse, but the short video still serves the photographic evidence of the contestant’s dedication to boredom, which is mainly how submissions are accessed. The contestant making this video could not bear the boredom of counting grains of rice for such a long
period of time: he took breaks, changed music on the phone, replied to messages, browsed WeChat, and eventually his patience wore out—he just poured the remaining rice to the other plate. The video was an experiential documentation of a specific boredom—that is, how the contestant endures the repetitive labour.

I thus highlight the aspect of waiting on livestreams, which is intertwined with the concept of non-event and liveness (discussed in Chapter 1). As I have discussed, liveness is, in its height of interrupting the regular flow of television, often connected to crisis. The other side of televisual time is, as television scholar Anna McCarthy (2001) puts it, “forms of deadness” (p. 196, emphasis in original) of waiting for nothing. In the above time lapse video, the outcome of what the viewer is waiting for is very clear, but it requires a little bit of patience to see the outcome.

However, the non-event of zhibo is the implicit waiting for something to happen without knowing what is going to happen. Priest (2013) argues that “the paradox of waiting for nothing—uneventful event of waiting—characterises the contemporary sense of boredom” (p. 69). In comparison to watching a film where certain action is usually expected and most ordinarily the expectation is satisfied, watching livestreams is an example of “waiting for nothing”. This waiting of zhibo contains the potential for thrilling intensity in the height of eruption of eventfulness (e.g. Ligan’s sleeping stream) and also risks the unbearable inactivity (e.g. the empty baby cradle).

Moreover, waiting can be also actively cultivated as a performativity. As Priest (2013) further elaborates, “waiting falls into a species of lived art or tactical know-how that is composed of multiple but untamed operativities” (p. 67). Michele White (2006b), in her research on spectators of cam sites, demonstrates this point with a concrete example,

Delays in receiving the expected information are also important aspects of emailing, gaming, and ‘synchronous’ communications. Internet spectators may stay engaged because of these aspects of waiting and possible futures rather than the promised immediacy and present (p. 70).

Although internet connection and computing speed have greatly improved in the past decade, waiting is still an experiential component of zhibo. Beyond the long buffering
time of livestreaming videos, which is a regular occurrence for me due to my location in Australia, waiting is also actively incorporated into certain genres of performance. Many professional wanghong are often trained by the wanghong incubators (see Chapter 4, Section 4.3.2) to pace the jiezou or rhythm of the livestream: interchangeably banter with viewers, sing, tell personal stories, and idling (but remain present in front of the webcam). In fact, according to the manager of the wanghong incubator X, idling and doing nothing, when applied “strategically” and not “excessively” in between spontaneous or rehearsed peaks of livestream events, help maintain the flow of the stream and give viewers “expectations” and control the (erotic or not) attraction of both the performer and the livestream channel. This training is often based on the accumulated knowledge on viewing practices. In the following section, I will make the transition from the above (anti)aesthetic rendition of zhibo to a more vulgar form of boredom through the viewing practice of geyoutang.

5.3.5 Vulgar Boredom

In contrast to the profound boredom of Warhol’s “Stillie” films, which rely on producing an interpretation whether in the form of affect or an essay, “vulgar boredom... takes place in the failure of the object to involve an interpretive, depressive I” (Richmond, 2015, p.31). Vulgar boredom is the comfort of being with oneself in “an ordinary way” (Ibid, p.32): “I am stuck with myself, but I am also relieved from wanting, waiting, or acting” (Ibid, p.32). Here we can address Siegfried Kracauer’s (1995) notion of “vulgar boredom of daily drudgery... [that] neither kills people nor awakens them to new life” (p.331).

Going back to the earlier discussion on anti-aesthetics, vulgar boredom has “the desultory singularity of mere taste” (Richmond, 2015, p.29). Vulgar boredom does not entail criticality in the intellectual or at the level of perception but a retreat from desire, a more habitual and ordinary level of disengagement. Vulgar boredom can easily fit into people’s lives rather than disrupt them. This vulgar boredom, as described by Richmond, is reminiscent of the Chinese term fangkong—literally “let empty”—that is frequently brought up by my interviews when they describe the state of mind when they watch livestreams as they try to relax from stress. It viscerally describes this emotional state as
one lets the mind be emptied out or be comfortably embraced by emptiness, especially after a day of hard work.

Much like how reality TV was perceived in the West (Deery, 2015), zhibo is often considered vulgar and a sign of low taste exactly because of this vulgar boredom. The Chinese State has been pushing for a “spiritual civilisation” that elevates the taste of the masses, which has been one of the primary motives (or “excuses” depending on the perspective) to censor livestreams. This stigma sometimes leads certain viewers being unwilling to confess that they enjoy the supposed vulgar contents of zhibo (see a further discussion in Chapter 6). In other cases, livestream viewers are not really bothered by the accusations of being shallow and vulgar—especially by Chinese media pundits—as they do enjoy the medium. This vulgar boredom in livestreams not only lies in the content of zhibo but also how viewers habitually watch them, in terms of both space and time.

**Geyoutang: The Importance of Viewing Position**

Where and how do viewers watch livestreams? On what devices? In what bodily positions? These were some of the recurring questions I asked during interviews with zhibo viewers. Livestreams are watched with various levels of attention. Sometimes we watch attentively during the height of eventfulness; sometimes we watch distractedly while doing something else, just like ambient role that television plays in domestic as well as public spaces (see McCarthy, 2001); sometimes we watch livestream absentmindedly. This absentmindedness is particularly evident in the reclining viewing position of geyoutang (literally “Ge You reclines”, see Figure 5.7) As an anonymous informant explains her practice of watching livestreams,

I messaged with my boyfriend for a while before messaging him ‘good night’ but I didn’t actually sleep. Instead, I just went on watching livestreams until 1am and then passed out, with my phone on my face... I find watching zhibo in bed really relaxing and comforting before sleep... I just put the phone on my chest and listen to it [the livestream] if I am too tired.
Viewing position thus emerges as a habitual manifestation of vulgar boredom. Similarly, to what McCarthy (2001) proposes for television, *zhībo* can be “a time-warping companion” (p.197) during the non-event of trying to fall asleep. Anxiety and insomnia are often said to be results of bed-time use of digital devices, but the practice of using smartphones before or during falling sleep is already the norm in China. My informant, as shown above, attributed livestream viewing as an activity that relieves anxiety. Watching livestreams is not necessarily wasting time as it helps pass time as it induces “a low-affect vagueness” (Ibid, p.219).

![Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

Figure 5.7 The meme of *geyoutang* is extracted from a still image of the actor Ge You in the 1993 sitcom *I Love My Home*. Image extracted from WeChat on 24 November 2017.

D’Costa (2017) posits the recliner position as the hallmark of the “American TV dad” and traces through history for evidence of the gradual construction of the recliner as exclusively male space. The recliner thus represents a social code of success in the US context. In China, it seems to be the complete opposite—the popularity of the reclining position both as a meme and a practice led to public scrutiny in 2016. *Geyoutang* (see Figure 5.7) becomes a symbol of the “wasted life” of watching videos or browsing social media on smartphones and the associated spirit of unrelenting indolence. This is simultaneously a positive and negative image: it is positive because, in a society that normalises long working hours and various extended responsibilities, this position is so relaxing to the
degree that its inertia resists any attempts to work; it is negative because idleness or “the right to laziness” or lanhanquan in Chinese is not considered a desired virtue.\footnote{\textit{I have also elaborated on this difference between wuliao and xian in 5.2.1. Here, the “right to laziness” is not seen as an elevated or enlightened ancient practice as we can observe in xian, but deeply entrenched in the everyday technological practices in contemporary China.}}

It can be argued that the proliferation of smartphone usage, rather than television, in domestic settings has led to the popularity of this sitting posture. In 2015, Douyu released the app “Douyu XL” for Android-based smart TV and its promotion at the time was “from now on we can watch livestreams happily while reclining on the sofa”. The reclining viewing position was promoted by Douyu itself. However, when asked where they watch livestreams, the common answer from my informants is on their mobile phones and none of my interviewees had actually tried watching livestreams on large screen televisions (even though most of them owned smart televisions). Compared to the aspects of mobile data plans and streaming videos on mobile screens during daily commutes, how livestreams are watched in domestic spaces is perhaps a more significant issue for most of my informants. Sofas and beds are common spaces where livestreams are viewed on mobile or tablet screens. Sofas are the optimal comfort zones, not just for the television but also smaller mobile screens.

I would argue the rise of the reclining posture precedes the rise of the meme geyoutang, which became so popular to the point that China Daily published an opinion piece headlined “Comfortable but inelegant couch potato style now in vogue” (Zhou, 2016) to highlight the risks of nihilism and inertia in the glorification of such memes. Zhou (2016) writes,

People with little knowledge of the source material would believe this is the archetypal image for a couch potato. In recent days, the existential ennui has been magnified as Chinese netizens added other global celebrities to the lineup—all in the same lolling position (English in original).
Geyoutang is not the same as couch potato exactly because its context of emergence. A commentator Qiangtoumashanghao (2016), provides a compelling counterargument to the characterisation of “couch potatoes”.

The reclining Sun Jisheng [name of Ge You’s character in the television show I Love My Home], is like a spiritual opium remediated across the century [referring to the Opium Wars], sneering at the white-collar workers who dress properly and sit uptight (translation is my own).

Geyoutang can be seen as a reaction towards the hardworking and low paid white-collar workers who have little hope for promotion but still try to improve their own images in order to impress their superiors, even with their sitting posture. Geyoutang is a temporary withdrawal from desires and responsibilities to the comforting boredom of being with oneself. The negative view of geyoutang is directly linked to the following discussion on the moral panics about mass distraction, which leads to a practice-based account of tactical boredom.

