CHAPTER 4

Creators

In this chapter, we consider conditions and varieties of wanghong labor. Wanghong labor demands efficient management of dynamic networked relationships between multiple stakeholders, including platforms, advertisers, management firms, fan communities, and the state. Like creator conditions in social media entertainment, conditions of wanghong labor and entrepreneurialism are both markedly precarious while also significantly enriching. We map the diversity of Chinese creators through a taxonomy of cultural, creative, and social wanghong. The always-present governance by the state exposes platforms and creators to risk while placing onerous responsibility for content moderation, self-regulation, and censorship on intermediaries and individual wanghong. Socio-technical innovation underpinning social presence in the platform ecology means wanghong are exposed to heightened psychological demands as well as enhanced commercial opportunity. Much of the organization of wanghong labor is accomplished by Chinese multi-channel networks (MCNs)—a term generalized to mean any intermediary management firm facilitating the growth of platforms and creators, advertisers, and manufacturers. While in the SME industry, MCNs have experienced a steep fall from grace, China’s MCNs number in the thousands, advancing the careers of millions of Chinese creators, while vulnerable to permanent disruption in governance and platform change.
Examining working conditions in the cultural and creative industries, critical scholars have mapped the conditions of creative labor that may have grown more precarious in the digital age. Cultural work proves neither as fulfilling nor autonomous as often touted by policy or industry boosters (Deuze 2009; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Curtin and Sanson 2016). Creative workers’ aspiration for self-realization in practice is often compromised by the lack of labor protection and market competition (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; McRobbie 2016). Gender, intersecting with race and ethnicity, age, (dis)ability and sexuality, can often lead to occupational segregation and unequal access to creative work and its reward system (Banks 2007). The rise of the platform society (van Dijck et al. 2018) and the analytical frameworks of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017) and platformization (Helmond 2015; Nieborg and Poell 2018) have magnified concerns about the role of these technologies in causing greater labor precarity and exploitation. Critical scholars have offered accounts for how platform users are converted into “prosumers”, operating effectively as exploited creative labor (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Fuchs 2010). Niels van Doorn (2017) notes that in the platform economy, contracted labor has been replaced by “platform labor”, which adopts “a more austere and zero-liability peer-to-peer model that leverages software to optimize labor flexibility, scalability, tractability, and its fragmentation” (2017, p. 901). As a consequence, workers are more readily regarded as subcontractors, instead of employees, of the platform companies, thereby exempting them from benefits or labor protection. Focusing less on value generation by creators operating entrepreneurially across digital and social media platforms, scholars further these critical concerns around inequality and risk that maintain and perpetuate pre-existing social divisions. While they may operate entrepreneurially and independently within a flexible work regime (Gill 2007; Gregg 2013), creators are also operating under the adverse conditions of aspirational labor (Duffy 2016) and visibility labor (Abidin 2016). “While a select few may realize their professional goals—namely to get paid doing what they love—this labour ideology obscures problematic constructions of gender and intersectionalities with class” (Duffy 2016 p. 3).

Many of these concerns about this form of labor are very real, but creators’ aspirations are not illusory, nor are they symptoms of false consciousness. Their entrepreneurial work also connects to their pursuit of a
“better self” (Rose 1990): advancing in income, being more creative, better known, or fashionable. Wanghong strive to navigate work opportunity and pursue social mobility in a highly stratified and fiercely competitive society that places enormous weight and prestige on formal education and has historically and ideologically discounted entertaining self-display as rampant individualism.

Critical concerns about creator labor need to be framed against concrete comparisons of actually existing, alternative regimes of cultural worker rights and freedoms. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019) have set out the points of difference between SME creator labor and cultural producers and media professionals operating in established media industries. SME creators were seen to advance from amateurism and hobbyism to more sophisticated and platform-determined professionalization and entrepreneurialism. Creators’ skills were more often self-taught rather than through specialized training, collapsing any division of creative labor between producing and production, and emerging from well-outside of the protocols and places of incumbent media industries, whether Hollywood, Bollywood or Chollywood.

Creator labor was most distinguished from cultural producers in the established media industries by platform dynamics. David Nieborg and Thomas Poell (2018) describe how platforms operate across “multi-sided markets” that foster more diverse opportunities and agency for individual creators. These conditions may prove as collaborative and symbiotic, as they are iterative and precarious. More specifically, sustainability demands that creators engage in a suite of risk management strategies to navigate the constant iteration of platforms, whether ever-changing algorithms, user-interfaces, features, services, or business models. In media, value is often generated through the control of either entertainment IP (intellectual property) or media distribution. In contrast, creators are more likely to secure cultural and commercial value through platform practices that engage, aggregate, and motivate their fan communities. These practices align with the conditions of relational labor (Baym 2015, p. 16), in which the social networking features of platforms afford, indeed demand, that cultural producers, whether creators, artists, or musicians, must engage in “regular, ongoing communication with audiences over time to build social relationships” in order to further their careers. In the case of creators, these online relationships are commodified across a portfolio of business models and practices, as further detailed in this chapter. In the wanghong industry, distinguished by the deeper strength of social affordances on
platforms, wanghong are arguably even more subject to the demands of relational labor in order to successfully navigate and monetize their careers through social platform business models, like social tipping and social commerce.

We argue in this chapter that, like creators operating in the SME industry, the careers of wanghong are both acutely precarious but substantially enriching at the same time. In our taxonomy of wanghong labor across cultural, creative, and social, we map the evolution of creator labor. Like the progression of SME creators, this evolution has proven rapid and dynamic, which vast changes in platform and content practices, entrepreneurialism, and community engagement. These differences in this evolution align with rapid uptake of new platform features and affordances in the wanghong industry. As mapped in Chap. 3, these include the affordances of social presence that advance the social media business models, like social tipping and social commerce.

