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Cultural capitals and creative labour of short video platforms: a study of *wanghong* on Douyin

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ABSTRACT

Studies of digital platforms have critically examined the exploitation and low paid condition of creative labour in cultural industries. This study aims to empirically explore the motivation behind why producers/consumers, key opinion leaders, or wanghong are still devoted to producing and posting videos on the short video platform Douyin, which is the Chinese version of Tik Tok, despite the precarious condition. Leveraging on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capitals and the interchangeability of capitals, this paper argues that Douyin provides the possibility for different wanghong to pursue their own intended capitals, which are not just economic capital, but also social, symbolic, and cultural capital. Under a relatively close environment of China, the flexibility and interchangeability of capital gain have at least become an alternative for these wanghong to explore their creativity and fulfil their desires.

Using short video platforms or apps with the capacity of sharing user-generated content has become a new form of entertainment, in particular, among young kids and youth. On these platforms, users as prosumers browse, consume, and contribute by uploading their own original or MIME-copied productions online, or they livestream, share, and circulate the videos that then become viral, being shared widely and reproduced. Among these platforms, Douyin and Tiktok (the global version of Tiktok), launched by its mother company ByteDance of China in August 2018, are the most prominent global short video website, with 800 million active users worldwide and ranked ninth in terms of social networking sites (Datareportal, 2020). As a short- video app—featuring 15-second posted videos (with some variations across countries)—TikTok and Douyin definitely the "new kid on the block". In this paper, we focus on the creative labour of Douyin.

Studies of Douyin, TikTok and wanghong

In recent years, there have been attempts to empirically capture the intent and mechanism in which wanghong or celebrities have actually fulfilled individual and public needs

and desires on a short video platform such as Douyin and TikTok. Recognizing that users acquire what they really want, namely pleasure, self-expression, or autonomy, Abidin's exploratory study (2020) on TikTok focuses also on celebrity behaviours on TikTok, arguing that a kind of parasociality or "communicative intimacies" is intentionally established between audience and celerbity. To maintain such interactive practices, the latter, as visibility labour, has to seek to fashion content and aesthetics that is specific to the particular social context in order to answer the needs of the local community. In the more liberal western context, Denmark, the social media use of TikTok for pre-adolescents and adolescents increases their gratification in terms of motivations of self-expression and social recognition (Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). In India, the lower caste makes use of cultural production on TikTok to voice out their marginalized needs when the agenda of production on Bollywood and YouTube is still very much dominated by the upper caste (Verma, 2021). But interaction on TikTok is not always empowering. In the US, e-girl fandom for D'Amelio in TikTok is found to intensify the mainstream young women celebrity culture, thereby shadowing the underprivileged in the society (Kennedy, 2020).

Besides, for this study, the references of TikTok have to be interpreted with caution. Notably, there are differences and similarities between Douyin and TikTok, which Kaye et al. (2021) explained using the term parallel platformization in that ByteDance tended to follow a tightened governance for TikTok in the international context but adopt a gift economy model of monetization for Douyin in China, meaning that Chinese wanghong are enabled to profit by live-streaming and virtual currency exchange. In China, as Chen et al. (2021) revealed, Douyin has been used by the state to promote a kind playful patriotism, meaning that, similar to other mainstream media, Douyin carries a political function in China, which other studies have not touched upon. Thus, the study of wanghong on Douyin has to be taken into account of the specific social, economic and political context of China in which their intention and desires might be very different from those users in the western context.

Platformization, capital and labour

The cultural economy of online platforms is a co-created community with wanghong tracked by followers and users. It is a new form of cultural economy in which followers are lured by the videos into the community created by wanghong as producers and as labourers. At least two forces are at work. On the cultural side, the new affordances of digital technology enhance the formation of the ethos of participation for wanghong and users in a networked community under various online platforms. Short video platforms like Douyin could breed new belongings, autonomy, identities and ideals, but there are new issues of moral panics, risks, and divisions that are formed through the politics of race, class, and gender (Jenkins et al., 2015). On the economic side, along with this participation is the commercial ecosystem that scaffolds new revenue models for the digital platforms. In Douyin, for example, direct gratuity, online advertising, or product placement becomes the source of revenues for the platform which in turn share with wanghong 80% of the income (data obtained from ByteDance).