5.4 From Digital Boredom to Tactical Boredom

5.4.1 Digital Boredom and the Prevalence of Smartphones

Moral Panics about Smartphones: Mass Distraction

In Post-Reform China there have been many waves of moral panic about various technologies or online platforms. In the late 1990s, it began with a demonisation of the internet—in the most generic sense possible, as often objects considered to be part of “the internet” were picked on arbitrarily as the critics did not fully understand how the internet worked at the time. Since the 2000s, videogames and especially MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games), as well as internet cafés (the popular space for videogame consumption), have endured waves of public scrutiny. There are some excellent sociological and historical critiques of these waves of moral panics (e.g. Szablewicz, 2010; Zhang, 2013).
My contribution is, however, to identify one crucial difference in the formulation of the past and present moralisation of technological practices in China. In the past (1990s–2000s), moral panics have scrutinised digital technologies and the internet for their addictive immersion and escapism from the real world (e.g. schoolwork), while the contemporary (post-2010) arguments against WeChat, zhibo, and smartphones mostly are no longer through a lens of attraction but distraction. Arguably immersion in a virtual world is also a form of distraction from “the real world” but the crucial difference is that the addiction of smartphones posits a total deficit of attention as opposed to a “misdirection” of attention. The public perception of technology has become more sensitive towards media saturation, the resulting vacuity, and the inability to immerse in anything. According to this perception, everyone is distracted by smartphones and overwhelmed by multiple sources of information and constant connection. Everyone has attention deficit to the extent that no one even pays attention to our face-to-face conversations. The incapacitating boredom we experience when we are rid of our smartphones just further reminds us of how bored we are.

Most livestream viewers I interviewed expressed the above concerns, especially the perceived decline of face-to-face conversations. As one anonymous informant W, who was a regular livestream viewer, put it,

Couples just looked at their phones at dinner tables without even talking to each other. . . . my mum used to yell at me for being online or with my computer all the time. Now she herself is always on her phone, doing exactly the same.

While I was not aware that the book *Reclaiming Conversation* (Turkle, 2015) was translated into Chinese, W mentioned this book in a follow-up interview and told me the book resonated with him.\(^\text{12}\) As Turkle (2015) writes,

We say we turn to our phones when we’re “bored”. And we often find ourselves bored because we become accustomed to a constant feed of connection, information, and entertainment. We are forever elsewhere (p.4).

\(^{12}\) The Chinese version of the book was published in August 2017 and the reviews are exceptionally good (scoring 9 out of 10 on a Chinese book review site, inspected in October 2017).
Read a summary of Turkle’s book on WeChat (as opposed to the original book) and circulated it among his friends, as the moral integrity of Turkle’s diagnosis was very appealing. As Miller and Horst (2012) comment on Turkle’s book, “Turkle reflects on a more general tendency towards nostalgia widespread in journalism. . . on the effects of media that view new technology as a loss of authentic sociality” (p.12). In this sense, Turkle was popular because she wrote what people wanted to hear. As these opinion pieces (see examples in Section 5.2.3) are widely read on people’s smartphone during moments of microboredom—while they are sprawling on their sofa, waiting on the platform, and sitting on the toilet—gaps of time are filled by reading articles on smartphones about how smartphones are destroying the sociality of our society.

One of the recurring misunderstandings during my interviews on boredom is that my interviewees often assumed that, when I mentioned wuliao in our conversations, I must detest boredom and I just wanted to hear negative views of it. I often heard the familiar criticisms of smartphone induced distraction and boredom, as understandably some of my long-term informants, who I have known for more than three years, scoured the depository on their phones for what they I thought I wanted to know. I often had to emphasise that I was more interested in their own experiences and practices of watching zhibo rather than an equivocal criticism of “smartphone culture”, a term that I find very unproductive. However, the problem of this criticism is that my informants’ smartphone practices do not change after reading the summary of Turkle’s book, culminated in the cynical statement “I know what (not) to do, but do it anyway”. This difficulty then leads to the discussion on an alternative way to account boredom.

13 There is a minority in the younger generation (under 20) who are abandoning smartphones and WeChat. It is curious that the appearance of withdrawal from social media such as the Moment (pengyouquan) in WeChat (which operates very similar to the timeline of Facebook but with numerous differences that I cannot expand here) is often considered as an act of “hiding” and interpreted as a sign of “not being trusted”. Some of my informants doubted me whether I trusted them as friends or not because they did not see my Moment posts. But no posts were hidden from them, I simply did not post anything.
Towards a Practice-Based Account of Digital Boredom

Martin Hand (2017) provides two major perspectives in addressing the moral crisis of “digital boredom”: acceleration of temporality, first in relation to the perception of time, as well as routinisation and quantification of the everyday; second in relation to the compulsion to be “always connected”. Summarising the recent trend of media critics and academics disparaging smartphones for causing or exacerbating our boredom, Hand (2017) writes,

Smartphones and social media figure as sources of boredom (being ‘bored with’) and vehicles for self-reflection (being ‘bored by’). That reflection equates boredom with repetitiveness, with ‘doing nothing’, with the evasion of others, with the desire for something to happen (p.124).

Here lies a perceptive criticism of Sherry Turkle’s (2015) turn against smartphones: these narratives portray a rather “seamless” boredom, which “reproduces enduring myths about relations between technology, time, and practice” (Hand, 2017, p.124). The ubiquity of smartphones makes them an easy target for both causing and alleviating, preventing, and promoting certain technological practices. These hegemonic accounts of digital boredom, however, rarely go beyond the ambivalent figure of a human sitting at dinner table, lying on the bed, commuting on the train, with his or her phone—these images in themselves become representative of our epoch. However, what is actually going on the screen is often blurred and the actual activity on the screen is not exhibited and therefore negative tendencies becomes the essences of digital technology. As Lovink (2012) recapitulates,

From Sherry Turkle’s rant on loneliness, Nicholas Carr’s warnings on the loss of brain power and the ability to concentrate. . . what unites these commentators is their avoidance of what the social could alternatively be, were it not defined by Facebook and Twitter (p.11, emphasis in original).

The alternative, as proposed by Hand (2017), is a “practice-oriented account” (p.125) and a situated understanding of boredom “in relation to individual biographies and collective histories” (p.126). As Priest (2013) reminds us, “while boredom may be ubiquitous, its effects are local and unpredictable” (p.66). Our vision should be not
shrouded by the ubiquity itself—an overarching critique of social media, smartphones, and various online platforms logically leads to complete rejection of “the social” (as well as any technologies these appear to be associated with).

This vision also applies to the previously mentioned but under-developed notion of distraction. Highmore (2011) highlights how distraction is often used contemporarily as a “shorthand for difficulty of concentrating on any one channel” (p.116), which lacks “dialectical nuance” (p.116). He further elucidates distraction’s different meanings. It first refers to “misdirection of attention” (Ibid, p.117, emphasis in original) or concentrating on the wrong matters. While this demonstrates distraction can be a form of attention but “misdirected”, it also shows that distraction carries strong moral and political judgements, which also apply to the above criticisms of spending too much time watching zhibo.

Distraction can also refer to “a form of absentminded or vacant consciousness” (Ibid, p.118) and this ordinary absented-mindedness can be “a productive state for encountering the new in everyday life” (Ibid, p.119). Highmore’s account shows that “distraction can be both poison and cure” (Ibid, p.124) and we need to go beyond both romanticism and moral panic—which goes back to the earlier point of a practice-based account of how distraction affects the individual locally. The following is a practice account of how an office worker Dabao broadcasts her dull office job to deal with the ennui of her own existential crisis.

5.4.2 Livestreams and Tactical Boredom
Tactical Boredom and La Perruque

Livestreams are often watched on second monitors and smartphones while in bed or in transit. Viewers are certainly “bored with” livestreams, and sometimes also “bored by” livestreams as they seek new channels or even new platforms. If we have established that viewers do not expect a transformative experience from livestreams, the regularity of livestream viewing can be understood as a tactical response to the sensory overload of contemporary visual culture, especially of social media feeds. We have too many video
clips, either shared or queued to watch, to talk about with our friends, whether in WeChat
group chats, Moments posts, or on our Weibo timelines.

In invoking tactical boredom, I want to highlight how the boredom of livestreams
operates outside both the ethical profound boredom and aesthetic boredom in
contemporary art. Boredoms of zhibo do not have a noble cause nor do they explicitly aim
at resistance. They operate within the dominant social order; “they escaped it without
leaving it” (de Certeau, 1984, p.xiii). Tactical boredom can be related to de Certeau’s la
perruque—originally means “the wig” but also used to describe “diversionary practices”
of using employers’ resources and time to do the worker’s own work. For example,
watching livestreams or even broadcasts during work hours (i.e. outside the work of
livestreaming) is a common practice according to my informants. La perruque is not the
same as pilfering or absenteeism because it is “precisely not directed toward profit” (Ibid,
p.25). This is where most Chinese livestream casters differ from la perruque: most
livestreamers are, however obliquely, motivated by (potential) profits.

Highmore (2006) questions how “inventive tactics” are favoured over “slow and
obstinate practices”, especially the “right to laziness” (p.112), in academic applications of
de Certeau’s theory in (sub)cultural studies. So, the intricate matter here is not to hasten or
extol the tactical boredom or frame it as subversion, but to understand the opaque nature
of tactical boredom: it can be very obstinate and not necessarily creative. The question
remains, “from what position can we set out to analyse it?” (de Certeau, 1984, p.24). Here,
I need to distinguish the work of professional livestreaming or broadcasting while working
for livestreamer’s own business (e.g. Chuange), and livestreaming while working for an
employer (not related to the livestreaming industry), usually without the employer’s
consent and in hiding.

Dabaoyuxiaobao: Work-Stream

Dabaoyuxiaobao, also known as Daobao, is a mother and a receptionist or clerk at a local
government office in Hunan province. In 2016, she livestreamed from her office every day
on Douyu under the category shenghuoxiu or life show (see Figure 5.8). She usually
broadcast from a webcam that was hidden beneath the office desk, played some background music via her phone, and bantered with her viewers on arbitrary topics around her personal life. Occasionally, she had to pause the livestream because there was some office work urgently needed to be done or a delivered package to sign for. She often whispered to the microphone on her iPhone earphones, to avoid her manager’s detection that she was not working.

Xiangzi, one of her regular viewers, was convinced Dabao’s performance was “authentic” because she appeared to be rigid most of the time, both for her viewers and her manager who occasionally checked on her or gave her assignments and was sometimes accidentally caught on camera. The woman sitting at the back in Figure 5.8 is Dabao’s co-worker and her accomplice in her la perruque—the cleaner was aware of Dabao’s zhibo but just ignored it most of the time.

