“Selling Poverty” on Kuaishou: How entrepreneurialism disciplines Chinese underclass online participation

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Abstract
The meanings of being “underclass” in China are increasingly ambivalent when various disadvantaged social groups also get access to digital platforms which become more and more influential in not just facilitating people’s economic and cultural practices online but also mediating, distorting, and reshaping these processes. Using critical techno-cultural discourse analysis about how the underclass represent poverty and themselves by creating short videos and performing live-commerce on Kuaishou, this study finds that digital entrepreneurialism becomes an interlocking governmentality to discipline the underclass’ online participation. Afforded by the platform and operationalized by multiple networked actors, entrepreneurialism incorporates the underclass in the digitally mediated productive relationship and at the same time disciplines their online representation and exploits the involved entities through both platform labor and monetary investments to cultivate an underclass entrepreneurial subject. Although claiming to include and empower the diversified Chinese underclass, digital platforms actually reproduce the underclassness by mobilizing the calculated conformity among the underclass to experience the intertwining online and offline inequalities through digital entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, nuances of minor narratives still exist in the digitally mediated self-representation.

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Introduction

As a new college graduate, Xiaoma came from a rural Hui family in Gansu Province. Since both of her parents could not live by themselves due to long-term illnesses, she gave up finding a job in the city after graduation, went back to her hometown, and made a living by vlogging and live streaming on Kuaishou, a mobile short-video sharing platform popular among the socio-economically disadvantaged populations in China today. Within 6 months (from September 2021 to February 2022), she attracted over 23,000 followers by representing her impoverished everyday life with short videos: the cottage they live in seems shabby, the homemade meals usually lack protein or vegetables, her parents blame her for being a “nobody” after finishing college, and her elder brother beats her for her “inappropriate” behaviors as a good Hui girl such as dying hair or not doing enough housework. Despite that some viewers questioned the authenticity of her video content, plenty of her followers were compassionate and supportive. They not just rendered suggestions and life hacks in the comment section, but also enthusiastically expressed their rapport either by sending virtual gifts to her during livestreaming or purchasing at her e-commerce shop on the same platform. In another word, though physically trapped in a miserable family as displayed in her vlog, Xiaoma tried to overcome these difficulties by earning money and being a multi-facet entrepreneur on Kuaishou, who is simultaneously a video creator, live streamer, and an e-commerce shop owner.

Xiaoma is one of the many Chinese underclasses who now try to earn a living by “selling poverty” through short videos as a digital entrepreneur on platforms like Kuaishou. As claimed by the platform, 6.64 million Kuaishou users who lived in national poverty-stricken counties have received monetary gains by creating videos and conducting e-commerce on Kuaishou by 2020. Nonetheless, underclass is a highly ambiguous term in China today which can hardly be equivalent to residents of the national poverty-stricken counties. Contemporary Chinese underclass covers a mass population while its meaning lacks an absolute definition (Li, 2021). On the one hand, underclass can refer to various groups of people such as precarious workers, ethnic minorities, rural migrants, people with disabilities etc. They are systematically or partially deprived of the equal chances to share the rising economic prosperity due to multiple factors including their living areas, migrating experiences, job, education, health conditions, gender, and ethnicity. Specifically, along with the digital transformation and platformization of Chinese society (de Kloet et al., 2019), digital technologies also profoundly infiltrated in this complicated stratification process. As the Chinese Internet-accessible population doubled to more than one billion in the past decade (CNNIC, 2021), many of the underclass are at the same time the information have-less because although they can now access to the Internet and various platforms, their online experiences always intertwine with the existing types of social inequalities (Qiu, 2009). On the other hand, composed of highly heterogeneous social groups who declined into the inferior positions amid different conditions, underclass lacks a collective class consciousness and its connotations manifest in different ways for each of them (Solinger, 2012). Moreover, the segregated underclasses used to be unable to speak for themselves because they lack sufficient channels to express or to efficiently negotiate with the more privileged others (Sun, 2014).

Underclasses are not just frequently excluded from cultural politics, but they are also marginalized in formal labor market due to various socio-structural constraints and discriminations. Therefore, becoming entrepreneurs, especially in the courtyard economy or as small businesses and

Keywords
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family firms, has always been a worthy alternative choice for Chinese underclass to eke out a living (Poutziouris et al., 2002). Although being an entrepreneur means one should take responsibilities of all risks and uncertainties (Carlsson et al., 2013), plenty of underclass still consider the option as attractive since they can achieve independence, self-actualization, and social acknowledgement if they once succeed in earning lucrative profits (Duan et al., 2020; Yu, 2019; Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014). With inexpensive Internet services, low-cost mobile phones, and various digital platforms, more information have-less are rendered with new chances to step into the social relations of production by being digital entrepreneurs. Digital technologies not just reshaped entrepreneurial processes and outcomes less bounded, but also involved a broader, more diverse, and often constantly evolving set of actors in different context (Nambisan, 2017).

This study concentrates on this specific entrepreneurial practice on Kuaishou where a group of underclass users pursue monetary and affective outcomes by representing their impoverished everyday experiences through short videos. First, acknowledging the complicated and contextualized meanings of underclass, this study does not assume underclass as a ready-made objective reality based on ostensive socio-economic variables, but as a performative concept in the dynamically changing social structures (Latour, 2005). We focus on “selling poverty” videos to examine the intertwining economic and cultural practices among underclass entrepreneurs who endeavor to not just incorporate themselves in the new digitally mediated productive relationship but also culturally represent themselves. In doing so, we aim at exploring how digital platforms and their multiple networked complementors together give new meanings of being an underclass in contemporary China. We find that entrepreneurialism has become as an underpinned mechanism and interlocking governmentality during this stratification process. It not just conditioned the underclass’ online participation on platforms like Kuaishou, but also complicated the social implications of the mediated poverty in short user-generated videos, which are simultaneously marketable objects and techno-cultural practices.