One means of tracing this evolution of creator labor is through the changes of names for social media entrepreneurs. In SME, these names have progressed from content creators to influencers or, as more readily adopted by most platforms as of 2020, just “creators”. We witness similar parallels in the evolution of wanghong nomenclature. For example, early cultural producers operating across social media were referred to as KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders), but this term came to be used for native amateur and professionalizing creators emerging off these platforms. Early terms like zhubo referred to livestreaming showroom hosts. As stressed in Chap. 1 and also by Zhao (2021), the term wanghong is polysemic. It may refer to social media creators or the entire industry. The term also includes culturally-specific pejorative connotations to describe those female livestreamers who operate as “virtual girlfriends”, exploiting the affective needs of lonely Chinese men.

Along with the taxonomy, we identify differentiating conditions of precarious wanghong labor. These conditions are notably advanced by ongoing and iterative state intervention (Chow 2019; Lin 2019). As we have seen, the party-state’s dual agenda for restructuring the economy and social/cultural governance expects creative workers to “be creative” for the market and the state. Likewise, for wanghong, all practices of platform labor and entrepreneurialism are deemed cultural and creative, and therefore subject to government surveillance, control, and potential censor (Lin 2019). These top-down, highly contingent, conditions of wanghong control place even more onerous demands on wanghong for
self-censorship and self-governance. Through greater reliance upon the affordances of social presence and relational labor, wanghong are vulnerable under conditions of affective labor and online harassment, exacting a psychological and emotional toll on their personal lives. As further described below, as platforms have advanced the affordances of social presence, so too the risks of boundary-less exposure of all aspects of online life, particularly through always-on livestreaming.

On the other hand, wanghong entrepreneurialism has been advanced through platform innovation and, most notably, social platform business models like social tipping and social commerce. The success and viability of these business models have fostered more viable and sustainable economic conditions for wanghong than that of SME creators. While SME operates globally (outside China) and multi-culturally, we find wanghong culture is most distinguished by divisions of class and geography. Cosmopolitan wanghong in top tier cities have often proven even more successful than their SME counterparts, but more significant has been the social uplift and financial opportunity for rural, lower social class, grassroots wanghong to become what Jian Lin and Jeroen de Kloet (2019) call “unlikely creative workers”.

Cultural, Creative, and Social: A Taxonomy of Wanghong Labor

After graduating from Chinese Communication University in 2017, one of our interviewees Xian Jing with his three friends started a WeChat public account called “Business Review on Culture and Entertainment” (文娱商业观察), a subscription service that provides business commentaries on Chinese creative industries. By September 2020, this account had gained approximately 200,000 subscriptions and achieving an estimated value of RMB 286,000 on the market. However, Xian Jing does not have any educational or occupational experience in business finance. He studied arts at college. His only related experience came from an internship in a new media company. Compared to the offline working conditions in Chinese creative sectors, content production on social media platforms looks to have lowered the entry threshold for creative workers and has

1 The statistics are provided by NewRank, a leading Chinese data analytic platform targeting wanghong industries and social media platforms. https://services.newrank.cn/trade/#!/appraiseIndex.
provided workarounds to alleviate problems such as bureaucracy and
inequality of class and gender, all of which are prevalent in Chinese media
industries like film, television, music, and publishing (Lin 2019).

Min is a Chinese woman in her forties. After working for 16 years as a
writer for a state-run magazine, she resigned in 2017 and started writing
for digital platforms. According to her, her account has over 60,000 sub-
scribers and brings RMB 50,000 in revenue per month from advertising
that sits alongside her content. The flexible work is both highly profitable
and allows her to stay at home and raise her two children. People from
rural areas untouched by Chinese economic advance also see an opportu-
nity to become creative entrepreneurs, indicated by the abundant cases of
video-makers on Kuaishou, a platform, as we saw in Chap. 3, with a major-
ity of its users from rural China and urban lower social classes. According
to the statistics provided by He Yang, who runs an intermediary agency
YouMeiYou for selling and buying WeChat Public Account channels, 80
percent of these channels are operated by people born after 1985, 40 per-
cent of them born between 1990 and 1995, with the majority women.

These examples tell a story of wanghong distributed across geography,
class, and gender in ways that address inequality of opportunity. Going
further in this chapter, we propose a taxonomy of three types of creators
based on their sphere of creativity and social background (see Fig. 4.1).
There are cultural wanghong—the most successful referred to as “Big V”
or KOLs; creative wanghong—professionalizing amateur creators native
to social media platforms generating content built around lifestyles and
affinities; and social wanghong. The latter have emerged most notably on
social streaming and social video platforms and have cultivated followers
and revenue less by their content practices than through mediated social
interaction.

Cultural wanghong are typically media professionals and experts, for
example, authors or actors, who use wanghong platforms to extend their
celebrity status or advance their expertise. A number of these creators were
previously employed by legacy media organizations in television, news
media and film. Before creating *Luogic Talkshow*, Luo Zhenyu, for exam-
ple, was a well-known television producer at China Central Television
(CCTV) (He 2019). The rise of the internet and social media entertain-
ment motivated Luo to resign from CCTV in 2012 and found his own
company and content channel on Youku and WeChat. In this show, Luo
shares his reading experiences in history, economics, and management
with the audience in a practical and comprehensible manner. By 2014,
Luogic Talkshow had become the most influential online program in China. Facilitated by the fame and popularity he managed to achieve in these two years, Luo started integrating his knowledge business (advertising and subscription fee) with ecommerce and community outreach. In 2015, he launched his own set of apps named Dedao, which translates to “get” but is referred to by Chinese users in English as iGet (得到)—a reference to Apple’s use of “i” nomenclature. Dedao is a so-called “knowledge sharing platform”, which invites university lecturers, business consultants and writers to offer online courses, podcasts, and e-books. Users need to pay monthly subscription fees for most of the online content including Luo’s own Luogic Talkshow. Luo himself transformed from a wanghong creator to a wanghong investor and entrepreneur. By May
2020, Dedao has accumulated over 38 million users with an estimated valuation of RMB 30 billion (Yang 2020; iponews 2020).