Dabao talked about, almost excessively, personal issues to a degree it was very daunting to keep up: her relationships with her husband, her mother-in-law, her son, and so forth. Just as one of her viewers commented: “I just unsubscribed, I am not sure what is the meaning of this stream”. Ordinariness is exhibited but also exhausted. Her office job
was “extremely boring” as she confessed during the livestream session on 19 August 2016. According to her confession, this livestream channel greatly helped alleviate her “suffocating boredom” at work. Even though livestreaming was not an actual antidote to her dissatisfaction with her life in general, it did temporarily suspend the boredom without being motivating enough to cause changes. Is this a guerrilla boredom? To an extent, Dabao is constantly evading her office job, diverting herself to the work of being watched (by the viewers, not by her boss). At the same time, Dabao’s obstinate insistence on repeating the trivialities of her everyday life, traditional values such as her roles as mother and wife, the stable but lowly paid job, her occasional and oblique compliance to her viewer requests to move her body in certain erotic ways, demonstrate the ambivalence of both her repression and escape.

5.5 Conclusion

Boredom is a difficult topic, but it is especially relevant for contemporary China. There is a sense of urgency in addressing the topic due to how boredom is pathologised as a pandemic. My critique of this tendency to pathologise boredom is not by praising boredom or aestheticising it as subversion. While the livestream examples I gave are reminiscent of the iconic moments in 20th century art, they do not deploy the similar aesthetic impact on livestream viewers but are consumed as novelties and commodified performances of inactivity and repetition. My ethnographic perspective differs from art criticism, especially in interpreting the avant-garde’s subversive rendition of boredom, and instead, focuses on the vulgar boredom of how livestream is performed and viewed in various circumstances.
Laobaixing
Vulgaritiy, Plebeian Energy, and Politics of Zhibo

6.1 Introduction

“The Chinese Farmer Who Live-Streamed Her Life and Made a Fortune” (Liu, 2018)—“How to make $100,000 a month in China, live-streaming your life” (Rauhala, 2017)—“Live-Streaming Apps Turn Nobodies Into Stars” (Guo, 2016)—“Kuai platform shows life in less-developed areas, capturing socio-economic gap” (Li, 2017)—“Sicko live streams himself raping his dog, angry mob arrives to beat him up, strip him naked” (Lin, 2016)—“Woman live streams herself eating ‘aloe vera’, nearly dies when it turns out to be poisonous plant instead” (Tan, 2017)—“Chinese pro gamer heard beating girlfriend on livestream after losing League of Legends match” (Mohos, 2017)—“Zoo Worker Live-Streams Himself Harassing Tiger” (Wang, 2017)—“Foreigners Barred From Live-Streaming on Chinese Apps” (Yin, 2017)—“Why China’s Live-Streaming Revolution Won’t Spur a Political Revolution” (Wu, 2016).

The above headlines of news reports on livestreaming cultures are aligned into a peculiar order to narrate a trajectory of journalistic platitude on livestreaming cultures in China. The narrative begins with a rather optimistic tone of rags to rich stories, because livestreaming platforms were providing an opportunity for the disfranchised to find their own audiences in a hugely stratified society and make money at the same time. Then journalism finds it difficult to defend this democratic promise of livestreaming for the plebeian, the subaltern,

1 It should be noted that while half of these headlines come from Western media outlets such as The New Yorker and The Washington Post, some are from less established media sources such as Sixth Tone and Shanghaiist, which are predominantly news and opinions on Chinese events catering towards the liberal audience in the West and expats living in China.
or the voiceless “masses” because they discover livestreams contain too much stupidity, unjustified absurdity, and a near lunatic pursuit for vulgarity. Then the witch-hunt begins: calls for harsher real-time censorship, a legal procedure to “license” professional streamers, more regulations on nüzhubo, and banning foreigners from livestreaming. Finally, the narrative comes to the realisation—just as with any precursory Chinese internet fads (e.g. Weibo)—that the participatory promise of zhibo (afforded by the socio-technological aspects of the livestreaming platform) does not lead to democratic politicisation.

The primary concern of this chapter is the politics of zhibo—not necessarily democratic politics but through the colloquialism of laobaixing (literally “a hundred surnames”) or ordinary people as I will discuss in reference to an eventlog later in the chapter. I will first scout the contours of relevant literature here. Graeme Turner (2006; 2014) has described and critiqued a sentiment in labelling the development of reality TV as “a form of democratisation” (p.310)—most notably in John Hartley’s (1999) neologism “democratainment”—because of its participatory promise. Turner (2006) questions this connection between democracy and the proliferation of DIY celebrity,

The ‘democratic’ part of the ‘democratainment’ neologism is an occasional and accidental consequence of the ‘entertainment’ part, and its least systemic component. . . there is no necessary connection between, on the one hand, a broadening demographic in the pattern of access to media representation and, on the other, a democratic politics (p.157).

Turner (2006) thus proposes the “demotic turn” as opposed to the democratic turn as “diversity is not of itself intrinsically democratic irrespective of how it is generated or by whom” (p.158). This argument of democratisation was also popular in English scholarship on China from television to the internet. Super Girl, a popular Chinese singing contest show in 2005 and 2006, implemented a SMS (and later online) voting system where fans paid for the right to vote, becoming an early example of media convergence between television, telecommunication, music, and the internet. Likely influenced by Hartley (1999), Jian and Liu (2009) argue that the show was “a simulated democracy as well as an entertainment democracy” (p.530, emphasis in original). Ling Yang (2014), on the other
hand, criticises Jian and Liu (2009) because they “severely underestimate its democratic potential and disrespectfully ignore the passionate, and radical engagement of fans” (p.529).

While not denying the engagement of fans, who are vicariously “projecting their personal dreams onto the contestants” (Ibid, p.528), I want to highlight how academic and journalistic discourses at the time romanticised and politicised the voting exercise in Super Girl, which was subsequently banned. The explicitly political discussion on how this voting potentially kindles democracy in the media, as opposed to what contestants and their fans actually did in practice, contributed to alerting the authorities. Since then, TV contest shows are no longer allowed to have mass votes. As Yang (2013) celebrates how the show “blurred the boundary between entertainment and politics” (p.528), I want to argue that the very boundary has always been blurred—democratic politics is not the same as democratised access to media; the potential guaranteed by a voting system does not necessarily translate to democratic values. Nonetheless, even “potentials” must be stifled, from the perspective of the State.

Following the reference to the “New Documentary Movement” first discussed in Chapter 4, Wu Wenguang’s Village Video Project (2006) is perhaps a more radical experiment than Super Girl in “restoring agency” (Voci, 2010) to the voiceless. The director Wu distributed DV cameras to villagers and asked them to document their everyday rural life. While the project was praised for its democratic experiment, Voci (2010) also highlights “how the subaltern position becomes apparent in the context of their distribution, circulation, and reception. . . above all, in the many art and film festivals and academic locations where the videos have become visible” (p.155). The rural participants always needed extra information and branding, provided by “endorsement-giving entities” in occasions such as film festivals and academic seminars. “It could not allow them to step into the cinematic space, autonomously, with no questions asked” (Ibid, p.157-158).

Returning to my own field, Douyu, according to the above democratising logic, is arguably more “radical” than Wu’s project—since even Wu’s role in curating the videos is eliminated. Many villagers like Xiangxi Xiaopang started broadcasting livestreams from their mobile phones in 2016. Living rural Hunan, Xiangxi Xiaopang livestreamed while building his rural house brick by brick during the day, then cooked and ate with his family,
before bantering with his viewers at night, all broadcast from his half-finished, gutted and dimly lit house. No DV cameras were given by any external artists and Xiangxi Xiaopang started livestreaming on his own initiative. No political vision of empowerment was enforced, so he did not need to justify his incursion into zhibo culture as a subaltern man.

While not a platform for democratic politics nor promoting democratic values, Douyu has certainly hosted a great variety of genres as I have discussed throughout the thesis. Instead of democratic politics, as Turner (2006) notes, we should pay more attention to the fact that there is a “rich seam of ‘the ordinary’ . . . and unlimited performances of diversity” (p.158) on reality TV. Similarly, on livestreaming platforms, the diverse genres of entertainment (discussed in Chapter 2) have gradually grown upon a co-constituted socio-technological infrastructure.

The fact that most of the rural livestreamers broadcast their streams from their smartphones is worth mentioning. Mobile app based livestreaming platforms alleviate the technologically uninformed from the strain of editing software, learning curves, and other technical chores in the traditional format of video-making. On the mobile app, one only needs to download the app, sign up for free, and verify one’s real name before starting the channel, which is available to anyone who is willing to watch, with very few restrictions other than politically sensitive matters and sexual content. However, technological convenience and the participatory flatness of the platform do not necessarily guarantee “democratic politics” in practice. We should not hasten to valorise livestreaming as a democratic medium or an empowering platform, and then subsequently regret doing so, like I have shown in the headlines earlier.

The second issue of this chapter is on the politics of taste and the question is what the plebeian viewership’s ordinary concerns are if they are necessarily “vulgar”. It is undeniable that a large percentage of the user base of livestreaming apps are from relatively less developed regions. According to Connie Chan (2016), 55% of viewers of the surveyed livestreaming apps are from third-tier cities, 34% from second-tier cities, and only 11%
from first-tier cities. The popularity of livestreaming sites/apps among the lower strata of Chinese society is then exploited as the causes for the stereotypical imageries of sordidness on livestreaming platforms. The spectacles of poverty, profanity, and lewd bodies form the centre of stigmatising discourses against platforms like Douyu and Kuaishou. There are many instances of unashamed, unsentimental or unfiltered exhibition of poverty and disability, aesthetically unappealing or raunchy bodies, explicitly sexualised female bodies, along with a plethora of alternative superstitions. For example, searching for the uncanny or supernatural and ghost-hunting were banned soon after their rise to popularity. If the main viewership of zhibo is deemed vulgar, then it is crucial to understand what exactly their vulgar desires and ordinary concerns are.

This chapter’s primary task is to elaborate on my informants’ disinterest in democratic politics (as we academics understand it) and the vulgarity of their ordinary concerns in order to understand the politics of zhibo in my informants’ own terms. This chapter is an extension and a convergence of themes and theories discussed Chapters 4 and 5, as the thesis culminates on the politics of livestreams. First, I will discuss the plebeian politics of desire, as opposed to democratic politics, through the term laobaixing. Second, beyond its implication for a vulgar boredom I was describing in the last chapter, the politics of vulgarity is discussed again through Foucault’s concept of the “plebeian aspect”.