Different from a neo-liberal view on creative workers (e.g. Florida, 2014), research in cultural studies on digital labour or cultural/creative labour have underscored the precarity of these seemingly creative occupations. The direct challenge to the neo-liberal

perspective is that these industries labelled as creative jobs do not celebrate creativity. Lin and de Kloet's (2019) study of another Chinese short video app, Kuaishou, precisely argues that wanghongs there are not necessarily creative as Kuaishou cedes to the state agenda of cultural censorship and social stability under the "Internet+" and "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" campaigns. The precarity they refer to are largely "unlikely creative" digital entrepreneurs who are self-employed. With a particular focus on digital platforms, waves of platformization studies argue that the infrastructures of digital platforms have compellingly re-organize users' lives and cultural practices around the platform (Poell et al., 2019). In China's case, this is basically equivalent to re-directing all cultural practices—from consumption of commodities to acquisition of knowledge—through a filter that operates by means of the datafication, hidden algorithm, data collection, and database behind the platform (de Kloet et al., 2019). The conclusion of these studies in China tends to describe platform as a new kind of regulatory regime by going around or over the formal authorities, thereby reaching the conclusion that users' expression and production are not at all creative. However, while it is true that the Chinese authorities impose a high-handed policy on platform, Crag et al. (2021) pointed out that precisely because of the "unlikely creativity", the precondition for wanghong to excel is to perform authenticity—an aesthetics valued in Chinese culture–in their cultural production. As we will illustrate later, it is that authenticity that establishes trust between fans and wanghong, and brings in more social capitals.

Second, platformization studies offers critique to monetary exploitation of digital labour. From a Marxist perspective, Fuchs (2014) argues that the phenomenon of user-generated content or prosumption activities is equivalent to a form of outsourcing of work from the platform to the users or consumers who are unpaid, while the value of labour that is converted to money—in addition to the use value of the multitude of personal data—is all siphoned to the platform. Such argument on precarity of wanghong is based on the economic ground, including the lack of proper working condition, low wage or job instability. This assumes that those who engage in creative industries must prioritize their economic capitals and exclude the possibility of other non-economic intention such as the desires of acquiring cultural and symbolic capitals. In response to Fuchs's argument, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2013) further elaborate the argument about self-exploitation of affective labour and suggest that exploitation does not necessarily preclude the possibility of "good" models of creative work which can be potentially emancipatory in kind and appealing to a stronger sense of social morality and justice. What wanghong needs is not just about income as personal satisfaction. As affective labour, with such good models and strategies, wanghong also find themselves motivated to acquire not only economic capital, but also cultural, symbolic capitals and so forth in the production.

There are studies of platforms that start to conceptualize the formation of various forms of capitals. In a study of crowdworking platform in Germany, Höhne and Sproll (2020) actually find that the importance of cultural capital on platform is often devaluated, arguing that in the changing space of working environment, enabling worker's cultural capital is essential for the sake of social equality. As to locate such "good" models of creative work, that requires us to probe the specificity of the mechanism of how Douyin wanghong develop their strategies to acquire various forms of capital. On Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat, using Bourdieu's notion of capital (1986), McGillivray and Mahon (2020) suggest that community practices of platform that enhances users' digital literacy

would educate the dis-privileged youngsters on platforms to open up access to cultural capital. The study also implies that the formation of capital is particularly useful for laymen, disadvantageous and unheard groups in society. Studies on how capitals are negotiated on Douyin are still very limited. Craig et al. (2021, p. 113) have illustrated how a migrant worker who turned his game hobby into a profession by serving as an online game commentator on Douyin. By posting short video about game critics, he gained economic capital for a living. Lin (2019) in a study of beauty streamers on Douyin, described female wanghong has to design self-image, do their face work with skills, and over time develop their identity in order to establish a new form of sociality; it is with such social capital that the latter can later attract gifts, or economic capital, from viewers.