This article has been divided into three parts. The first part reviews existing research about the underclass entrepreneurship in digital China, paying specific attention to how three different types of digital entrepreneurship—the e-commerce related ones, the self-employed platform labors, and the content creators—respectively, included but also exploited the underclass. We then introduce critical techno-cultural discourse analysis (CTDA) as the research methodology of this study and explain how it is particularly applicable to understand marginalized groups’ online engagement (Brock, 2020). The last part, also the findings of the research, unpacks how entrepreneurialism underpins the representation and meaning of underclass from different perspectives. We first discuss in what conditions and ways entrepreneurialism has become a key platform logic in the case of Kuaishou. The second section analyzes how multiple actors—including but not limited to local government officials, audiences with diverse backgrounds, underclass creators/entrepreneurs—are associated with each other and redeployed through entrepreneurialism in different patterns. Third, we pay special attention to the underclass creators/entrepreneurs themselves, investigating their calculated and contingent agency and the nuances in their minor narratives. In sum, we will argue that being afforded by the platform and interlocking various related actors, digital entrepreneurship on Kuaishou, both its economic and cultural practices, reproduces the underclass positions through their own narratives, despite that some minor resistance may still exist in between the lines and details of these poverty videos.
The underclass and their entrepreneurialism on Chinese digital platforms

Though the public imagination of Chinese entrepreneurs often connects with well-educated urban youth or people with rich social capital (Ahlstrom & Ding, 2014; Peverelli & Song, 2012), diversities widely existed within the term entrepreneur, ranging from the elite ex-managers of state enterprise to self-employed, family-based, small-scale business operate within informal economy (Poutziouris et al., 2002). By perceiving and even creating new opportunities and introducing their ideas into the market, plenty of underclass entrepreneurs succeeded to uplift themselves and their families from poverty ever since the economic reform (Wu et al., 2020; Poutziouris et al., 2002). Moreover, the innovative practices of some underclass entrepreneurs even left significant impacts in reforming the relationship between market and the state (Xiang, 2018), industrial structures (Feng, 2010), and local entrepreneurial context (Murphy, 2000).

The rise of various digital platforms has invited more diverse underclass social groups with new patterns to step into the social relations of production by being entrepreneurs. Such a process is vigorous both top-down and bottom-up. On the one hand, Chinese government particularly proposed “Mass Entrepreneurship and Mass Innovation” as a national policy since 2015 and utilized it as an effective structural force to reduce poverty, assuage inequalities, and achieve an overall moderate prosperity (Yu, 2017). Chinese tech giants such as Alibaba, ByteDance, and Kuaishou are also particularly active in this process to not just cohere with the mainstream political agenda but also to expand their user-base to the underserved population and ultimately pitch to higher commercial and financial values (Zhang, 2020; Zhan et al., 2020; Hou, 2021). On the other hand, it must be noted that the digital transit among underclass entrepreneurs did not merely result from the efforts of governments or large firms but is also shaped by the underclass themselves (Si et al., 2015). Some specific underclass groups who can access to more socio-economic and techno-cultural resources than others, such as return migrants in rural areas or the disabled with relatively higher educational backgrounds, serve as the sufficient human infrastructures to realize digital entrepreneurship in local contexts (Duan et al., 2020; Yu, 2019).

Currently, afforded by different platforms, three forms of digital entrepreneurship most prominently reshape the life chances of many underclasses. The first is to get oneself involved in the e-commerce ecosystem, either as a shop owner, a supply chain partner, or related service provider (Yu, 2017). The wide spread of Taobao Village, a model co-produced by the e-commerce monopoly Alibaba and local governments, has significantly narrowed urban-rural gap and stimulated the entrepreneurial enthusiasm among the rural residents in various regions (Wu et al., 2020; Tang and Zhu, 2020; Mei et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2016). However, though claiming to be inclusive and empowering, the chance to benefit from entrepreneurship intertwines deeply with the existing social, economic, and political constraints (Irani, 2019). This e-commerce prosperity is not evenly redistributed because the socio-economic and techno-cultural threshold to run a Taobao e-shop not just excludes the more disadvantaged groups, but also reproduce existing social inequalities. For example, even when plenty of rural women overcome tremendous difficulties and do actively engage in e-commerce, it is still debatable whether their performance creates inconsistencies in the micro-gender power dynamic (Liu, 2020) or being entrepreneurs serves as another way to legitimize the exploitation of their cheap and docile labor (Yu and Cui, 2019).

Second, the platformization and digital transformation has significantly diversified the meaning of entrepreneurship and blurred the boundary between entrepreneurship and labor. For example, many domestic workers, delivery workers, and food couriers—these temporary occupations are frequently shared among rural migrants—were usually depicted as the “entrepreneurial individuals”
rather than the employees of the on-demand service platforms. On the one hand, these workers are empowered by the “temporal entrepreneurship” to enjoy more independence during work such as making time better fit their individual needs and constructing meanings for their temporary work without structurally challenge the dominant platform logic (Chen and Sun, 2020). Nonetheless, it must also be noted that such an entrepreneurial subject, particularly afforded by digital platforms, also function to discipline these gig laborers through algorithmic rankings and justify their precarious labor condition (Sun, 2019).