6.2 The Politics of Laobaixing

6.2.1 The Laobaixing Emerges: A Conversation with Shanghai Laotou
In this section I will expand the concept of laobaixing emerging from one dialogue collected from Shanghai Laotou’s channel during an event on 23 August 2016 (see Figure 6.1). I will use this first-level livestream dialogue as a prompt to ethnographically engage with theories on laobaixing and plebeians so as to put the theoretical improvisations made by broadcasters and viewers themselves on an equal footing with academic theories, which forms the second-level dialogue between academic and colloquial theories by proxy of this writing.
Shanghai Laotou, literally “Shanghai old man”, had been broadcasting regularly on Douyu since late 2015. I started watching his livestreams since early 2016 and became a regular viewer of his channel for a year. His viewership in 2016 was relatively small with only a few hundred regular concurrent viewers. It was precisely due to this small viewership that more textually “meaningful” (in the sense that the chatlogs easily constitute coherent dialogue rather than chaotic fragments), intimate, and long conversations between viewers and the broadcaster took place. Shanghai Laotou usually starts his livestream late at night, smokes and talks to his viewers in front of his webcam. The topics under discussion are usually not predetermined and vary greatly depending on where the conversation is heading during the stream. Apart from his daily ritual of discussing the stock market, one of his favourite topics is theories on new media and its influence on Chinese society.³

³ Shanghai Laotou’s channel often oscillates between two categories: shenghuoxiu or “everyday life shows” and gushidaren or “stock market expert”.
The following chatlog is an abridged transcript of a very long conversation that took place on a Douyu livestream where the protagonist Shanghai Laotou, a dozen of his viewers and I debated theories on new media, the nature of plebeian politics, and State censorship. As there are many terms in the chatlog that cannot be easily translated, I have put detailed clarifications in the footnotes.

Anonymous Viewer 1 (chat message): Livestream as a format is fundamentally against the ideology of our country. So, tightening speech is a certain move. If Douyu grows bigger, it must get nationalised.

Shanghai Laotou (verbal speech): Livestream is a double-edged sword. If your control is too strict, it is not necessarily good. If you just let it do whatever, it is no good either. . . Douyu, like Didi (Uber-like ride hailing service in China), poses a challenge to the current [surveillance] system. But the problem is, what is the depth of your challenge? Does it challenge the core interests? What are the core interests in this country? To get to the bottom, it is basically “do not interfere with politics”. You can never do anything political, but gossiping is fine. It does not matter. No pornography. But chabianqiu (edge ball) is fine. That’s basically the bottom line. If you know these, then it is fine. Without these, society can’t survive.

Shanghai Laotou (verbal speech): The state does not need to acquire it [new media] but to control it in broad terms. The State cannot control it. The State does not have the capacity to attend to individual channels. It only needs to make some rules and set up a governmental institution. The State does not necessarily define a very clear boundary. So, you can “play the edge ball” to a certain a degree. So, most of the time it’s up to you (emphasis my own).

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4 I did inform Shanghai Laotou, in the text chat, that I am a researcher doing fieldwork on his channel several time, but this information did not seem to interest him at all, partly because my username “ethnographer” is too hard for him to remember.

5 Edge ball or chabianqiu is a term that derives from table tennis. It means the ball hits the edge of the table which still counts a point in the context of table tennis. It is also a metaphor that refers to behaviours that do not necessarily challenge the law but test the borderline within legality. It can also refer to the mentality of relying on shortcuts and luck to succeed. Shanghai Laotou is using the term here to hint at how some nüzhubo dress and act in a certain way to entice their viewers without alerting the censorship or breaking the outlined rules (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion on nüzhubo’s dress code).
Me (chat message): What if the quality of content starts to decline when these ‘live’ media start to proliferate?

Shanghai Laotou (verbal speech): The contents are chai mi you yan from ordinary people anyway. That’s what zimeiti (we media) is for. Why does it have to be very “advanced” or sophisticated? I think this is exactly why it is good. Why does everything have to gao da shang? Laobaixing do not care about these. Ordinary people care about what they use, what they eat, what they wear and what they play every day.

Me (chat message): But if all we talk about it “oil salt sauce and vinegar”, we eventually grow tired of it. Gao da Shang is not necessarily good, but the same banal gossip can get boring. This standard is determined by the upper class anyway.

Shanghai Laotou (verbal speech): Laobaixing will never grow tired of “fuel, rice, cooking oil and salt” and gossiping. [A disparaging laugh] No one will ever get tired of these. What they will really get tired of is gao da shang. Laobaixing like to

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6 Chai mi you yan or literally “fuel, rice, cooking oil and salt”, similar to the English expression “bread and butter”, is a Chinese idiom to convey mundane aspects of everyday life. Oil, salt, sauce, and vinegar are all daily necessities for home cooking.

7 Zimeiti or “We media” is a misused concept in many Chinese contexts. In Dan Gillmor’s (2004) book We the Media, they are mostly referring to the potential of participatory media (especially before the advent of the commercialised “social media”) in relation to citizen journalism. The term “we media” was initially imported to China by political activists, then picked up as a marketing term and abused to such a degree it cannot be clearly distinguished from the term “social media”. Shanghai Laotou was using social media and “we media” interchangeably to, essentially, refer to the same thing.

8 Gao da shang, or literally “high, big, up”, is a contemporary idiom to describe an object (for example, architecture) that is sophisticated in taste, expensive in cost, or politically important.
Shanghai Laotou (verbal speech): The problem is, however, if you put these ideological issues on a supreme level [i.e. that it is absolutely necessary to strictly comply with the ideological lines], you have no choice but to shut down the entire internet. If you only think about the life or death of the State, you can only shut down the internet. It is impossible to achieve perfect control. Thinking about it, the society is always extremely complicated and there are always things that do not fall into our positive ideals. If it exists, so be it.

Anonymous viewer 4 (chat message): Is it like opening one eye and closing the other?

Shanghai Laotou (verbal speech): Well, that’s not true either. They do have governmental agencies just for the purpose of surveillance. Before we had a website called Kuaibo\(^\text{12}\) that was persecuted for pornographic content. But if you go to Baidu (the Chinese search engine), you can find all sorts of pornographic content. Do you close down Baidu as well? You cannot really prevent these. As long as the company’s profits do not entirely rely on pornography, it will be fine.

Shanghai Laotou (verbal speech): Real time interaction is really difficult to control, technologically speaking. The best advantage of “we media”. . . Human media is always developing toward interactivity, toward one-to-one. That is, everyone (we) satisfies the needs of everyone (us). This is “we media”. It is multicentered. Each person can become a centre. The highest stage of the internet is that everyone can be the centre of the world. . . The boundaries between humans have almost disappeared today. We have just started. . . Just like right now, when I am talking to you, there is no boundary. I can see the comments you send instantly, which almost equates to the

\(^9\) *Weiguan*, literally “surround [the object or event being watched] gaze”, was one of most discussed internet memes coming from the Chinese Web. It originated as a popular term on Weibo to express a sort of collective witnessing emerging from the participatory culture. It soon became a derogatory term because the official media deemed it negative as it fostered the past image of “crowds of ordinary Chinese who craned their necks to dumbly watch the spectacle of the beheading of revolutionaries who had fought for the freedom of these same people”, according to the Chinese media scholar Hu Yong (Bandurski, 2011). According to Ho (2017), livestreaming is just another form of *weiguan*, “motivated by boredom”.

\(^10\) *Tucao* is an imported Japanese term. In Chinese, it usually means a light-hearted or humorous complaint or tease.

\(^11\) *Kanrenao* has similar connotation as *weiguan*—onlookers are just there for the spectacle of disorder.

\(^12\) Kuaibo started as a file sharing and streaming video platform in 2007. It gradually became the main hub of online pornography in China but was prosecuted and shutdown in 2016.
situation in which you are physically sitting next to me. This is the power of the internet. This influence [that I cast upon people] is immediate, without any latency.

Anonymous viewer 5 (chat message): Your opinions are so mainstream. Did you have [ideological] training?

6.2.2 What is Laobaixing?

We all love to be ordinary, not to be a legend, [to blend in] the general climate, be bland, no taste. . . be a chess piece, don’t encourage, a hundred of surnames, to talk about backbone (courage); be the law-abiding Baixing, until escape, the wronged millennials. . . Everybody is an anonymous passer-by, all brainwashed, the dark star cannot flash. . . We all love to be ordinary, not to be a legend, the general climate, need to restraint, and stay in place. . . be loyal baixing, don’t want harmony, be happy and sad. (Kwan Gor, Baixing)\(^\text{13}\)

How is this group of people best defined? The workers? Too communistic. The great unwashed? Not communistic enough. The salt of the earth? We’re here to praise them, not worship them. Let’s settle for “The Laobaixing”. (McGeary, 2015)

The above dialogue is merely a small fraction of the entire recorded transcript, but it is evident that laobaixing as a concept stands out in the debate. In the following sections, I will explicate the concept of laobaixing in detail then recap the topics and questions raised in the above chatlog. Shanghai Laotou often used “Masses”, “People”, and “Laobaixing” interchangeably to refer to the same abstraction. A more nuanced and historical delineation of these titles and designations of laobaixing is thus needed.

According to legend, before the Warring States period (475–221 BC), people with surnames were aristocrats, and the hundred surnames or Baixing were government officials. Slaves were called Li Min. Li means crowd or congregation of the generic people without names. As some aristocrats descended into or bred with the slaves, they made up a new class that was neither ruling aristocrats nor slaves—therefore Li Min Bai Xing, the crowd of hundred surnames. Allow me to make a historically inaccurate analogy: If Bai Xing were the Roman patricians, and Li Min were plebeians. So laobaixing, in its origin, conveys a

\(^{13}\) This is a Cantonese song by the Hong Kong singer Kwan Gor, released in 2016. The translation is my own.
sense of hybridity between the patricians and plebs. And gradually in its further
descendants, baixing, became a common term to refer to the generic lower strata of society.