Cultural wanghong usually already have expertise in their respective fields before going online. And before launching their wanghong enterprises, they had built influence and social networks. The online content they create extends their cultural capital and appears more serious and elitist than that created by native and amateur creators. The cultural creators who have built large followings and launched successful brands are often regarded as Big V (大V), or Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). Their content production has the look and feel of professionally generated content and has less of a classless entry threshold due to its requirement for higher production values and creator expertise.

Creative wanghong are professionalizing amateurs native to platformized culture. Across diverse verticals of content (see Chap. 5), creative wanghong range from urban-based, university-educated young hipsters through to rural peasants and migrant workers. We see Chinese and international multilingual creators vlogging about their cosmopolitan tastes and lifestyles, but we also see rural fishermen and farmers recording their skills derived from generations of practice. Across a breadth of platforms, from first-generation Weibo and WeChat to next generation Bilibili and Douyin, creative wanghong have built careers creating tutorials about fashion, make-up, or game play, but also their attitudes and values about relationships, marriage, career, and so on.

Compared to the Big V wanghong, creative wanghong are amateurs operating with limited budgets and self-taught media skills (photography, audio-visual editing, and make-up). This amateurish style is categorized as “User-Generated Content” (UGC), although UGC has become associated with both monetized and non-monetized content in the earlier development of this industry. We will later discuss similar developments around the adoption of the terms MCN, an acronym for “multichannel networks” that has since been adopted within the wanghong industry to describe any intermediary firm operating between platforms and creators. As we will see in Chap. 5, their “grassrootedness” lends to creative wanghong an aesthetics of “performative authenticity”, which resonates with the everyday life of their followers. Wang Rui, for example, lives in a small village in Anhui, a hinterland province west of Shanghai. His future was rather

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1 “V” stands for “verified”, referring to those who have their identity and profession verified by the social media platforms.
uncertain, chances were high he would become one of the migrant workers in the bustling eastern seaboard Tier 1 cities, most likely Shanghai. But already at a young age he developed a strong interest in computer games, and with the emergence of platforms like Douyin, he slowly started a career as an online game commentator. Based in his countryside village, he posts short videos and writes commentaries on games, a job that earns him enough money to sustain himself.

A Feng and Lao Si both live in a fishing village in southern China. They started their channels on Bilibili in 2018, producing and posting how-to-catch-fish videos almost every day. By 2020, their seemingly unsophisticated personality and exotic fishing life have garnered millions of subscribers on Bilibili, Xigua, and YouTube and their fishing videos can easily obtain 200,000 views in a few days after uploading to the platforms. The online traffic generates decent financial returns. Since Bilibili has a special reward system that pays RMB 3 (or USD 0.50) per 1000 views, without even doing advertising or ecommerce, A Feng and Lao Si can easily earn RMB 900, roughly USD 140, per video.

Along with the growth of popularity and revenue, however, such amateur production is also gradually professionalized and creative wanghong have the potential to develop sizable brands comparable to, if not surpassing, the size and value of cultural wanghong. Before her career took off, Zhang Dayi was an unknown model working for fashion magazines and occasionally posting selfies on Weibo. After accumulating a small number of followers, she started sharing her fashion tips and some rough cut videos. In 2014, MCN company Ruhnn approached her and helped establish a professional team in charge of Taobao ecommerce and personal branding around her content. The professionalized operation led to explosive growth of Zhang Dayi’s business. With over 12 million followers on Weibo (by September 2020) and a prosperous ecommerce business together with advertising, she is not only the most influential Chinese beauty blogger, but also one of the most successful wanghong entrepreneurs in China.

As mentioned in Chap. 3, Papi Jiang or Miss Papi is one of the most successful, and even prototypical, creative wanghong in the industry. Prior to her wanghong career, she was an unsuccessful actress and aspiring media professional. From 2015, she started posting videos first on Maipai and then on Weibo. Her short-form video content featuring fast-paced rants, which Jian Xu and Xinyu Zhao (2019) refer to as *tucao*, lightly satirized Chinese culture. As her channel and follower numbers expanded, in
2016 she secured nearly USD 2 million in investment from Luogic Show. That same year, she signed with Mountain Top, a talent management firm, and launched her own MCN, PapiTube, which manages a newer generation of creative wanghong.

Whether it is text, images, audio, or video, for most creative and cultural wanghong, content still plays a central role in the success of their careers. In contrast, social wanghong are distinctive in their ability to harness the affordances of social presence across wanghong platforms, nurturing mediated relationships through extraordinarily dynamic communicative competence—online interactivity and fan-community building—rather than through content creation. The creativity involved in their production process is less about fashioning a text and more about fostering social relationships. What attracts users to subscribe to their channels is not the acquisition of cultural capital or the enjoyment of particular genres, but the intimacy and reciprocity generated by the production of social presence.

Social wanghong have emerged most notably on livestreaming platforms, which refers to broadcast video streaming services provided by web-based platforms and mobile applications that feature synchronous and cross-modal (video, text, and image) interactivity. Across these platforms, users (“livestreamers” or zhubo, which translates as showroom hosts) have generated content genres (“verticals”) of onscreen performance that include gameplay, cooking, painting, karaoke, and mukbang, or “social eating” (Recktenwald 2017). Livestreamers convert their onscreen practice and interactivity with their followers into revenue streams, generated through features and affordances both on and off platforms.

Also mentioned in Chap. 2, once the most successful vertical of social wanghong featured attractive female livestreamers, often wearing heavy makeup and sexy outfits, talk, sing, and dance online for their male fans. Offended by the deeply gendered and performative nature of these social creators, the Chinese press has condemned the creators for their “vulgar and sexual content” (Wang 2016) and for “going low” (Yang 2016). As Aynne Kokas remarked, China’s livestreaming industry has become “an entire industry of virtual girlfriends” (Kaiman and Meyers 2017).