The third option for the underclass to practice digital entrepreneurship is to participate in the wanghong economy as a creative labor (Craig et al., 2021). Although underclasses are viewed as the unlikely creative class and their entrepreneurial practices are often under strict institutional and governmental regulation (Lin and de Kloeit, 2019), many underclasses, particularly the younger generation still perceive being Internet celebrities a dream occupation, much more satisfying than continuing formal education or working as a precarious rural-migrant worker (Li et al., 2020). In consistent with creative labors from other social backgrounds, the underclass creators must also act in accordance with quantified platform metrics (Duffy et al., 2021) and devote tremendous affective labor to actively maintain their fanbase (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019) to survive in the highly competitive social media entertainment industry. Despite that some underclass entrepreneurs do earn meagre income from creating content, the amount of the money they gain is incomparable to the increased commercial values of the platform (Tan et al., 2020). Digital entrepreneurs often expose their labor—either the creative, relational, or algorithmic—to the highly exploitative platform capitalism (Baym, 2015; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016).

In sum, the chance and outcome of digital entrepreneurship is never equally distributed and the process of entrepreneurial self-making in accordance with the structural demand is not natural but requires particular efforts and investment (Zhang, 2017). More importantly, since digital entrepreneurship is assumed as an incremental solution to all social problems, structural inequalities and uncertainties are not just masked but also legitimized, and neoliberal capitalism in general is reinforced as an inevitable choice for everyone (Lindner, 2020). By concentrating on the digital entrepreneurs who sell poverty through short videos on Kuaishou, this study contributes to scholarship about underclass entrepreneurship on China-based platforms from the following three aspects. Empirically, many of the involved underclass entrepreneurs of this study are more disadvantaged because the lack of socio-economic, techno-cultural, or even migrational sources used to prevent them from participating the existing platformized relations of production as digital entrepreneurs. Second, we pay special attention to how these participants negotiate between multiple intertwined roles—content producers, e-shop owners, live streamers—and how entrepreneurship disciplines the underclass’s self-representation. Third, we reflect on how different actors are connected through entrepreneurialism and together contribute to reshape the meaning of underclass in China today.

**Method**

This study utilizes critical techno-cultural discourse analysis (CTDA) as its primary methodology (Brock, 2020). In line with critical discourse analysis, CTDA also considers the situations, institutions, power dynamics, and social context that frame certain discourse(s) to be crucial (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Moreover, CTDA extends beyond texts and offline interactions to technology-mediated cultural practices. Particularly, CTDA evaluates technology not as neutral or universal but an assemblage of artifacts and practices where platforms and their networked complementors, different levels of public institutions, and users with diversified social backgrounds all have some potential to impact in a localized context.
In another word, by pulling together multiple disparate data points, we critically examine the techno-cultural discourses of different involved entities in this specific case to understand entrepreneurialism as an interlocking governmentality. First, to unpack the design and function of Kuaishou, we conducted an app walkthrough paying special attention to the changing features on multiple levels: interface, affordance, architecture, content, and patterns of users’ interaction (Light et al., 2018). Since platforms like Kuaishou constantly refashion itself to accommodate the changing social conditions, our app walkthrough was carried out during three periods of time where significant changes of Kuaishou occurred: (1) from December 2017 to December 2018 when Kuaishou was punished by the state authorities to gradually “clean up” the vulgar content produced by underclass users; (2) from July 2020 to September 2020 when Kuaishou released its 8.0 version with a comprehensive upgrade; (3) from September 2021 to November 2021 when Kuaishou officially announced entrepreneurship as the platform’s key logic by proposing the concept of “grassroots multi-sided market.”

Second, centering on the marginalized groups’ own patterns of usage and understandings of technology while pursuing entrepreneurship, we select and follow 15 creators who primarily “sell poverty” on Kuaishou like Xiaoma (see Table 1 in the appendix for the details of these video creators). We take special consideration of the following features when choosing these entrepreneurial creators to reflect on the highly diverse underclass users and communities on Kuaishou, though our dataset seems only a drop in the ocean. These features include demographic ones (age, gender, ethnicity, region), genres of content (vlog, dance, lip-syncing, comedy sketch), their level of impact as influencers (number of followers) and the reasons of poverty/social exclusion (rural, ill/disabled, precarious worker etc.). After viewing 3716 short videos produced by these creators, we manually transcribed 111 videos where they particularly demonstrated why and how they transformed themselves into entrepreneurs on Kuaishou. We also interviewed six creators through Kuaishou and WeChat for further details.

Third, to understand the disparate discourses alongside the underclass entrepreneurial practices on Kuaishou, we also collected the archived information from multiple sources including the company’s policies, advertisements, press releases and branding pages, government documents, blog posts, and third-party reports to understand the platform’s business models and governing policies and interviewed 12 other participants, including four frequent viewers, three developers and two market analysts of Kuaishou, and three local governmental officials (see Table 2 in the appendix for the details of these interviewees). In doing so, we concur that digital technologies are not exclusively online but part of the everyday life of both its users, creators, and operators (Pink et al., 2015). We anonymize all the involved content creators and interviewees to fully protect their identities.

**Disciplining underclass’s “vulgar” online participation with digital entrepreneurship**

Both as a techno-cultural construct and a socio-economic structure, platform such as Kuaishou constantly evolves, upgrades, and transforms (Helmond & van der Vlist, 2019). This section argues that Kuaishou embraced digital entrepreneurship as its key platform logic particularly as a response to address the intertwining political, commercial, and moral crises after 2018. In addition to a short-video-based social media platform, the current Kuaishou is also a full-fledged live-commerce ecosystem that not just affords underclass entrepreneurship but also effectively structures the previously controversial underclass’s self-representation with digital entrepreneurship.
Before the platform’s entrepreneurial shift, Kuaishou initially endeavored to construct and represent itself as an inclusive and decentralized online sphere friendly for the unprivileged information have-less. Though both featuring in creating and sharing short videos like its more globally famous rival TikTok/Douyin, Kuaishou’s backstage recommendation system by 2018 was