Laobaixing or the old baixing, as a phrase, did not exist in official dictionary until
1963. It is in a sense a neologism that was popularised under the new language (re)invented
in People’s Republic of China and its celebration of the “People” since its foundation—
adding the “old” to baixing just attached a greater weight of respect. Laobaixing are
expected to be obedient but at least haphazardly (no matter how superficial) replicate the
desired model citizen. Such Platonian imagery of sheep and the shepherd cannot be
explicitly expressed because it actively diminishes the “human agency” of the masses
immortalised in the words of Mao himself.

There is a fundamental paradox embedded in the term laobaixing. The term implies
a sense of political correctness that unconditionally praises the people. On the one hand,
baixing is linked to an imagery or fantasy of power from below—without questioning the
validity or legitimacy of it. This fantasy encourages political engagement from the common
people, for instance, in order to combat the corruption of cadres. The expansion of
“political life” into the common people is enshrined in theory but not encouraged in
practice. On the other, the official view still maintains a negative view of the exhibitionism
of private life and considers the obsession with accumulation of personal wealth a
withdrawal from the enshrined collective “political life”. However, the consumerist desires
of saving money and getting a good deal is exactly what Shanghai Laotou considers the
core concerns of laobaixing. Laobaixing thus vacillate between the resolutely apolitical or
“based” concerns of everyday life, and a celebrated emotional collectivity.

Shanghai Laotou also incongruently speaks of laobaixing with a sense of
superiority, especially against any “cultural” elitists. In response to recurring fears of the
surveillance State, he said “even if you are big [in terms of power], you cannot be bigger
than the laobaixing”. Laobaixing is then framed in the position of power, not necessarily
passive but “inactivated” with unlimited potential. Perhaps that is why one commentator
joked about Shanghai Laotou’s opinions being “so mainstream” (i.e. identical to that of the Communist Party) and probably informed by “ideological training”.\textsuperscript{14}

The term’s resurgence in contemporary China has associated it with very specific, often pejorative, meanings. In a Zhihu thread (2015b) under the question “why media don’t replace laobaixing with ‘citizens’?” commenters provided many definitions and examples that attempt to reveal the underlying logic of the term. In their words, laobaixing are “cattle”, “sheep”, “the impenetrable mass of passivity”, “the primary feature of laobaixing is laoshi (innocent/frank)”. And the following quote explains the specific contextuality of invoking the various positions of laobaixing, citizens, and people presumably in official speech but also in everyday language to an extent. These terms are often floating signifiers without contextual information:

When you need the collective to live an ordinary life, and grazing heads down\textsuperscript{15}, use Laobaixing;
When you need to the collective to talk about individual rights and responsibilities, use Citizens;
When you need the collective to talk about individuals and responsibilities, but without acknowledging the existence of individuals too much, use People.

These examples point to a negative connotation that laobaixing entails in contemporary China: laobaixing are docile bodies of the lowest denominator, therefore deemed to be looked down on and preyed upon (whether politically, socially or economically). On the one hand, a Chinese celebrity Guan Xiaotong was recently lambasted for using the word laobaixing to refer to the general public of her fans, because, according to her critics, “the wording implies her position looking down from the top, and a sense of arrogance” (Netease, 2017a). On the other, livestream viewers are totally fine

\textsuperscript{14} There is a profession in China called wangpingyuan, literally “web commentator official”, or colloquially known as wumao (fifty cents). These professionals are trained by government institutions to direct online discussions on sensitive issues, with fifty cents reflecting their supposed payments for each online comment.

\textsuperscript{15} It is a Chinese metaphor for cattle-like servitude.
with microcelebrities like Shanghai Laotou using the term uncritically. That is why a celebrity, a billionaire, or a government official would be condemned if they claim to be a member of the laobaixing or condescendingly call everyone else laobaixing, while the common folk—a housewife, a migrant worker, or a livestreamer (especially a xiaozhubo)—is fully entitled to call themselves and others laobaixing, whether ironically or with pride. Here we begin to understand a complex disposition of laobaixing in various contexts: some intend to exalt it (e.g. Maoism), some intend to praise it (e.g. the intellectual), some intend to stigmatise it (e.g. cultural elites), and some ironically identify with it. Laobaixing themselves seem to be disengaged with all of above.

6.2.3 Where is the Bottom Line?

In the above chatlog, the discussion between Shanghai Laotou, his viewers and myself mainly centred on two issues. The first was the laobaixing’s everyday concerns or exacerbation of such taste politics. The second was the State’s ideological incentive to control zhibo through a translucent (as opposed to opaque) structure of censorship as well as the peculiar politics of boundary setting. The following discussion will elaborate on these topics.

Vulgarity of Ordinary Concerns

The first point is on the zhibo’s concerns of ordinary matters. In one comment, I asked if the supposedly desired triviality and banal concerns of viewers and performers on zhibo platforms will be eventually exacerbated, and Shanghai Laotou scoffed at the idea. Shanghai Laotou’s point is that ordinary people refuse to be elevated to be gaodashang no

16 According to the current official narrative, government officials are supposed to be civil servants of laobaixing. They therefore do not belong to the category of laobaixing even though they are supposedly selected from the people (which is mostly not the case in practice). While the exclusion of government officials from laobaixing is agreeable for most, what is not laobaixing is still a very contested terrain, as it often depends on the political interests at stake.
matter if the purpose is pedagogical (from the perspective of the intellectual/educator) or stupefying (from the perspective of the authority/regulator).

In her search for a definition of *laobaixing*, Deborah Fallows (2010) was unable to reach a consensus through her survey and capitulated, “it’s all those who are trying to make the staggering adjustments to survive” (p.67), which sounds a lot like de Certeau’s (1984) art of making-do. Fallows’s first discovery, was on *laobaixing* shopping— “The importance of a good deal”. Fallows wrote about a story about a drugstore, which was incidentally called “Laobaixing”, being stormed by 20,000 eager consumers who smashed the glass door for the discounted products on that day. Lewis, Martin, and Wang (2016) similarly observe that the mass appeal of certain lifestyle television shows in China lies in their viewers’ desire of “getting good value” or *hesuan*, which is “rated much higher than conspicuous consumption. . . [and] taste and style” (p.61). Continuing my earlier discussion on vulgar boredom, *laobaixing* seem to reject or simply absorb the promised or enforced elevation of “cultural” tastes, and are always ready to take a good deal.

This argument shall not be treated trivially as it confirms a similar obstinate fixation on ordinary matters among television viewers in China and its implication for television’s supposed pedagogical role. As Lewis, Martin, and Sun (2016) observe in their survey in China, “when asked which kind of host they prefer to see in these shows”, 51% of participants “preferred a host who looks like an ‘ordinary person’ (*pingmin*), whereas only 17.5 percent surveyed preferred a host with style and elegance” (p.58). The producers behind a Shanghai fashion lifestyle channel revealed that, even though the channel’s “real” goal was a pedagogical one—to educate and elevate the taste of the masses, to “get away from the vulgar” (Ibid, p.67)—the channel was confined by its advertisers. Its content was tailored by the desire of their audiences to absorb any aesthetic education (without digesting it) and insist on “bread-and-butter’ topics pertaining to everyday life” (Ibid, p.65). Shanghai Laotou also hints at this omnipresent and yet ambivalent desire for the ordinary matters of *laobaixing* in his phrase “oil salt sauce and vinegar”.

Censorship and Boundary Setting
Second, Shanghai Laotou’s comment on censorship clearly anticipates a foreseeable crackdown on livestream platforms due to their potentials as a socio-technological infrastructure with a massive amount of concurrently shared images. This insecurity has been around the livestreamer community for a while now. The crisis of a fully implemented real name registration across all internet infrastructures has been looming for years, especially in English journalistic reports. Livestreaming platforms are among the first wave of internet companies who have been fully committed to this policy since their (re)emergence in 2014.

Every broadcaster has to have their real-name identity verified before they can start a channel. There is certainly a psychological effect upon broadcasters knowing their full personal details (in the case of Douyu, national ID card and bank details) are possessed by the livestreaming platform but most of my informants were not as concerned as I was. The imminent “threat” of total surveillance of a real-name registration system across all internet platforms is gradually banalised, and somewhat accepted, however cynically or reluctantly. The rationale is fairly simple as one anonymous broadcaster on Douyu puts it in an interview,

“I am already watched by the State anyway, in everyday life, through WeChat, smartphones, surveillance cameras, and so on. As long as I know I am not doing anything wrong, why should I be afraid?”

“So, what is considered ‘wrong’ here?” I asked. The interviewee was speechless. Her rolling eyes looking away from me clearly suggested she was getting impatient, assuming I was pushing her to talk about “politics” like all oblivious foreign newcomers. I paused and did not dare to press on the question. This was not the first time when a slightest hint at “politics” was immediately interpreted as undesirable and a dead end in fieldwork conversations. The affect conveyed between the lines and awkward silence was not anxiety but from a sense of tiresomeness. Politics was scandalous.

17 I was, in this instance, recognised by her as a foreigner partly because I informed her my identity as a researcher at an Australian university with the consent form, partly because my heavily accented Mandarin clearly did not impress her as a native speaker.
My theory is that to be apolitical on a livestream is not necessarily done out of fear but as a defence mechanism against the dead end of ultimately pushing the blame to the government, which is not permitted on livestreams (or, indeed, anywhere else). It is the most basic bottom line of zhibo in China—in Shanghai Laotou’s words, “do not interfere with politics”. If fear is associated with uncertainty or the unknown, the spelt-out bottom line, as it is already enshrined in the first few lines of the terms of service, does not instigate fear for the common people, at least not fear of the unpredictable. Quite the opposite, in fact, the State is constantly haunted by the fear of unpredictability of plebeians. Of course, this is a whole different story for political activists or direct participants in an open confrontation/protest against the State, but they are not within the scope of the discussion of this thesis.

“If you know these [the bottom line], then it is fine. Without these, society can’t survive”, Shanghai Laotou said. As society must be defended, to be laobaixing does not necessarily mean voluntary servitude, but to acknowledge and respect the bottom line performatively. As Shanghai Laotou continues, “the State does not necessarily define a very clear boundary. . . most of the time it’s up to you”. This bottom line concretises the foundation of a vast field of social institutions, but everything above is left for interpretation. As an anonymous viewer informant put it well,

I used to despise these behaviours [on livestreams] because they are so vulgar, so boring, so stupid. But something my friend said made me feel relieved [from the thought]: people have the right to be vulgar. Let the vulgar be vulgar. Let the law be lawful.