In press accounts, the term “wanghong” has been used pejoratively for these female livestreamers engaging in deeply-gendered performativity, exploiting and profiting from the desire and needs of lonely men. Beyond these normalized critiques, as previously noted in Chap. 2, the success of
these social wanghong are testament to underlying socio-economic policy and material conditions. China’s one-child policy—now modified to some extent—has contributed to a vast gender imbalance estimated to be near 70 million more men-to-women by 2020 that has produced millions of “lonely leftover men” (Sun 2017). China’s shift from a rural agrarian and manufacturing base to a more consumer-oriented, service-based economy has contributed to mass migration from rural to urban centers (Johnson 2013) and the rise of a “feminized service sector” (Grossman 2012).

The consequence of these conditions has left millions of Chinese men partnerless with little opportunities for family formation and romance. Rural Chinese men rely on smart phones for basic communication but these also provide entertainment and interactivity previously limited, inaccessible, or unaffordable. Their phones provide access to hundreds of applications, which now include any number of livestreaming applications and, in turn, helped cultivate their “virtual girlfriends”. As Beijing Normal University scholar and livestreamer, Hongzhong Zhang, claimed

Chinese people are lonely due to the fast pace of urbanization. A large number of people are going into big cities where they feel lonely. 30 million lonely souls are floating above the sky of Beijing. Alternatively, these conditions apply in the countryside because rural Chinese have fewer entertainment options. (Zhang 2017)

As for these female livestreamers, normative social critiques can simultaneously occupy diverse positions. Female streamers have been empowered by the underlying socio-cultural, material, and technological conditions of the industry. For some, particularly those less educated and from more traditional cultures, lower classes, and remote areas, female zhubo may be afforded greater entrepreneurial agency and the means for social mobility. To be eligible, they need a good-looking face and body, some basic creative skills such as singing and dancing and most importantly special communicative skills (for example, seductive posture and talking) that can cultivate intimacy with their audience. As social wanghong, these female livestreamers thus distinguish from cultural and creative wanghong creators in the sense that the communicative skills and the cultivated social relationship transcend content (singing or dancing) to become the primary goal and talent of livestreaming wanghong. This highly-gendered industry has a lower entry threshold for its relatively
small production cost, yet the industrial inclusiveness also induces fierce platform competition and, as we will show in the next section, cause formidable precarity facing these social wanghong performers, especially given a significant number of these livestreamers are signed and controlled by MCNs and guilds. Alternatively, as social wanghong has become even more central to the rise of the digital economy, these wanghong garner greater cultural respect for their entrepreneurialism. As Chinese news headlines remark, “after years of derision, China’s Internet celebrities finally win mainstream success” (Wang 2019).

This distinction between creative, cultural, and social wanghong, however, is by no means comprehensive or always clear-cut (see Fig. 4.1). All wanghong, even the Big V, engage in visible (Abidin 2016), affective (Duffy 2017), and relational (Baym 2018) labor, exploiting the affordances of social presence on platforms to aggregate and engage their community for value. Likewise, creative wanghong, like Papi Jiang and Zhang Dayi can transform into cultural wanghong (the Big V), extending their careers offline, whether in legacy media or launching lifestyle brands. Finally, many social wanghong creators share a similar background with creative wanghong in terms of their class, education, and previous profession. As they evolve their wanghong careers, they expand their repertoire of creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurialism.

Our taxonomy is meant to help make sense of the extraordinary variety of wanghong practice. In effect, we better view these three categories as tendencies embodied in the process of wanghong labor and production as determined by platformativity. Coined by Thomas Lamarre (2017), platformativity refers to how the progression of affordances of platforms for creators advance new forms of creativity, innovation, and business models. In their historical account of wanghong, Ge Zhang and Gabriele de Seta (2018) detailed “how shifting intra-actions between infrastructures, platforms, and modes of performativity have shaped the construction of internet celebrity in China” (p. 61). Xu and Zhao (2019) also described how the professionalization of female wanghong has evolved these labor practices “from a stigmatized non-mainstream (feizhuliu) culture online to a new type of digital economy and a trendy profession” (pp. 149–50). Aligned with these accounts, in our taxonomy of wanghong, we understand these categorical distinctions as dynamic, constantly shifting in the wake of repeated disruptions and expansions throughout this industry.
**Wanghong Conditions**

While offering work opportunities and identity enhancement, the wanghong economy is also permeated with uncertainty and precarity. Increasingly stringent internet censorship in China and the rapidly evolving social media industry demand a continuous self-governance that incorporates self-censorship, continuous learning, and emotional management.

As we saw in Chap. 2, while Chinese policy makers have regarded the wanghong economy as an integral part of national economic advance, the state also keeps a vigilant eye on the content and culture it produces. To investigate and stop practices that may “harm social morality” (Horwitz 2017) and threaten political “harmony”, Chinese authorities since 2016 have accelerated its regulation and censorship of productions on various social media platforms. In mid-2016, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SARFFT) banned female livestreamers from “erotic banana-eating” (Phillips 2016). In one instance, a livestreamer was detained for five days after she was presumed to have streamed from the Empress Dowager’s bedroom in the Imperial Palace. However, it proved to be a set in a studio.

Platforms increasingly are as subject to direct censorship as wanghong and the effects on company practice are now manifest, often as much where moral surveillance is accomplished through machine learning. All the platforms we interviewed have divisions dedicated to supervision and censorship. Once content creators are discovered to have erotic or sexually explicit behaviors, their account is shut down. Platforms have developed diverse strategies that combine human and automated curation. According to He Jinkai, a marketing manager at Yi Live, of the 2000 employees at their firm, half of them (1000) are involved in online supervision (He 2017). Kuaishou also established a team of over 5000 employees responsible for manual censorship (Yu and Wenting 2018).