| No | Codename | Gender | Age | Ethnicity | Location | Type of Influencer (No. of Followers) | Genre of Content | Primary Reason of Poverty/Exclusion | No. of Archived Videos |
|----|----------|--------|-----|-----------|----------|---------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1  | Deng     | M      | 10  | -         | Sichuan  | Mega (2m)                            | Dance            | Living in an impoverished village | 5                      |
| 2  | Lou      | M      | 10  | Yi        | Sichuan  | Macro (400k)                          | Dance, lip-syncing, comedy sketch | Living in an impoverished village | 5                      |
| 3  | Qin Qin  | F      | 20  | -         | Guizhou  | Mid-tier (70k)                        | Vlog             | Rural mother with three children   | 9                      |
| 4  | Xiaoma   | F      | 20  | Hui       | Gansu    | Micro (30k)                           | Vlog             | Rural college student             | 12                     |
| 5  | Lingling | F      | 20  | -         | Yunnan   | Mid-tier (200k)                       | Vlog             | Rural mother with four children   | 20                     |
| 6  | Amei     | F      | 20  | -         | Guangxi  | Micro (30k)                           | Vlog             | Rural mother with four children   | 9                      |
| 7  | Zhou     | M      | 20  | -         | Hubei    | Micro (20k)                           | Vlog             | Precarious worker                 | 7                      |
| 8  | Zheng    | M      | 20  | -         | Guizhou  | Mid-tier (140k)                       | Vlog             | Illness                           | 5                      |
| 9  | Sister sun| F    | 30  | -         | Anhui    | Mid-tier (200k)                       | Vlog             | Illness                           | 5                      |
| 10 | Brother liu | M  | 30  | -         | Liaoning | Mid-tier (200k)                       | Cross-dressing   | Rural queer                       | 7                      |
| 11 | Aya      | F      | 30  | -         | Liaoning | Mid-tier (200k)                       | Dance, lip-syncing | Rural single mother              | 7                      |
| 12 | Junjun   | F      | 30  | Yi        | Sichuan  | Mega (2m)                             | Lip-syncing, cooking | Living in an impoverished village | 7                      |
| 13 | Li       | F      | 40  | Zhuang    | Shandong | Mid-tier (200k)                       | Comedy sketch    | Peasant                           | 6                      |
| 14 | Zhang    | M      | 60  | -         | Jilin    | Macro (400k)                          | Singing          | Precarious worker                 | 5                      |
| 15 | Grandpa pamelo | M | 70  | -         | Sichuan  | Nano (1k)                             | Vlog             | Peasant                           | 2                      |
significantly different and intentionally designed to attract and maintain underclass users. Three coding engineers of Kuaishou all mentioned a metaphor in the Chinese language when introducing the foundational logic of Kuaishou’s algorithmic architecture: just as rains fall equally on everyone (yulujunzhan), each individual user received equal chance to be displayed in the default exploring channel (faxian) according to the recommendation algorithm. That said, no users get extra visibility due to his or her privileged offline social status and at the same time if one user already achieved a number of followers, his or her videos would be restricted to the following (guanzhu) channel in order to keep the community constantly open to newcomers. Consistent with the technological features, Kuaishou utilized the “never-recruiting-any-celebrity” principle as its main commercial strategy. One market analyst of Kuaishou explained to us on June 16, 2018:

| No | Role                  | Codename | Gender | Interview Date       | Method               |
|----|-----------------------|----------|--------|----------------------|----------------------|
| 1  | Frequent viewer       | Shen     | F      | 30 Jun 2018          | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        | 5 Aug 2020           | WeChat text message  |
|    |                       |          |        | 1 Nov 2021           |                      |
| 2  | Frequent viewer       | Han      | F      | 4 Jul 2020           | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        | 31 Oct 2021          | WeChat text message  |
| 3  | Frequent viewer       | Yang     | M      | 8 Aug 2020           | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        | 20 Nov 2021          | WeChat text message  |
| 4  | Frequent viewer       | Xu       | F      | 15 Sep 2020          | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        | 4 Nov 2021           | WeChat text message  |
| 5  | Developer             | Wang     | M      | 6 Jun 2018           | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        | 12 Feb 2021          | WeChat text message  |
| 6  | Developer             | Zhao     | M      | 11 Jun 2018          | WeChat text message  |
|    |                       |          |        | 14 Jun 2018          |                      |
|    |                       |          |        | 13 Feb 2021          |                      |
| 7  | Developer             | Qian     | M      | 15 Sep 2020          | WeChat text message  |
| 8  | Market analyst        | Feng     | M      | 4 Jul 2018           | WeChat text message  |
|    |                       |          |        | 30 Aug 2018          |                      |
| 9  | Market analyst        | Chen     | F      | 16 Jun 2018          | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        | 15 Feb 2021          | WeChat text message  |
| 10 | Government official   | Chu      | M      | 19 Nov 2021          | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        |                     | WeChat text message  |
| 11 | Government official   | Wei      | F      | 12 Nov 2021          | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        |                     | WeChat text message  |
| 12 | Government official   | Jiang    | M      | 10 Nov 2021          | WeChat phone call    |
|    |                       |          |        |                     | WeChat text message  |
| 13 | Video creator         | Zhou     | M      | 5 Oct 2021           | Kuaishou livestreaming|
| 14 | Video creator         | Lingling | F      | 29 Sep 2021          | Kuaishou livestreaming|
|    |                       |          |        | 16 Feb 2022          | Kuaishou text message|
| 15 | Video creator         | Xiaoma   | F      | 8 Oct 2021           | Kuaishou livestreaming|
| 16 | Video creator         | Zhang    | M      | 9 Oct 2021           | Kuaishou livestreaming|
| 17 | Video creator         | Shi      | F      | 1 Mar 2022           | Kuaishou text message|
| 18 | Video creator         | Kong     | F      | 5 Mar 2022           | Kuaishou text message|
Our decentralization principle determines that we will never hire a celebrity for branding or ask him or her to open an account no matter how many followers may be brought in. You know, from the perspective of the algorithm, the famous actor Xiaoming Huang is no different from a peasant Xiaoming Li living in the Guizhou mountainous region. If we give more visibility to the actor, that will conflict with the value of our platform. But from the celebrity’s point of view, the platform means little if he or she does not get extra attention.