Knowing the bottom line is also a way to ensure the laobaixing their interpretive freedom above the bottom line—the freedom to be vulgar, to be banal, to be boring, to ignore the State, or even harass the State, without challenging its legitimacy. I would like to call this the plebeian energy of laobaixing.

6.3 The Plebeian Energy of Laobaixing Livestreams
6.4.1 Plebeian Aspect of Chinese Laobaixing Livestreams

In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1977), Michel Foucault is very critical of 19th century Europe and writes on decadence of Europe in relation to the baseness of plebs, Europeans no longer know themselves; they ignore their mixed ancestries and seek a proper role. . . We can begin to understand the spontaneous historical bent of the nineteenth century: the anemia of its forces and those mixtures that effaced all its individual traits produced the same results as the mortifications of asceticism; its inability to create, its absence of artistic works, and its need to rely on past achievements forced it to adopt the base curiosity of plebs (p.159).

This critique was written in the context of outlining genealogy (which identifies discontinuities and “unpromising places”) against traditional history (which identifies continuities and origins) and how, as historians accommodate the base curiosity of plebs instead of cultivating “taste”, they are therefore unable to locate discontinuities. However, what is not said in the usual reading of this text is the uncanniness of how this quote would make sense if I were to replace the 19th century “Europeans” with the contemporary “Chinese”. Maoism effectively demolished “ancestries” and the majority of the Post-Mao Project, apart from economic development, has been seeking a proper role in reinvigorating tradition or, in the official slogan, “revitalising the spiritual civilisation”. There are often criticisms of cultural anemia that the Chinese cultural industry is frail and empty despite receiving large investments, the lack of creativity and tendency to copy (for instance, in the much-discussed case of shanzhai (Han, 2017)), the absence of an appreciation of art, and how Chinese nationalism predominantly relies on the celebration of arbitrary “past achievements” rather than demonstrating a deep understanding and appreciation of ancestral arts and rituals.

When interpreted in this light, it is not difficult to align Foucault with Chinese critics who deemed zhibo “abominations imperilling civilization” and “crystallisation of vulgar taste of laobaixing” (Ma, 2016). It is undeniable that livestreaming platforms like Douyu and YY did provide a fairly “flat” venue for ordinary people to have a platform to express themselves but the platform’s flatness (as discussed in Chapter 2) is parallel to the livestreamers’ basesness.
In *Power/Knowledge* (1980), Foucault presents another interpretation of the plebeian, where he distinguishes between “the proletariat” and “the non-proletarianised pleb” (p.23). This division prevented the two from forming alliances, and neutralised the plebs by depriving them of “their conflictual specificity in relation to the ruling bourgeoisie” (Breaugh, 2007, p.84). The crucial question here is therefore not what is plebeian but rather *something of* the plebeian, a “plebeian aspect” so to speak. Plebeian is thus an aspect because it is not a “sociological entity” (Foucault, 1980, p.137) and it can be identified across different classes and groups.

Going back to my earlier argument of the *laobaixing*’s origin as a hybrid, and the fact that it is not really bound to particular gender, ethnicity, or any clearly identifiable classes (e.g. workers or peasants), I argue *laobaixing* is not a “sociological entity” but an ambiguous and disorganised mass whose meaning shifts according to the political needs of its utterance, as shown in the elaborated distinctions compared to citizens, taxpayers, and people outlined earlier. *Laobaixing*, much like *diaosi* (see Section 4.2.3), can sometimes be a moral high ground that the “un-entitled” (i.e. the rich, powerful or famous) battles social discourses in order to occupy; it is sometimes an emblem of spiritual poverty or plebeian baseness, in Foucault’s terms. The *laobaixing* thus oscillate between being praised and stigmatised, depending on the political need.

Foucault (1980) continues, “this measure of plebs is not much what stands outside the relations of power as their limit, their underside, their counter-stroke, that which responds to every advance of power *by a movement of disengagement*” (p.138, my emphasis). The plebeian aspect is thus what at once both resists and permits power. Foucault further raises three ways plebs can be reduced:

1. “by effective subjection” (Foucault, 1980, p.138), so power directly assaults the points of resistance.

2. “by utilisation of a plebs as in the example of criminality in the nineteenth century” (Ibid, p.138), where “power can treat this energy as the plebs in the ordinary sense, that, as an element that is . . . threatening the public order” (Breaugh, 2007, p.86).

3. “by its stabilising itself through a strategy of resistance” (Foucault, 1980, p.138), plebeian energy can be neutralised when it is co-opted into a clearly defined strategy of resistance.
These three ways can be concretely elucidated through the example of how workers are controlled in post-Mao China. Proletariat, as a term, has mostly withered away in the reform era. Here, I am not referring to workers as an organised “sociological category” but a mass with manifold dimensions. In the first instance, workers’ riots are always put down in the most brutal ways possible. In the second instance, workers are often patronised as voiceless victims, reduced to inert representations. In the third instance, State-sponsored official unions have been consistently attempting to stabilise the unpredictability of workers’ violence via its program of “pushing for reform”.

Beyond the Politics of Confrontation

Much like Foucault’s exposition of how the “plebeian aspect” evades, resists, and sustains power relationships, what is needed for the politics of zhibo is a critical perspective beyond the binary narratives of democratic politics versus authoritarian politics. The major pitfall of addressing the political question on Chinese online platforms is often the oblivious migration into democratic politics, or the lack thereof, which subsequently leads to a politics of denial, or an alternative form of democracy, which inflectively goes back to redeem democracy in whatever form possible. Laobaixing politics provides an entry to ethnographic theory rather than an unacknowledged presupposition of positivity in politicisation or democratic politics.

What must be salvaged, at least for this thesis, is a possibility outside the there-must-be-a-redemption-of-the-grim-reality-of-domination in cultural studies—in the words of Meagan Morris (1988), “the voxpop style of cultural studies is on the contrary offering the sanitized world of a deodorant commercial where there is always a way of redemption” (p.26). This re-orientation towards laobaixing politics, in the midst of pessimism, has to be distinguished from a sanitised story of the voiceless seizing means of expression and resisting the hegemony of authority, which can end up being an “allegorical emblem of the critic’s own activity” (Ibid, p.23). It is especially helpful in the context of China because discussions of Chinese “grassroots” politics almost always end up about the confrontational, the oppressive, and the corresponding resistance—all very consistent tales of resistance.
Fan Yang (2016) provides an excellent critique of academic literature (e.g. MacKinnon, 2012) on Chinese internet censorship. The problem is not the observation of various internet practices—such as using homonymy like “grass mud horse” (caonima) and “river crab” (hexie) as internet slang to address issues in censorship—but the framing of them into an often “celebratory sentiment” of resistance.\(^{18}\) She writes,

to argue that the recording practices (homonym described above) is indicative of broad-based political dissent (against the state) would risk projecting our own utopian desire for an idealized, politically engaged ‘netizenship’ onto what is likely a very small segment of China’s internet population (p.1368).

These “projections”, in anthropological terms, are our own presuppositions as academic researchers. Politics always carry a normative approach—a public sphere is good, engaging citizenship (or netizenship) is good, political debates are constructive, resistance always carries a political message, and so forth. This point also resonates with Sarah Thornton’s (1995) critical treatise on the academic writing on subcultures (especially the Birmingham school of cultural studies): the framework of resistance risks interpreting the “resistant meaning, . . . in a miraculously media-free moment when an uncontaminated homology could be safely identified” (p.184). I will not attempt to argue plebeian politics is entirely from the bottom or “authentic”. In fact, as I have argued in Chapter 4, the “grassroots” obsession with authenticity is certainly shrouded with ambivalence but, at least as a frame of discourse, it deviates from the politics proper of puncturing or contesting dominant ideology of the state surveillance or censorship.

Through Foucault’s plebeian aspect, the nebulous concept of laobaixing becomes intelligible. Instead of constructing an uncontaminated utopian vision of resistance, it is a highly intricate matter of context and temporality. Plebeians can resist, but only when they

\(^{18}\) Caonima means literally “fuck your mum” and the corresponding homonym “grass mud horse” was created to evade online censorship. Hexie originally means “harmony” and part of Xi’s “harmonious society”. As the term was adopted as a euphemism for censorship, the term itself became part of the long list of censored keywords online. Thus, the homonym “river crab” was created to circumvent the key word detection. As they grew in popularity, both homonyms were included in the list of sensitive keywords. But in a sense, both homonyms have become part of everyday vocabulary (although very much avoided in official speech), without its initial political controversies. Hexie is now synonym for censorship. And the original mascot of “grass mud horse”—llama—is now often called “grass mud horse” in Chinese.
are given legitimacy by the State or co-opted. When it is enshrined in the official discourse, the unpredictable plebeian energy is neutralised. The situated point on zhibo is that livestreamers are not obliviously manipulated by the state apparatus and administrative platforms, nor are they necessarily effectively resisting the regime. Confrontations on Chinese livestreams are anything but consistently documented evidence of mass resistance. Due to strict real-time censorship as well as the performatively understood boundaries, there are no livestreams of protests, natural or man-made catastrophes, not even any of the media events that have been traditionally subjects of television studies (see Chapter 1).

The total absence of catastrophes on Chinese livestreaming platforms poses a curious question, not just due to the hardworking 24/7 active machinery of surveillance and the pre-emptive measures of real-name verification, but how livestream performers disengage with the politics proper and engage with what is largely deemed undesirable or deplorable by the Chinese “mainstream” (as defined by the State and its intelligentsia). While temporarily decentring the issue of censorship apparatus, it is then possible to consider how livestream performers are “creatively” interpreting, testing, and sometimes boldly challenging the limits of their expressions on the livestreaming platform. The following event will help demonstrate the unpredictable nature of this plebeian energy.