For individual creators, this stringent censorship regime forces them to meticulously self-censor themselves, balancing the demands of the state, platforms, brands, and fans. Sisdon is a queer beauty/fashion blogger based in Dongguan, Guangdong. After his cross-dressing video went viral on Iqiyi in 2015, he opened Weibo and WeChat accounts featuring cross-dressing images and beauty and fashion tips. As he described in our interview (Sisdon 2018), he is a “small, local wanghong” whose fans are mostly local in Southern China. Even so, he has managed to develop multiple
revenue sources including influencer marketing with beauty and fashion brands, social commerce, and social tipping through live streaming. His queer content has encountered ongoing problems:

Weibo suspended my account last year. You cannot be too obvious as an LGBTQ. They didn’t give me a reason but I guess I cannot be so obvious anymore… I cannot post things that I want to pose anymore… if I become bigger, I might be considered dangerous… Now I’m afraid to be suspended again… I actually have a really famous video on TikTok (Douyin) of me dancing. But it got deleted again. (Sisdon 2018)

As Sisdon’s comments suggest, the more successful the wanghong, the more potentially vulnerable their career, particularly those who may be perceived as violating cultural norms, if not explicit state policy. Tianyou was the most successful zhubo in 2017 (Sohu 2019). His livestreaming shows on Kuaishou attracted over 35 million followers and earned him more than USD 2 million a year from social tipping and influencer marketing. He even released his own songs and aired programs on Chinese state-owned television. However, in early 2018, Tian You was accused by the state-run China Central Television (CCTV) of talking about pornography and drugs while livestreaming. Shortly after, Tian You was banned across all Chinese platforms and in established media and his career appears over (eastmoney 2020).

Aside from career uncertainty resulting in censorship, the affective labor of wanghong creators exhaustively blurs the boundaries between life and work, personal and public. Like those for SME creators, these conditions place extraordinary demands on wanghong management of self-representation and fan engagement. As Elaine Zhao (2021, n.p.) avers, “wanghong operate in a liminal space where the line between public personae and private selves is shaky”. High interactivity and connectivity online expose creators to both praise, celebration and “public shaming, humiliation and harassment”.

These conditions were confirmed in our interview with Anna (2019). She was initially hired as an employee for Bigo, a livestreaming platform. Then the firm asked her to become a livestreamer on the platform. The blurring of her professional and personal life contributed to an untenably toxic environment marked by cyberbullying and sexual harassment that forced her to leave her job and abandon her livestreaming career:
I have one follower who knew my Instagram. He started stalking me and my friends. He started to ask why I’m not streaming and why I stopped replying to his messages. He started to send me messages like, “I know what you did, I know who you were, you are not allowed to be with other men, I’ve been supporting you, you cannot go out with other man”. Then he started texting my boyfriend, “who are you, why are you always with her, you’re not allowed to be with her because she is mine”. He started sending me things anonymously, like flowers, and when I refused to accept them, he got really angry. I tried to report it to the company even though I was no longer there. They responded with “don’t worry about it, you’re just popular, they’ll go away, there’s nothing much we can do anyway, just ignore it.” I tried to ignore it. I ended up with blocking him on all my social media, and I told him to stop bothering me. Now I am no longer livestreaming.

The affective demands of relational labor while navigating the commercial dynamics of social presence prove challenging, even exhausting, contributing to feelings of loneliness and social insecurity. In our interview with Bobby Kiki (2017), the pseudonym for a livestreamer operating on multiple platforms including Huoshan (Volcano), she remarked:

Livestreaming is a job but it is different from nine-to-five jobs. We sit for 6 hours and talk and dance. We have to imagine what our top followers like. We need to know their favorite songs, the colors they hate, and the clothes they like. We need to be aware every time they enter the room. If we treat them seriously, they will send me the gifts. Gradually, we will develop more of a connection…Sometimes, when fans have conflicts with me and when I am alone, I feel lonely. Streamers actually do not have many people to keep them company…We do not have a private life. We post pictures to fans everyday with posts like: “I am eating breakfast at 8:00, going to the gym at 9:00, doing my nails at 10:00, taking a nap at noon… but nobody realized that I am doing these things all alone. This is hard for me. We have fans who want to take care of us, but we rarely have time to meet friends in real life and offline. Gradually, I feel I am not living in reality. (Kiki 2017)

Despite these challenges and the potential emotional and psychological toll, these creators are still motivated by the promise of a “better self”—a successful career, including financial success, social mobility, and personal transformation. We have seen how this calculation requires balancing the often onerous and often contradictory demands of followers, advertisers, platforms, and the state. Having said that, the financial and career upside for wanghong—as we discuss now—can be much more than the
disappointing letdown that critical scholars have often argued. Lucrative business models like social tipping and social commerce, coupled with the stabilizing effects of wanghong MCNs, contribute as a general rule to greater financial reward and sustainability than experienced by wanghong’s SME counterparts.

**Wanghong Monetization**

SME creator entrepreneurialism and monetization involves developing a portfolio of revenue streams to mitigate risk and increase sustainability. Varying by platform, content verticals, and the nature and size of their fan communities, creators can secure revenue through advertising, subscription revenue, and, in the case of livestreaming, virtual goods. Across platforms, successful creators have entered into high-touch brand deals for influencer marketing and launched subscription and crowd-funding pages on platforms like Patreon and Kickstarter. Only a small percentage of creators have secured fees through deals with mainstream media in film and television, although some have secured book publishing and music recording deals. Pre-COVID, creators may also have commanded lucrative performance fees, whether through touring or live appearances at venues like clubs, malls, or cafes, or appearances at fashion shows, whether on the red carpet or modelling down. Some SME creators are able to secure licensing and merchandising fees for their self-branded consumer products.

Despite this array of options, commercial affordances for SME creators lag behind that of their wanghong counterparts. We go into these differences now, but one which stands out as fundamental is the difference between wanghong’s accepted place in China’s digital economy as delivering on goals of Internet+ and mass innovation and the more contingent place of SME creators as nominal stakeholders within their industry. Many United States platforms have lagged in empowering creators, as witnessed in the collapse of the short-video Vine platform. In 2018, YouTube began demonetizing creators in the disastrous “Adpocalypse” (see Cunningham and Craig 2019, pp. 111–13). Despite creators being the engine of Instagram’s explosive growth of the platform, that platform’s creator studio, designed to assist creators with growing their channels and generating more revenue, only launched in 2020.