As a result, underclass users gathered and stayed on the platform and cultivated numerous subcultures such as hanmai rap, social shake dance (shehuiyao), rural food porn, and the more controversial ones such as adolescent pregnancy and nonsuicidal self-harm videos. Many of them fueled mounting criticisms in the middle-class public sphere for being denounced as aesthetically vulgar and morally harmful (Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Hou, 2020; Tan et al., 2020). In April 2018, the controversial “vulgarity” in underclass’s self-representation even triggered the state’s various punishments of Kuaishou due to concerns of moral degradation, social stability, and more importantly, an “appropriate” representation of underclass in public sphere (Hou, 2021). These punishments included temporarily removing the app from online stores, requiring the platform to recruit more human moderators and carry out stricter rules in examining “inappropriate” content. The Cyberspace Administration of China also summoned Kuaishou’s senior managers for face-to-face meetings, where details of the punishments such as the definition of “vulgarity” or “appropriateness” was not disclosed.2

Besides the political uncertainty, Kuaishou also needed to carefully position itself in front of commercial clients, capital investors, and different types of users, where the “vulgar” aesthetics of the underclass might occasionally undermine its brand value or at least circumscribe it from further expansion. Digital entrepreneurship thus turned out to be an eclectic solution for the platform to tread a fine line between political safety, profitability and maintaining an active user-base who are

![Figure 1](image-url)  
**Figure 1.** On the profile pages of multiple Kuaishou users, they describe their motivation to use Kuaishou as to “record and change their life” in different phrases.
expected to be simultaneously productive and noncontroversial. By affording and promoting the live-commerce and online shopping function, Kuaishou encouraged its users to take three roles simultaneously just as Xiaoma did: a video creator, a live streamer, and an e-commerce shop owner. All the three roles can generate income for underclass entrepreneurs in related but different ways. Since then, entreprising on Kuaishou not only attracted more underclass users for the possibility to achieve supplementary income but also encouraged them to reflect on their online self-representation, shifting from personal tastes for fun to appealing to potential consumers, especially the non-underclass ones who have better consuming abilities than themselves.

The significant shift in users’ motivation illustrates how digital entrepreneurship restructures their participation and self-representation. Long-time Kuaishou users inclined to use the verb “play” (wan) to describe their engagement on Kuaishou. Frequently mentioned in interviews and their videos, they started “playing” with Kuaishou for boredom and the hankering to have some fun. Though they also asked for likes and subscription in their videos, most of them received merely affective pleasure for knowing and connecting with more laoties (the vernacular term on the platform to describe friendship among Kuaishou users). While current users (some of previous users created new accounts for the new aim) more often attribute their engagement on Kuaishou to “recording and changing my life” (see Figure 1). The number of likes and followers becomes more economically and socially meaningful because all the viewers may be turned into consumers or patrons if they work hard to transform themselves into entrepreneurs who can stimulate their viewers’ willingness to purchase or donate with their short videos and live streaming performances.

Rather than an idler, the role as an entrepreneur and the potential to become socio-economically successful on Kuaishou urge the underclass to create content and use the platform in the proposed ways. For example, Zhuoma, a Tibetan young female participated the platform’s IPO ceremony in early 2021, as one of the only six user representatives, for generating millions of revenues by selling local agricultural products such as cordyceps and mushrooms during live commerce. The trajectory for the underclass Kuaishou entrepreneurs is indicated in Zhuoma’s success: creating videos (but avoiding all types of controversial content), accumulating followers according to the platform data metrics, opening an e-commerce store on Kuaishou, selling products while livestreaming, and achieving a happy life not just for herself but also for her local community.

Though previous underclass “vulgarity” was silenced during a political Internet clean-up campaign, we highly doubt whether these subcultures would continue their popularity after digital entrepreneurship became the key governmentality in reframing the platform’s narratives as well as directing users’ ways of engagement. When Zhuoma is set as a model for the underclass users, the previously famous representatives of the “vulgar” underclass subcultures have been prohibited from appearing on not just Kuaishou but also all digital platforms since 2018 such as hanmai rap performer Tianyou and social shake dancer Paipaiqi, both of whom once had around 30 million followers on Kuaishou. The dramatic contrast between users like Zhuoma and users like Tianyou or Paipaiqi clearly differentiates two types of underclasses, a vulgar and morally controversial one and a hardworking and active one and indicates the different results for them: playing with the vulgar underclassness may get oneself in trouble while becoming an entrepreneur as suggested by the platform can generate not just lucrative income but also positive social acknowledgement. To some extent, the platform embraced digital entrepreneurship for it is not just endorsed by the state power but can also function as a constructive and ideological apparatus itself to discipline underclass’s ways of online engagement so that Kuaishou can survive the intertwining political, commercial, and moral crises.
Operationalizing underclass entrepreneurship as an interlocking governmentality

The digital transition of underclass entrepreneurship does not naturally configure into specific structures but is profoundly assembled by both human and non-human actors (Latour, 2005). This section discusses how underclass entrepreneurship that is afforded by Kuaishou interlocks multiple actors including but not limited to underclass entrepreneurs, local government officials, and the highly heterogenous viewers of these poverty videos (see Figure 2). It also reveals how entrepreneurship deploys and exploits each involved entity in different ways. When affording underclass entrepreneurialism, platforms like Kuaishou also encourage the underclass to invest not just time and labor but also money to develop an entrepreneurial subject. As a key networked complementor of the platform, local government officials are involved into operationalizing digital entrepreneurship among local underclass in particular ways to achieve their own ends. Viewers, both underclass and non-underclass, also contribute to the remaking of underclass entrepreneurship with their perceptions, preferences, and consuming power.