6.4.2 Plebian Energy: Sheng Ge and the Media Event of Tianjin Explosion

On 12 August 2015, a massive explosion at a container storage station in Tianjin, which killed 173 people, generated headlines and was featured in prime-time news reports all over the world. A day later, a Zhanqi.tv (another popular livestream platform outside Douyu) livestreamer Sheng Ge (literally “victory brother”) called the police, claimed responsibility for the explosion, and said he would turn himself in by peacefully waiting for police’s arrival at his home—all while he was livestreaming. His viewers also witnessed the whole footage of him being interrogated and arrested by the police at his home. As the event was retold by an informant who watched this livestream at the time,

Sheng Ge just decided to call 10086 (the official service number of China Mobile) while he was streaming (it was just a spontaneous decision on stream according to my informant) to report himself as the culprit of the Tianjin catastrophe. His
viewers started to heatedly debate the moral implications of such an act in his channel’s chatroom—opinions were divided, some accused him while other defended him. One of his viewers, most likely a troll, spewed out the comment “victims of Tianjin explosion deserve it”, which ignited the chatroom. Sheng Ge refused to apologise initially, but then capitulated after some moderators threatened to unsubscribe. He even kneeled down to apologise. The morning after, he was sitting on his bed, waiting for the police’s arrival, totally panicked.

The event was not surprising to me personally because Sheng Ge was one of the most outlandish, audacious, obnoxious and scatological zhibo personalities I witnessed during my fieldwork. Initially he caught my attention because I saw a Kuaishou video of him eating a rat alive, then followed by another video of him eating a larva from a tree, intestines from carcass of a pig, faeces straight from a pit and so forth. Unfortunately, I was only able to catch his livestreams three times and I was not present in the above event. The following analysis replies on interview data across multiple informants, triangulated with various online reports.

Other platforms in the West, such as Twitch, have also witnessed similar events of getting “swatted” while on stream (where a streamer gets raided by SWAT team because his or her online rival reported the person to the police as a terrorist). But in Sheng Ge’s case, he reported himself to the police as a terrorist just to shock and entertain his viewers. What is more interesting in this extraordinary case is not Sheng Ge’s motivation but how the State power responds to such “unpredictable plebeian energy” (Breaugh, 2007, p.89) of daring to harass the State in the aftermath of widely reported catastrophe, at a time of national mourning. Sheng Ge was arrested and imprisoned for several days—presumably intimidated by the police and forced to sign some sort of letter assuring that he would not do such a thing again. Nonetheless, he was not charged with subverting to overthrow the State or being a danger to public security. He resumed streaming and “this time he has learnt to avoid discussing sensitive issues on livestream, and even [reportedly] swears a lot less” (Hupu, 2015).

Sheng Ge’s public stunt was then ridiculed by various media outlets as an untypical ephemeral phenomenon, idiotic eye-catching, and ultimately “brainless” while the media refused to take him seriously as a political threat but “a vulgar behaviour that totally ignores
the basic social morality” (Candouwang, 2015). Sheng Ge is not an activist with a clear cause or strategy of resistance, as his act of harassing the State is motivated by the “vulgar” I-am-just-here-to-capture-attention-and-make-money-by-whatever-means.

As Martin Breaugh (2007) further explains Foucault’s theory of the reduction of plebs, “that division makes it possible to defuse the potential threat of the plebeian by opposing ‘healthy’ people on one hand to plebeian violence on the other” (p.89). Sheng Ge was reduced to an embarrassing anomaly of violent or amoral obscenity and some critics are even using his example to pathologise the whole livestreaming scene. But he was not eliminated, not even punished as harshly as many predictable (articulatively political, organised, or intellectual) activists were, who often aim to send a clear message by their acts of protest.

Sheng Ge is the embodiment of “plebeian unpredictability” (Breaugh, 2007, p.89) that cannot be eliminated but circumvented—his act of violence is without “a recourse to public deliberation” (89). Shanghai Laotou also alluded to a similar argument quite a few times in response to the fears that the State will eventually deem the liveness of zhibo “life-threatening” (as in the potential to overthrow the party state): “laobaixing love to gossip about dramas behind stock market manipulation, and gossiping is often tolerated”. This gossip, such as how the viewers in Shanghai Laotou’s channel chat speculate on where the “fundamental interests” of the State lie, are often extensions of power domination. State apparatus is never strictly nor absolutely authoritarian. These private or semi-public spaces (such as a livestream channel, as a livestream channel’s publicness is often measured by the number of active viewers) are often tolerated. Because if they are to be eliminated, it might unleash the much feared “plebeian unpredictability” that will not simply look for answers in the aftermath of the Tianjin explosion, but challenge the so-called “fundamental values”.

6.4 Conclusion
The politics of *zhibo* is not entirely new as the past politics of the televisual—especially discussed in the literature on reality TV—remains valuable even in the contemporary setting. However, the nuances lie in how participants of the livestreaming scene articulate it, in the context of official denigration of *zhibo* being boring and vulgar. When focusing on these livestream dialogues such as Shanghai Laotou’s, I do not necessarily observe a grim picture of alienation and domination but many voices attempting to encapsulate the politics of *zhibo* in their own terms. In contrast to the quoted examples of journalists and cultural critics in China (in Chapters 5 and 6), livestreamers’ own attempts at theorising is full of thoughtful ideas rather than just passive acquiescence. The point is that, if I can borrow from Spivak’s famous essay, the subaltern does speak but not in our scholarly terms. *Laobaixing* may sound like a cliché compared to an internet neologism such as *diaosi*. However, listening to how my informants and interview participants unpack it in their terms is an ethnographic theory in the making in the natives’ own terms. Invoking Foucault’s plebeian aspect is my attempt at furthering the intellectual dialogue on *laobaixing* and *zhibo*. It is a point of comparison and provocation, rather than imposing idealism upon the natives who must speak in words or actions.
Conclusion

**Everydayness of Zhibo**

This thesis begins with the question of how streamers on Douyu perform their everyday life. As Wanning Sun (2007) writes, “a history of Chinese television is necessarily an account of Chinese society and its people becoming modern” (p.201). As my ethnography of early Douyu is bound to become history very soon, zhibo is also an account of Chinese society set in a specific spatio-temporality, against the backdrop of a Chinese modernity that can no longer boast momentous economic growth at all costs but, instead, attempts to implement “cultural revitalisation”. As a member of the official intelligentsia, Du Hongyan (2018) argues that the opaque and resistant structure of the everyday, or richang, seems to be impenetrable by the project of modernisation (which only succeeded at the macro-level of economics). To this extent, a critique of everyday life in China, according to Du (2018), is not a project that identifies how modernisation exploits and oppresses everyday life but a project that sees modernisation as its goal, as ordinary people are encouraged “change one’s way of life. . . to clear the cultural hindrance for modernisation” (p.113).

This ethnography of zhibo does not consider the ordinary, boring, and vulgar livestream as “cultural hindrance”, but instead seeks to contribute the vitality of life through what Lefebvre (1987) calls everydayness. The ideal product of modernisation, in Du’s (2018) formulation, is exactly what Lefebvre calls “the everyday”, which has become the object of modern social organisation in “the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism” (Lefebvre, 1984). Everydayness, in contrast, is attributed to the “lived” aspect of everyday life. As Shields (1999) comments on Lefebvre’s vision, “Instead of two distinct sets—one alienated, bad, everyday; the other special, good, unalienated moments—Lefebvre proposes two overlapping sets. Each element of the alienated everyday is also potentially an element of the unalienated extraordinary set” (p.70). This ethnography of zhibo, beyond positing the dualism of resistance and passivity, thrives in the interstices of alienation and enlightenment.
The ordinary, boring, and vulgar aspects of livestreams coalesce as the performative qualities of zhibo. First, ordinary life and its bland and long-term and tenacious processes of personal development of the microcelebrity—as exhibited, verified, inspected, and interrogated on livestreams—forms the affective integrity of zhibo as the televiual proper. That is, it is superior to television in television’s own claim to authenticity and the medium of the real ordinary person. Second, boredom is an integral part of everyday life—whether one intends to escape from boredom or escape into it. Boredoms on zhibo are both a performativity that resist aestheticisation and a viewing tactic or practice that distracts, relaxes, and alleviates the viewer from the fatigue of work and the kind of anti-vulgar pensiveness encouraged by the State. Third, if boredom is deemed vulgar, why not cast vulgarity under a different light beyond the binary of taste politics? Laobaixing politics sets forth a more productive, implicit, and not so punishing way of addressing the presupposed inertia in avoidance of the politics proper (i.e. anything to do with the Party-State) on livestreams, as well as the unpredictable energy of the plebs that are omitted by the class politics of resistance.

At this juncture, I want to return to Chuange’s story from the beginning of the thesis. I surmise that the untold stories of Chuange’s zhibo are his “water friends”. Chuange, as he confessed on livestreams, has a mental image of the average regular viewer on his channel as a male, single, lonely diaosi (loser) in his 20s. Most likely he is also struggling with poverty, exploitation, abusive employers, social isolation, low self-esteem, incapacitating boredom. Or, if he is running a small business (as Chinese workers often aspire to start their own business like Chuange), he would be overworked and in constant anxiety. The lonely diaosi is vicariously participating in the spectacle of hypermediated and performative social life with a zhubo from a similar background of an ordinary (i.e. poor) man who is experiencing the ephemeral upward mobility vaporised by rentier capitalism, the gender gap, and a stratified society.

If this rapport, sense of solidarity, and resolute escapism represent the collective desire of “water friends”, the performative work of the livestreamer must satisfy the desire in order to hold onto the aforementioned upward mobility. This desire of laobaixing is then deemed vulgar, therefore controlled and pathologised, but certainly not eliminated. The
zhibo industry flourishes on simultaneously encouraging and sanitising such ordinary desires. Returning to Tianyou’s speech quoted in the introduction, he continues,

I have a fan who was an apprentice at a Beijing hotel. He only earnt 2,500 RMB monthly. He had followed me since I started livestreaming and would donate 500 RMB to me every month. Later we had an offline gathering, I came to know this. I told him “Don’t donate anymore; your money is hard earnt”. He responded with such positivity, ‘I only have this five hundred, I don’t have any more. I worked all day every day. When I go back to my basement, you are my only company and even thank me [when I donate]. I feel a sense of satisfaction. Your livestream is pretty interesting. If it were not for your livestream, I wouldn’t be able to endure Beijing.” I was on the verge of shedding tears at the time. Don’t think just because I am a livestreamer, so I am talkative, at that moment I paused for almost five seconds. And I told him, ‘you like to hear me hanmai (a form of rap) right? I am going to sing it for you right now. I will do as many times as you want. . . I did it seven or eight times for him that day. My throat was sore but it was worth it. I felt good. Because people like him are quite common among my fans. Even though I do no know their stories, but they have a similar life to what I had. During the day, they were commanded everywhere [by their bosses], there are so many frustrating things in this society. Only when at night, on my livestream channel, they laugh at an unpopular joke of mine; they yell alone with an out-of-tune song of mine. They feel gratified when they are thanked by me. Because of me and other livestreamers like me, they fend off the loneliness and coldness of this cruel society. Although this sort of happiness is cheap, it is very real.