What is important in Lin's study (2019) is that she hints that in the process of inter-action, reproduction and social transformation, capitals can take different forms, namely economic, symbolic, cultural and social, and that one form of capital can be readily transformed or transacted into other forms of capital. In short, capitals at the dis-posal of wanghong are interchangeability in nature in that economic capital can be trans-lated into cultural capitals (Zhu, 2020). Wanghong with millions of followers could, in theory, acquire more economic capital, but one could easily translate the economic capital to social capital with the outcome that wanghong feel imbued with sense of com-panionship by making networking with fans across the nation.

Search collaboration with ByteDance

This paper probes the creative labour of Douyin in an unprecedented and systematic effort with multiple vigorous methodologies and a focus on the use of Douyin in China. As of July 2019 (ByteDance & Beijing Normal University, 2019, report released by this research team), Douyin has more than 320 million daily active users (DAU) and is the most popular short video site in China.

Unlike a purely academic study that understands platforms from without, this research is unprecedentedly a study of Douyin between ByteDance and our research team in Beijing Normal University (BNU). ByteDance and BNU co-published and released some of the official research report of Douyin, namely Creative Workers on Short Video Platform, in August 2019. In it, basic descriptive data of Douyin was first released. In the research agreement, ByteDance also gives permission to the research team to publish and use the full data for academic purposes. In addition, as ByteDance and the research team also received prior consent from the selected interviewees in the qualitative interview that their identity would be revealed. The significance of this study lies in the fact that this is the first internal dataset and representative samples ever released about the living conditions of the users to the public that is only made possible by a collaboration between the industry and the academy.

A study of mixed-methods

This research then combines a systematic and large-scale survey of Douyin's wanghong and selected in-depth interviews to examine the relevant occupations. The mixed-method design with both qualitative and quantitative data aims to seek a more

nuanced understanding of the research problematic with a strong triangulation (Flick et al., 2012). As Flick et al. (2012) argued, strong triangulation is not just meant to inform or complement qualitative data with quantitative data or vice versa. It also means triangulation of perspectives on different levels, and in this case, an institutional and collective perspective on the general level of satisfaction of Douyin labour collected in questionnaire survey, and a subjective level on the perception of individual wanghong informed by in-depth interview (2012: 108). Besides, in practice, the result of the questionnaire did help formulate the interview guidelines for the planned in-depth interviews conducted after the survey. For instance, after knowing that on a collective level Douyin wanghong valued less economic capital in general, researchers were prompted in the interview design to ask every interviewee in what processes they develop desires in other forms of capitals.

In the research process, ByteDance in the first place provided the research team the access of a huge internal dataset, namely, an internal visual categorization of the users. As an informal agreement, this dataset which might identify individual users was not allowed to be released. The actual research was started with narrowing the scope of the study and identifying samples of wanghong for the survey. Our research team worked with Douyin's technical team in Beijing on the existing categorization data to derive our own sampling frame. In Douyin's daily operation, through their AI technology and the wanghong's self-tagging, ByteDance has a pre-existed set of categories to identify all short videos uploaded. There are 60 hashtags that Douyin internally use to categorize these videos, and within each category, user might sometimes specify their category as a second tag. For instance, a Douyin wanghong who performs as a teacher for cram schooling for high school kids is categorized by Douyin as "culture and education", and the user further categorizes herself using the tag "examination". Douyin and the research team first screened out tags that are non-occupation-related (e.g. jokes), and second, combine the existing tags to form meaningful clusters. It is a reiterated process in which the team had to go back to watch the video to examine the face validity after the combinations. Finally, while some of the non-job-related categories were excluded, the team arrived at 10 meaningful occupational clusters: fashion, beauty, health, education, food, animation, talent, pets, travel, and celebrity. With these 10 Douyin-staged traditional-jobs-turned-occupational-clusters, these workers perform on the platform as if they do in the same traditional occupation and engage their stakeholders in a new light.