The one consistent exception in the West is, ironically, Bytedance-owned TikTok which, like its Chinese-counterpart, Douyin, considers creators as vital stakeholders in its growth. The platform allows creators to
secure revenue from virtual goods and provides an influencer marketing service coined the “creator marketplace”. Unlike Douyin, the platform also established a multi-billion-dollar fund to support creators in the United States and Europe (Weiss 2020), which is strong evidence that Bytedance understands the dramatic difference in sustainability that SME creators face relative to their wanghong counterparts.

Influencer marketing remains a core business model for most cultural and creative wanghong. The Big Vs entered directly into deals with brands, while smaller wanghong connect with advertisers through third-party MCN agencies. Like YouTube, some wanghong platforms such as Bilibili, Toutiao and Xigua offer creator partnership programs and advertising marketplaces, in which creators are compensated by receiving a share of advertising revenue based on their online traffic. Overviewing these fundamental components of the wanghong industry, Lin and de Kloet (2019) observe that “the long-term financial success of digital platforms is thus not simply based on the exploitation of platform labor, but is contingent upon commercial collaboration between platform companies, content producers and other complementors” (p. 6).

Hyperplatformization, portalization, and interplatformization, discussed in Chap. 3, each create revenue opportunities for wanghong. In turn, these inform the viability and sustainability of wanghong careers. Interplatformization, for example, affords the means for wanghong to engage in near frictionless cross-platform use of multiple platform features and services. Through enhanced social presence, wanghong can generate forms of revenue little developed in the West through business models like social tipping and social commerce, as illustrated in the following.

Whether called virtual or social gifting, live or social tipping, or da shang, this business model has become a significant income source for both livestreamers and livestreaming platforms. Xiaoxing Zhang, Yu Xiang, and Lei Hao (2019) are clear in their analysis that the infrastructure of livestreaming platforms “is purposely designed to maximize content monetization through virtual gifting” (p. 13). Most of these platforms have their own virtual currency (for example, Kuaibi on Kuaishou, Huyabi on Huya), through which users exchange their real money and buy and send virtual gifts to livestreamers. Whereas livestreaming in the SME industry remains mostly limited to social live gaming, wanghong livestreamers secure tips through a far more diverse array of live socializing practices, including singing, dancing, hosting talk shows, fishing, and mukbang. Originating in Korean, mukbang refers to a kind of fetishized
performance in which strangers watch creators eat massive amounts of food on recorded video platforms like YouTube. This content has since migrated to livestreaming platforms like Twitch and spread across Asia, if not, worldwide. In China, this phenomenon aligned with the larger progression of the affordances of social presence and has grown with so much popularity that it has experienced a backlash in the press. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, ongoing trade wars with the United States, and rising fears of food insecurity, in their “Clean Plate campaign”, the government has condemned this practice as amoral and “food waste”, shaming these creators to explore alternative content (Tidy 2020). This pattern of creators engaging in popular content practices that push the boundaries of taste, both literally and figuratively, and socio-cultural norms of Chinese society reflects strategies of “edge ball”, as discussed below.

Social tipping has proven lucrative for both platforms and wanghong. As Chap. 3 notes, first generation live streaming platforms like Momo and Inke not only rely on social tipping, but have gamified the process through “PK, or Player Knock-out Battles”. Similarly, game-focused platforms Huya and Douyu secure between 86 to 95 percent of their revenue through their share of social tips paid to live gamers (Liao 2019). Platform dependency on the social tips generated by live gamers has led to a race to secure exclusive access to these gamers, in exchange for both salaries and higher cuts from social tipping, particularly those who belong to esports teams and compete in tournaments. Outside of live gaming, other platforms and verticals allow for social tipping and streamers operate across as many platforms and rooms as they can navigate to secure the largest number of followers and gifts. For example, Wang Qian, a Kuaishou creator we interviewed in 2018, performs magic tricks in his livestreaming shows and has over 1 million followers. He claimed in our interview with him that his average monthly income can reach USD 9000—mostly derived from social tips from his followers.

Social commerce also generates high returns for wanghong and platforms. Using social commerce—the near frictionless integration of e-commerce links coupled with online mobile payment services across their social media platforms and channels—wanghong can directly sell products to their fan communities and audience. In earlier developments, wanghong platforms created user interfaces and the ability to post links that would drive traffic over to ecommerce platforms. Since 2018, next generation platforms like Kuaishou, Douyin, and Xigua have launched e-commerce services, called mini shops. These shops remain cross-platformed and inter-operable with and in collaboration with those
platforms run by rival tech firms, whether Taobao, JD, or Pinduoduo—a strategy we describe as interplatformization.

In addition to ongoing collaboration between tech companies and platforms, the uptake of social commerce in China has contributed to platform co-dependency between e-commerce platforms and wanghong creators. As scholar Anett Dippner (2018) notes, these are “intrinsically inseparable... many wanghongs either started their careers as Taobao models and expanded their online shops successively on social media platforms by advertising their products as their own-tested best choice (and thus blurring the line between authentic self-representation and business) or they gained their fan reputation with beauty product recommendations and styling tutorials over years. This makes wanghong the perfect advertising medium for the fashion and cosmetics industry” (p. 11).

Even Dippner underestimated the breadth and scale of this phenomenon, as wanghong e-commerce now extends well beyond the lifestyles industry, driving sales and services throughout the digital economy. Whether “made in” or “created by” China, everything can and is likely already being sold by wanghong through social commerce practices. Consider superwanghong Viya who, in addition to selling beauty and lifestyle products, has used her social commerce platforms to sell houses and even rocket systems (Jain 2019). Viya’s main platform is Alibaba-owned Taobao, as previously described, an ecommerce platform prominently featured in the interplatformization strategies within the wanghong platform landscape and these social commerce business models.

We have seen in this section that, as wanghong platforms introduce new socio-technological and commercial features, wanghong have continued to flourish, if remain precariously interdependent upon the platforms for their careers. Whether creative, cultural, or social, these wanghong must perpetually engage in dynamic and iterative changes in creator management, multiplatform maintenance, content production, and entrepreneurialism. Within this new media ecology, a growing wave of intermediary firms called MCNs and media professionals have emerged to assist in these developments, as discussed in the next section.