First, like digital entrepreneurs elsewhere, the underclass entrepreneurs on Kuaishou also need to devote time, energy, and labor to create attractive contents, interact with their followers, and frequently update their understandings about the dynamically changing digital technologies. However, Kuaishou entrepreneurs are, at the same time, milked by the entrepreneurial products and services afforded by the platform though they lack sufficient socio-economic resources in physical lives. As QinQin expresses in a comment when interacting with her followers:

No matter what content you create, the only thing that matters (to become more popular on Kuaishou) is whether your video can be included in the trending topic or not. Either you are super lucky to be selected or you pay money for it.
Using “grassroots multi-sided market” (xinshijing shangye) as a new branding, Kuaishou depicts itself as an extension and revitalization of the traditional rural market structure, where subordinate social groups survived economic struggles by occasionally being peddlers (Skinner, 1985). Accordingly, underclass entrepreneurs on Kuaishou are contemporary street peddlers except that they can build affective connections and find potential consumers who are geographically distanced and culturally different empowered by the platform’s affordance particularly designed for users who want to upgrade themselves. The economic costs and related risks are thus individualized and legitimized in the process of becoming a self-responsible digital entrepreneur. For example, one can utilize Kuaishou’s Streamer Partner and Streaming Open Platform to smooth and improve the live streaming experiences with additional mobile devices and software applications, or the Magnetic Engines composed of a set of marketing tools to boost a potential entrepreneur’s visibility. The interfaces @KuaishouTrendingTopic and @KuaishouBusinessDataCenter frequently used by Xiaoma are two of the easiest among many others to access the Magnetic Engines, while many more advanced functions can be utilized if the potential entrepreneurs invest certain amount of money to trade for both hardware and software products rendered by the platform. Moreover, to better regulate the grassroot multi-sided market, Kuaishou asks all the potential shop owners of the platform to submit security deposit in advance (ranging from 500 RMB to 100,000 RMB depending on the types of commodities) and pay certain percentage of service, marketing, and transaction fees for each sale.

The inclusiveness embedded in the previous recommendation algorithm that once attracted the underclass users to participate has been systematically rebuilt with “correct value and positive energy.” The default exploring channel that used to be open to unprivileged newcomers is now not just full of various entertaining and Internet celebrities but can be easily intervened by the in-platform entrepreneurial tools and services. When these extended affordances claim to reduce or solve the pain of the social exclusion experienced by the underclass by facilitating their entrepreneurial transition, they also assist in creating a larger poverty trap for extracting security deposit and service fees from the potential underclass entrepreneurs. More importantly, the share revenue contract for each future sale, which users must accept, further disciplines and exploits their future economic and cultural value as entrepreneurs. When they are enduring today’s depression and powerlessness, Kuaishou’s entrepreneurial affordances distort their perception of social exclusion and seduce them to affectively invest in their future selves for imaginary successes while depleting their current labor and money.

Second, underclass themselves are not the only human infrastructures to realize digital entrepreneurship in local contexts (Oreglia, 2013). No matter how much the platform renders geography as irrelevant in the digital grassroot multi-sided market or how virtual emotion between streamers and fans overweighs the exchange of physical products, there are always material commodities to be transported to operationalize the actual money-making process. Local government officials, particularly village leaders, take the most responsibilities in setting up local delivery terminals that collect, store, and ship goods from the underclass entrepreneurs to their consumers. Moreover, to enlarge the scope of underclass entrepreneurship, village leaders who are usually young and more tech-savvy, sometimes run an e-commerce shop for the whole village. Village leaders can hardly compensate from the platform for their free labor in operationalizing underclass entrepreneurship and incorporating more marginal social groups in particularly those who have little experience with digital technologies as the entrepreneurs. However, they still voluntarily participate for perceiving entrepreneurship as an effective way to accomplish the accelerated poverty reduction campaign as their political achievement.
Facilitating the underclass entrepreneurship with their own labor, local officials also profoundly reshape the self-representation of the underclass by selecting certain individuals and commodities, affecting video and livestreaming content at the backstage, and redistributing related social resources to advance the underclass entrepreneurship. During this process, local officials particularly connect underclass entrepreneurship with “positive energy,” the hegemonic framework that underlines public discourse in contemporary China (Yang and Tang, 2018), to further incorporate their endeavor in establishing entrepreneurialism among disadvantaged populations to the mainstream political agenda. When introducing why Grandpa Pomelo was chosen as the village’s representative on Kuaishou, Wang, a female village secretary now working in Sichuan Province, interpreted entrepreneurial spirit as the ability to be self-responsible and self-upgrading with a positive attitude, which is exactly the outcome that the state authorities anticipated from the digital entrepreneurship to reshape the representation of the underclass.

We hope to set some good role models (during poverty reduction campaigns) to encourage more villagers to consider entrepreneurship as a choice...Grandpa Pomelo is appropriate because he has positive attitude in every aspect of his life. He is hardworking, and he cares about his pomelos. His pomelos are thus of high-quality, better than many other villagers who seldom work on their pomelo trees...He is also willing to collaborate with us.