As Tianyou gave this speech on television defending the medium of zhibo, one of my informants thought his speech was “a bit too sensational” when we were discussing him. I do not doubt the genuineness of this story. Even though I did not witness his conversation with his fan, the rationale of Tianyou’s story of his ardent viewer can be easily triangulated by my own observations of Chuange, Pili Wuwang, and Xiangxi Xiaopang over the years. Tianyou certainly capitalised on his zhibo fandom and strived to extend his celebritydom by going into the mainstream television and film industry. In 2018, Tianyou was eventually banned from zhibo permanently when he was highlighted as the most prominent example of zhibo’s vulgarity and boredom by State media. I am not going to portray Tianyou as a hero of the people as he was also stuck in the conundrums of transcending the everyday life of an ordinary man by attempting to become a celebrity
proper. However, his story hints at how the ordinary, boring, and vulgar livestreams are regarded as socio-cultural contamination of Chinese modernity.

(Post)Platform Futures of Livestreaming Media

With a broader view of a history of online videos in China as well as the platformative reiterations of Douyu from 2014 to 2017—its digital infrastructure, attention economy, institution of categories, censorship machinery, and the danmu interface—I have highlighted the divergent influences on Douyu from Niconico to Twitch, and the effects of its unique channel and category-specific formation on both performative and comment cultures. In isolating the Chinese internet, we will end up missing many traces of influences and movements between regional and international internets. The section includes a set of speculative proposals on platform politics of livestreaming video.

My initial interest in zhibo started with an arbitrary encounter with Ligan’s Douyu channel in early 2014, when zhibo was still a relatively obscure phenomenon in China. By the time I am finalising the thesis in early 2019, livestreaming platforms such as Douyu have already gone past their period of growth and have consolidated their own social space in Chinese society. The zhibo bubble has burst, and many platforms have vanished or merged, but novel forms of performativity are still emerging on Douyu, albeit at a much slower rate. The other observation from many streamers who quit livestreaming in 2017 and 2018 is that the originally very alluring lucrative schemes of the “fish balls” attention economy, streamer contracts, and so forth have all ceased to exist. Livestreaming media is soon likely to be (or indeed already is) a mainstream media form.

While the main viewership of zhibo continues to regularly watch their favourite channels, the public/media attention has moved on to duanshiping or “short video” platforms such as Douyin (or Tiktok in its Western release). There emerges the new bubble of countless Tiktok clones—repetitions of the same or at least comparable rhetorics of growth, rounds of financing, democratised participation, media entrepreneurism, banal celebritification, taste politics, stigmatisation, and so on. Some of my informants, who used to be livestreamers but failed to maintain a regular viewership on Douyu, have now
migrated to Tiktok in the hope that they could capture an audience this time around. At this juncture, I have four postulations on the platform futures of user generated online videos.

First, as I have demonstrated in Chapter 1, live and recorded media have always existed in relation to each other and this ecology of relationality is situated in the socio-technological contingencies at a given time. As I previously outlined, the tension as well as mutual reliance persisted between theatre and cinema, cinema and television, and television and early online videos. The history of media is perhaps also a history of accelerating shifts of antagonism between live and recorded media. The current competition between short video platforms and zhibo follows the same logic of relationality albeit with new nuances.

Similar to livestreaming platforms, Tiktok, or the format of short videos, is not a recent invention as it certainly built on earlier iterations like Vine. Tiktok, while being a medium of short videos, does not operate as a database like YouTube and its flow between videos is largely administered by algorithms. As seen in an opinion piece by Wang Xinxi (2017), the main contention in the current comparison between zhibo and short video platforms in China is that the performative possibilities of zhibo have been exacerbated. In his own words, “the imagination of zhibo [performers] has shrunk...viewers have reached aesthetic fatigue”. Wang is writing from the perspective of commodification of a media platform, which always prioritises novelty and growth potential. As I have demonstrated in the second half of the thesis, while zhibo as medium was novel relative to the previous media such as online video portals, the medium rarely sought to go beyond the realm of everyday life in its performative qualities. For Shanghai Laotou (in Chapter 6) and Pili Wuwang (in Chapter 4), any imaginaries exceeding the realm of everyday life and ordinary people are a violation of the integrity of zhibo.

Second, media platforms, as vehicles of capitalist expansion, always seek to converge and/or encapsulate other platforms, especially their perceived competitors. Livestreaming platforms will also include short videos, and short video platforms will also include functionality of livestreaming. As my research is confined within the temporality of early Douyu, we see that the platform’s identity shifts and morphs over time. Moving towards ubiquity and eventually social invisibility as zhibo becomes too common and the
claims to novelty are taken by new platforms, Douyu and livestreaming media will occupy a pivotal place in everyday media, maybe even being elevated to the same status of television instead of existing in opposition to it.

Third, the platformative movement outlined in Chapter 2 should not be seen as one-directional but truly a reticulation. The aspect I did not inspect in this thesis is crucially how Chinese platforms, especially those perceived as “clones” or copycats of their Western counterparts, influence the (re)designs and reiterations of the familiar US-based platforms. Whatever is considered superior in platform politics is relational, but certainly not static. Due to how Douyu originally imitated Twitch’s interface, two of my informants, who also watched Twitch, initially looked down upon Douyu’s “shameless poaching” and said they preferred the range of videogame livestream content broadcast by most Taiwanese streamers on Twitch.¹ However, they gradually shifted towards Douyu because, apart from the more localised content, styles, and personalities, in their own words, “Douyu strives to develop new unique features”. It was therefore not surprising for them to see some of these features, such as the operation of attention economy via “fish balls” and other virtual currencies, also implemented on Twitch.

Finally, I propose that academic theories of livestreaming media should balance media specificity and the colloquial theories of remediation. As I have shown throughout the thesis, televsual metaphors are going as strong as ever. The point is not to dispense with television studies but juxtapose them with how ordinary viewers and livestreamers understand the technological form—in these points of contention, we can then observe the socio-technological changes in situated practices rather than in idealised or isolated cases of theorisation. For example, my theory of livestreaming media reviews the movements of remediation while emphasises the gradual formation of a new medium in its own socio-technological mediation of the televsual. It ends with two key proposals: first, studying performativity of genres on livestreaming platforms ethnographically can be a productive

¹ Twitch was not blocked in China at the time of the interview (May 2017). Due to slow connection speeds, the lack of mainland Chinese streamers active on Twitch, and generally insufficient knowledge about foreign platforms in China, Twitch was only known to a minority of mainland Chinese, as reflected by my own observations.
alternative to the ideological fetishisation of liveness; second, a renewed theory of live media events must be recalibrated to tackle the specificity of the livestreaming media, which should foreground “small” and local everyday events as opposed to “large” and national/global ritualistic events. Genre and event are thus two prominent conceptual devices I derived from my research, but more work needs to be done towards a theory of livestreaming media.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

In this thesis, my fieldsite and the object of research converge since I am studying how Douyu performs as a platform and the performative qualities of livestreaming video more broadly. However, this preliminary research can also pave the way for future research on livestreaming platforms that is not necessarily a study of the platforms themselves. livestreaming platforms can be resourceful venues of research on contemporary Chinese life, in which videogames are only one aspect. While I did not focus on a single category of Douyu in this thesis, each (sub)category can be a fieldsite in itself for a topic related to the activity or people featured in that category.

On Douyu, cooking and eating shows engender very specific performativities and practices that can be insightful for a research project on contemporary food (sub)culture. A deep dive into the channels in the category of “stock market” can be very helpful for a project on the financialisation of everyday life. Livestreaming media are extensions of various facets of everyday life and can be an appropriate site to conduct observation remotely and even interview the participants (if the channel has few concurrent viewers).

For instance, my long-term observation of Yuwen can provide ethnographic data for a different research project on disability. Unless I am invited to designated spaces and events (such as specialised schools for certain types of disability), disability is largely invisible in public spaces in China. Researching disability can be particularly challenging due to social stigma and government policies. Yuwen’s livestream channel thus provided a rare opportunity to talk to the man, who had been immobilised for years and suffered from social stigma, in a relatively safe space (i.e. his Douyu channel and his home), where
he felt relatively comfortable to articulate himself in his own terms without feeling insecure and being constrained by the situation of a formal interview.

To extend this argument further, popular livestreaming platforms that encompass a broad variety of content (e.g. Douyu) can be a form of anthropological archive. It is not to say that VoD platforms cannot constitute such a public archive. However, it is much easier to navigate Douyu’s content than Youku’s chaotic public archive. With the infrastructure of categories, less channels overall, and distinct identities of microcelebrities on Douyu, a specific area of research can be located relatively easier. The mundane and impromptu type of livestreaming content are also more indicative of everyday activities. Livestreaming platforms attracted more “ordinary” participants from all walks of life to exhibit their daily life without omission over a long duration, compared to VoD platforms where the protagonists are often rid of their agency by the video editor.

The difficulty is, however, the archiving of livestreams. This issue is often deeply situated within the affordances of each platform. For example, certain platforms (e.g. YouTube) do provide live chat replay for archived livestreams, which is indispensable to the contextual information needed for transcription and analysis. In contrast to a YouTube video which can be viewed without the comments, an archived livestream is incomplete without the live chat replay. Other platforms (e.g. Douyu) do not deploy these functions, and some do not even automatically archive their livestreams. Unedited livestream archives are barely viewed—as I have emphasised in Chapter 3, watching a 3-hour livestream archive is just not desirable. The unbearable experiences of viewing long livestreams for research purposes is sometimes exactly the kind of observation that can, in the right conditions, produce valuable ethnographic data. My suggestion is to try to catch a livestream when it is live as much as you can and record locally as much as possible. Online archives are not reliable and cannot be taken for granted. A personalised offline archive (both in terms of digital files and the researcher’s memory) is vital for researching livestreaming platforms.
Bibliography