WANGHONG MANAGEMENT AND CHINESE MCNs

Wanghong management is increasingly the domain of MCNs, a term that generally covers any intermediary firm operating between platforms and creators, established media and advertisers. These firms offer a suite of
content production and management services that advances the interests of platforms and professionalizes wanghong entrepreneurialism. As outlined in this part of the chapter, this intermediary layer of the wanghong industry has emerged at a scale and with viability significantly greater than their SME counterparts. Nonetheless, MCNs are still subject to precariously disruptive conditions.

In the SME industry, “the MCN is synonymous with failure”, admits the blog lead by one of China’s leading MCNs, Parklu (Rapp 2019). Most of these firms first emerged in the late 2000s, fostered by YouTube’s creator-focused advertising partnerships and the redesign of the platform’s user interface to allow creators to operate multiple channels. Companies like Fullscreen, Maker Studios, Machinima, Awesomeness TV, and The Style Network entered into management service agreements with tens, even hundreds, of thousands of creators. Most firms offered services that claimed to help creators monetize their channels on and across multiple platforms, grow their fan or subscriber base, create more professional content that will be distributed through more channels including legacy media, secure influencer deals with advertisers, and provide the tools and strategies that fostered sustainable career development.

Most of these promises proved as hollow as their services proved redundant. Platforms elbowed them out of the way with automated and low-touch management services, like YouTube’s Creator Academy. In her account of the “deconstruction of MCNs”, Digiday journalist Kerry Flynn (2019, n.p.) describes how, “as YouTube matures, middlemen lose ground”. Inflicting further damage, traditional Hollywood talent agencies and management began to siphon off the top-tier creator talent from MCNs, leveraging their larger portfolio of services to broker deals for creators throughout the arts and legacy media industries. Within a few years, most MCNs had either collapsed or pivoted to offer a new array of services and value propositions, leaving creators in their wake. Some MCNs secured investment from or were bought outright by media conglomerates; for example, the lucrative deal between Maker Studios and Disney. As soon as the deals were signed, the owners of the firms cashed out, fully aware of the ephemeral value their firms represented. As experts like Kendra Chamberlain (2017) opined, the Maker Studios deal signaled “the final chapter of the MCN era”.

On the other hand, in the wanghong industry, MCNs have flourished over the past decade. Depending on the source, there were between 2000–3000 MCNs in 2018 (Han 2020), and as many as 28,000 MCNs in
2020 together valued at over USD 3.4 billion (Jiang 2020). Unlike their counterparts in SME that scaled while over-promising services, Chinese MCNs may typically manage only a handful of wanghong clients and deliver a more high-touch experience. These firms do not need scale to succeed as these creators have more lucrative business models afforded to them than their Western counterpart, especially social tipping and social commerce. Most operate in close cooperation with platforms, delivering high-touch management services critical to the growth of both platforms and creators, brands and advertisers. In their 2016 Annual report for the United States Security Exchange Commission, the Chinese platform Weibo openly declared:

The role of multi-channel networks, MCNs, as talent agencies for content creators, are becoming increasingly important. We have built a large network of MCNs in different domains, such as e-commerce and video, and rely on these platform partners to incubate and grow content creators and help them share more and better content on Weibo. If we are unable to expand our network of MCNs and content creators and entice them to share more content, our content offerings may not be as robust and competitive and our user base and user engagement may be adversely and materially affected. (Weibo 2016, p. 11)

Chinese MCNs provide an array of services to platforms and wanghong, as well as, more broadly, across multiple markets and industries in China’s diversifying digital economy. The firm Ruhan (or Ruhnn) is a prime example. As Dippner (2018) notes, “companies such as TopHot and Ruhan call themselves ‘hotbeds’ that make future Internet stars fit for fame, but they also hire established top talents and assume responsibility for content creation, marketing and all kind of business aspects such as market development, negotiations with business partners and business management” (p. 18). MCNs are referred to as “wanghong incubators” in Xiaofei Han’s (2020) account of how MCNs like Ruhan have expanded their service beyond beauty and lifestyle management to place themselves closer to the center of the larger value chains of ecommerce and retail in the wanghong economy: “Wanghong incubators have, therefore, become a critical intermediary which progressively fills—and institutionalizes—the space between different types of dominant platforms such as Weibo and Taobao. ... such value chains have clung into, and now are becoming increasingly central to, the business strategies of both Weibo and Alibaba” (p. 7).
Chinese MCNs are as subject to conditions of precarious management as those for platforms and wanghong themselves. Ruhan serves again as an exemplar. Launched in 2001 as an e-commerce firm called Leilin, Ruhan became a top fashion brand in partnership with the Alibaba-owned e-commerce platform Taobao and Tmall. In 2014, the firm partnered with Zhang Dayi, who was, at that time, a relatively unknown beauty and lifestyle wanghong. Within two years, Dayi could sell clothing worth USD 3 million in two hours on Taobao and was making more money than Fan Bingbing, China’s largest movie star (Xu and Zhao 2019). Even though Dayi remains the top wanghong, Ruhan continued to sign and launch the careers of multiple wanghong and, in 2016, launched an IPO on the Nasdaq valued at USD 125 million (Liao 2019). However, in 2020, Dayi and Ruhan suffered a remarkable fall of grace, when Dayi was accused of having an affair with Jiang Fan, the President of Tmall, by Jiang’s wife. Referred to as a “melon” in the press, the scandal cost Jiang’s job and Ruhan has reportedly lost USD 1 billion in value and may be delisted from the Nasdaq (DayDayNews 2020). These accusations of infidelity, coupled with unfair business dealing, have also compromised Dayi’s fan loyalty leading to Dayi’s descent “from being highly sought after to being forgotten” (jqknews.com 2020). This story reminds us how the wanghong industry places great value on the performance of authenticity which, in the instance of MCN management, includes transparent business practices. The performance of authenticity—which we know from Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2012) important account of brand culture—represents both commercial and cultural capital in creator-driven industries. We take this analysis further in Chap. 5.