Third, viewers of these poverty videos, especially non-underclass ones, also have unneglectable power to affect how the underclass entrepreneurs represent themselves because they constantly evaluate the “authenticity” of underclass entrepreneurs’ online performances and manifest their perceptions and preferences through likes, comments, and consuming power. Therefore, just as social media influencers always need to negotiate between commerciality and authenticity (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021), underclass entrepreneurs also attentively reconcile their images as an “authentic” underclass and as an active entrepreneur to different audiences. Particularly, such an authenticity does not refer to actual realities but the common anticipation for an “authentic” image of underclass which is often anticipated by the non-underclass viewers and thus composed of stereotypical assumptions particularly including ignorance, obedience, and passiveness. In another word, viewers only support, either affectively or economically, the underclass entrepreneurs who can arouse their empathy with specific online images that cohere with the viewers’ anticipation of the underclass.

The simultaneous existence of resources—including Kuaishou’s affordances, local officials’ human infrastructure, and viewers’ response—again distinguishes the “good underclass” and the “bad underclass” in additional to the comparison between the “vulgar” and the hardworking underclass. This separation further legitimizes poverty as an outcome of “personal incompetence” rather than structural inequalities (Bauman 2004, 76). When the good poor are temporarily liberated from impoverished conditions with the help of digital technology and local government officials, their contagious successes not just create “slow violence” among those who do not have opportunities yet (Lindtner, 2020), but also reinforces that failure should be attributed to individual foibles instead of structural inequalities.

Balancing between a conforming underclass entrepreneur and a creator of “minor videos”

Acknowledging that multiple actors—platforms, local officials, and even viewers—are interlocked in reshaping how the underclass engage with digital entrepreneurship on Kuaishou, we concentrate
on the underclass entrepreneurs in this section. Specifically, we ask whether entrepreneurialism is a false consciousness that only reinforces class differences by seducing the underclass to become further exploitable in the platform capitalism? An affirmative response would be oversimplified since it neglects that the underclass themselves can also penetrate and demystify the prevailing ideology (Scott, 2008). Though most of the videos represent a stereotypical image of the underclass themselves that coheres with public imagination, we argue that such a performance does not necessarily demonstrate that the underclass internalizes these images of being poor. Instead, their understandings of being an underclass distinguish from the definitions rendered either by platforms, village leaders, or public discourses. By examining how they represent themselves and perform as an underclass entrepreneur in their short videos and live streaming, we first find that, in many cases, underclass entrepreneurs only perform as a stereotypical poor with calculated and contingent agency to maximize their economic benefits on Kuaishou. Second, even these intentional performances of poverty primarily aim at mobilizing viewers’ compassion and rapport, we can still encounter the underclass discourses of personal vibrant histories in these “minor videos.” We call them as creators of minor videos not just because of the length or banality of these video clips. Most importantly, these video clips recorded with different dialects and in various physical impoverished settings, portrayed the mundane daily life, the earthly happiness, the subaltern innovation, and the forever-existing precarity that surrounded the overlooked, neglected, and excluded “losers” in the Chinese economic miracle (Nicoll, 2019).

First, conforming to public expectations of underclass is not attributive to ignorance, but an effective self-conscious strategy for the underclass entrepreneurs to survive the mundane pressures of eking out a living (Scott, 2008). For example, when Lingling’s followers reached 30 thousand, she was offered a precious chance to sell gastrodia at her Kuaishou shop to earn extra money. Lingling recorded the process and shared them as usual to her Kuaishou followers about how she was invited by a team of gastrodia suppliers for a face-to-face meaning, but these videos triggered plenty of doubts rather than compassion as they used to. Viewers commented as

A: She can afford a car drive and a comfortable hotel! I regret I did worry about her before.

B: Do not believe these Kuaishou poor! They are just performing to sell products. Maybe they are richer than us.

Lingling used several subsequent videos to explain that the herb merchants offered her a free accommodation and the car ride. However, suspicious comments only stopped as Lingling gave up describing her entrepreneurial practices in short videos and returned to her daily routine of self-representation: a powerless but persevering rural mother rather an active entrepreneur. She interpreted this gastrodia incident during livestreaming, which is more ephemeral and broadcasted only to her attentive followers compared to the random viewers of short videos. Instead of discussing the authenticity of her videos, she regarded it as a failed attempt to enrich the content of her videos as an underclass entrepreneur.

Creating short videos is only a way to increase my income. I have four young children at home, so I can hardly go anywhere and dagong (be as a precarious worker). I need to try whatever I can do just to make money. I know my attempts will not always succeed (viewers may not like certain videos), but I would not even know if did not try…. I just want to change my life. I no longer want to hear those rats squeaking around my children late at night.
Like Lingling, many underclass entrepreneurs have few alternative options but to reinforce a stereotypical representation of themselves to efficiently gain attention and profits from wider audience. The small but essential economic gains that they can hardly achieve from other sources together with the potential future gains urged them to create spectacular poverty and stereotypical representations of underclass, even though they do not necessarily agree with these images themselves. As a form of governmentality, entrepreneurship on Kuaishou interlocked the underclass by mobilizing their calculated conformity to reshape their user-generated discourse. Underclass used to be a given identity which is narrated by privileged social groups: sociologists, media, and middle-class, while underclass themselves are silenced due to the lack of channels for them to express and to negotiate. However, the entrepreneurial practices on Kuaishou not just turn the invisible underclass visible but also serve as a hegemonic rather than repressive apparatus to encourage the underclass to accept the inferior position and express their subaltern identity with their own words.

However, if we have a chance to go to the backstage such as the more enclosed live streaming or private conversation, we will notice that the underclass clearly have the ability to re-discover their socio-economic positions, re-identify points of antagonistic interests, and perceive struggles, and act accordingly to maximize one’s own benefit (Thompson, 1978). With calculated agency, they perform as the stereotypical poor in short videos to earn empathy/gifts/purchases from the non-underclass viewers and they also perform to be active entrepreneurs to win the trust from local officials for socio-economic resources to advance their entrepreneurship. But they may not agree with their definitions of underclass. For example, when local officials usually depict the underclass as those who need help due to the lack of knowledge and capabilities, many underclass entrepreneurs interpret the underclassness as being unequally treated particularly in the micro power dynamics, the lack of positive acknowledgement and the enduring sense of uncertainty.

Figure 3. The minor narratives in the underclass entrepreneurs’ short videos.
Though underclass entrepreneurs primarily sell poverty with short videos as marketized spectacles to satisfy non-underclass viewers and persuade them to become either the potential consumers or patrons of themselves, their videos still contain minor discourse about their own perceptions of being underclass. Borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1986)’s concept of minor literature, we argue that multiplicity of the underclass’ images and voices are implicit between lines and details. Xiaoma records and publicizes her struggles as a girl from rural Hui family. Qinqin, Lingling, and Amei often groan about their husbands’ lack of reasonability, earning no money and taking little care of all the children. Though being illiterate and working as garbage collector (which is a low prestige job in China), Zhang recreated numerous popular songs with humorous new lyrics to express his own observation and critique about plenty of social phenomena. Brother Liu, on the other hand, designed stylish clothes with agricultural materials and even recycled wastes to accomplish his dream to become a model, which seemed out of reach because he is a peasant at the current stage (see Figure 3). These trivial complaints, innovation, and humor are their minor resistance in the gaps of their everyday conformity as underclass entrepreneurs.

Last but not least, each creator of these “minor videos” has the potential to generate a micro-community among the disadvantaged population who are trapped as the underclass for similar reasons. Rural mothers with multiple children voluntarily described their personal struggles in the comment section of Qinqin, Lingling, and Amei. They also encouraged each other with affective rapport and suggestions about how to overcome or at least assuage the daily difficulties. In the comment section of Zhou, a homeless young adult who wandered in between different Internet cafés and lived by doing temporary job, commenters not just received comforting words or even hongbao (a small amount of money as gift) sometimes from other followers because they understood the difficulties for sharing similar experiences and concerns when migrating between Internet cafés. The voluntary sharing of these trivial complaints, anxieties, and bewilderment in both the minor videos and the comments of these videos enunciate collective value and emotions just as minor literature (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986).

Conclusion

Digital platforms such as Kuaishou have deeply intervened the meanings of social class in contemporary China by not just rendering chances for the underclass to participate in the digital productive relationship and to symbolically represent themselves, but also disciplining their online behaviors within the logic of entrepreneurialism. We first argue that entrepreneurialism is an interlocking governmentality where both human and non-human actors—specifically digital platform, local officials, underclass entrepreneurs, and viewers of diverse social backgrounds—have been involved in the process with respective ends to achieve. Afforded by online platforms and operationalized by multiple actors, entrepreneurialism incorporates the underclass in the technology-mediated productive relationship and exploits them through not just platform labor, but also various entrepreneurial tools and subjects specifically designed by the platform. By differentiating the hardworking underclass from the vulgar ones, the “good one” from the “bad one”, digital entrepreneurship urges the underclass to represent themselves in a stereotypical way and justifies poverty more as a temporary outcome of individual fault rather than structural inequalities. Nonetheless, the underclass embraces digital entrepreneurship not as a false consciousness but to utilize their calculated conformity to trade for the small but essential economic gains as a way of surviving. With few alternative choices to be incorporated in the digital productive relationships, they always tread a fine line between representing themselves as a stereotypical underclass, a conforming entrepreneur, and a creator of “minor videos.” The intertwined economic practices and cultural experiences of being
digital entrepreneurs on Kuaishou, thus, reproduce and restructure the meaning of underclass in today’s China. Digital entrepreneurship transforms underclass from a top-down identification to a bottom-up and user-generated narrative and successfully disciplines the voices of the underclass, though minor narratives still exist in the gaps of the hegemonic stratification process.

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Notes
1. The data comes from Kuaishou’s official report about its contribution to poverty reduction in the year 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jxtSsceAJqfI2X23qNf4sIA, accessed on October 17, 2020.
2. These punishments can be found from government documents and news reports such as http://www.cac.gov.cn/2018-04/06/c_1122644271.htm, http://www.bjnews.com.cn/invest/2018/04/06/482139.html. The two pieces of materials were, respectively, accessed on May 12, 2018, and April 8, 2018.
3. Short videos can help an entrepreneur attract more followers because there is possibility to be displayed on the trending topic channel (jingxuan), while they can also directly generate income for the creators through Kuaishou Guanghe Project. In most cases, live streaming is only open to followers therefore creators are more engaged to intimately interact with audiences during live streaming. During live streaming, they can also directly promote products, which are enlisted in their e-shop on the same platform.
4. Details of grassroot multi-sided market can be found from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/iO6wM7oBlZJinWqp2lgMCA, accessed on November 3, 2021.
5. Streamer Partner (zhibobanlv), Streaming Open platform (zhibokaifangpingtai), and Magnetic Engines (ciliyinqin) are all value-added services as satellite platforms in the Kuaishou live-commerce ecosystem. Details can be found from https://live.kuaishou.com/live-partner, https://liveopen.kuaishou.com, https://e.kuaishou.com/#/e/home, accessed on November 22, 2021.
6. The fee scale can be found from https://www.kwaishop.com/, accessed on November 14, 2021. And these governance policies about running e-shop on Kuaishou can be found from, https://edu.kwaixiaodian.com/rule/web/category, accessed on November 14, 2021.
7. This is directly quoted from an apology letter written by Su Hua, Kuaishou’s CEO at that time. Its full version can still be accessed from http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/2018-04-03/doc-ifyswxnq1677266.shtml, retrieved on February 15, 2021.

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