One type of MCN in the wanghong industry that differs radically from those in the SME industry are MCNs managing livestreaming wanghong, or zhubo. These MCNs are referred as “gonghui” (guild 公会), a word that is a synonym for union (工会gonghui) in Chinese. As Zhicong Lu (2020) described, guilds have been vital to offering support, promoting, and managing zhubo. The rapid growth of these MCNs were a consequence of livestreaming features and platforms introduced throughout the industry that fostered lucrative social platform business models for social wanghong. In contrast to MCNs in the West, Chinese gonghui have succeeded in securing extensive employment contracts with their creators, securing exclusivity if also creating the conditions for exploitation, including exhaustive demands for streaming around the clock and more heightened forms of affective performance bordering on censorable fare.
While social wanghong featured skills for engaging their online communities through live interaction, these MCNs proved vital to their business development and career management. In the earlier period of development, these guilds developed a reputation for exploiting streamers, often engaging in less transparent, even borderline criminal, business practices. As depicted in the documentary, *People’s Republic of Desire* (Wu 2018), guilds would often demand exclusivity from streamers while commanding a large percentage of their revenue secured primarily through social tipping. The streamers are forced to compete in winner-take-all PK battles with other streamers, funded by unknown benefactors who may either be the guild owners or the platforms. Driven by the demands placed by these guilds, zhubo sometimes engaged in outlandish sexual behavior bordering on pornographic to their highest bidders, or tuhao, to pay more. In some instances, this behavior can lead to prostitution. In a press interview, a livestreamer admitted “there are hidden rules in this world. Tuhao will ask to meet in person, or something else” (Yang 2018).

As the industry has become more formalized, and these social wanghong, platforms, and guilds have become more critical to the growth of China’s digital economy, the state has introduced more oversight. As discussed in our governance chapter but briefly described here, these regulations sought not only to contain bad and exploitative practices, but exert social control. In 2017, SARFFT, an earlier iteration of China’s complex policy bureaus responsible with oversight of their internet, introduced regulations for livestreaming platforms, creators, and firms that “harm national security, damage social stability, disturb societal order, violate the rights of others or broadcast obscene or erotic activities” (Kaiman and Meyers 2017). Shortly after, nearly 400 livestreaming platforms and guilds were either closed or fined for sponsoring “violence, pornography, gambling, superstition, and other values harmful to public morality” (Yang 2018, p. 1).

This pattern of formalization from illicit behavior followed by government control is also not unusual throughout the growth of Chinese cultural industries. As Michael Keane (1998) identified, borderline acceptable behavior, or “edge ball”, has long been a feature of Chinese cultural practices for decades. With regards to livestreaming, Cunningham, Craig, and Junyi Lv (2019) observed that “these violations of Chinese norms that make livestreamers subject to an ever-increasing level of state regulatory restraint, signal the return of ideology designed to mold online expression and behavior” (p. 719). As alternatively reported in popular media, “for
China’s livestreaming craze, the party is over it seems—now that the Communist Party has arrived” (Horwitz 2017).

The supervening conditions of hyperplatformization, limned in Chap. 3, see MCNs forced to regularly pivot to new business strategies reactively, rather than through strategic innovation. In our interview with the co-founder of Star-Station TV, a leading MCN agency in China, co-owner Heng Cai (2019) describes practices of risk management that border on desperation. “We keep experimenting…. We call this ‘horse riding’—the channel that rides the fastest garners our support. As a management company, we cannot be an artist. We must be product managers”.

Earlier in this chapter, we classified wanghong as cultural, creative, and social, and pointed to evidence of movement between these types of wanghong practice. MCNs may be similarly understood. The CEO of Xinpianchang, or New Studios Media, gave us a sense of the dramatic shifts in that company’s identity in a series of interviews. First launched in 2012, Xinpianchang was a first-generation MCN that started by financing and producing short films at the height of their appeal in China. But, “as many distribution platforms, like iQiyi, Youku, Tudou, 56 emerged at that time, and it is very hard for an individual to put their content on those platforms, we become a bridge between the content creators and the platforms” (Yin 2016). Their focus then shifted from streaming video portals toward social media platforms—“social media is our battlefield—we gather fans on social media first, then use the fan base to do other things”. As for managing wanghong, they described how a process of identifying KOLs (key opinion leaders) on Weibo, but then converting them into “PGC”, a term he used to describe professional web series producers.

By 2019, Xinpianchang’s value propositions had expanded. While still financing, producing, and distributing web series, the firm launched a web portal for production talent operating across legacy and social media industries, while it was also signing and managing wanghong talent. “In the wanghong area, personality matters … most of our clients sell products on Tmall. So, we select personalities like make-up, beauty, lifestyle.” In 2020, Yin told us, “the MCNs have changed a lot here again, not because of the crisis [COVID] but because of the rise of new platforms like TikTok (Douyin) and Bilibli. They have become the leader and renew the roles”. Xinpianchang is now dedicated to managing social wanghong across these platforms, while also running their own Douyin channels hosted by Xinpianchang employees.
As the wanghong economy grows, so stakeholder scrutiny heightens. In 2019, another MCN, Hive Media, was accused of inflating data and revenue when a high-profile ad campaign for a client went bust. The firm was kicked off the Weibo platform and charged with crimes by the Prosecutor’s General Office, which is the highest criminal court of the land (Jiang 2020). Prosecutions like these throw further light on “China’s perennial struggle with data faking” (Lee 2019)—although fake data remains a concern across the global social media landscape.

* * *

For Chinese MCNs, dealing with precarity and risk while calibrating entrepreneurial opportunity is a condition of survival. The labor conditions for wanghong are distributed unevenly by their background, their cultural and social capital, type of content and part of the country they work in. Governance, whether by the state and platforms or through self-censorship, is borne by wanghong because of the lucrative opportunities afforded them. As the next chapter will show, contingencies of this kind in this industry have also produced a kaleidoscope of commercialized brand culture, where authenticity intermingles with performativity, self-censorship conflates with parody, and the state’s oversight is sustained and tested simultaneously.

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