Between 5 August 2018 and 30 March 2019, the individual wanghong (based on the Chinese Douyin platform only) who fell into these 10 clusters and had over 10,000 followers were selected as the sampling frame for study. The reason why those with 10,000 followers were selected was mainly due to the fact that many accounts with few followers were not active. Besides, since the focus is the occupational clusters, in which the various types of capitals could be identified more easily, users with few followers were not included. It was however acknowledged that those users with few followers or amateurs, should have their own reasons why they set up their Douyin account, but without active activities or frequent postings, their motivations behind were not that obvious to be analysed. Excluding organizational accounts (e.g. government, enterprises, or media), accounts of celebrities or artists (i.e. that are run by companies), and other problematic accounts (e.g. those created purely for soliciting money, or people with a fake identity, etc.) left us with 121,234 accounts, from which participants

would be selected to complete the survey. Upon the completion of the questionnaire design, ByteDance then sent an online link for the online questionnaire to all members of the sampling frame on their own backend system, and 2375 completed questionnaires were received within 5 days. The dataset was then passed to the research team who was responsible for handling and analysing the survey dataset.

As for the in-depth interview, ByteDance helped locate and contact the interviewees whom the research team identified right after a preliminary analysis of the dataset. The interview was formally conducted three weeks after the survey, mainly, via the audio function of Wechat, which is the most common way for a long-distance Internet call. Byte-Dance offered a different amount of incentive—which are unknown to the research team–for those interviewees who accepted the interview of the research team. As this is a collaboration with a commercial corporation, members of research team have been self-reflexive of our position as scholars and keep a distance view and a critical view of the data throughout the research process. For the interview, 50 individual interviewees who had indicated their willingness to be further interviewed and left their mobile phone number were chosen out of from the 2375 survey respondents. The criterion for interview selection was amount of influence on the platform, based on the assumption that the larger the number of followers, the stronger the influence. This resulted in 10 interviewees being chosen from each of five categories (10,000–100,000, 100,000–250,000, 250,000–500,000, 500,000–1 million, and over 1 million followers). The wanghong interviewed were those who act on the platform as individual participants (they account for 72.3% of the sample) with their own motivations and desires, not as employees of a company. In the study, the interviews mainly concerned the users' work on Douyin, the reasons they became wanghong and changed their living conditions when they started working online, their economic conditions, quality of life, emotions, experiences, and interactions with fans, which collectively could be interpreted as different capitals. Five graduate students from Beijing Normal University and Tsinghua University at Beijing majoring in communications were trained and deployed to conduct the in-depth interviews over the phone on 16–24 July 2019. A semi-structured guideline outlining five aspects, namely occupational changes, economic condition, perception of personal and social values, social network, and interpretation of video content of the wanghong, were designed and used in the interview. Among all the questions, we often highlight a few core questions, including, "Do you have some fundamental change of economic condition after becoming wanghong, and does it matter?" (which tapes into the perception of economic capital) and "What is the biggest change for you in terms of life and leisure for becoming a Douyin creator?" (which explores if Douyin changes their cultural, social and other capitals). Each interview lasts 1.5 h on average. The interviews were recorded, analysed, and transcribed. Because of the massive scale of data in this study and the limit of page length, only a portion of data that was connected to the argument was chosen to be presented. In the following, basic quantitative data will be reported first and it would be followed by highlights of four cases with whom in-depth interviews were conducted. In a special issue of mixed methodology, Mertens and Hesse-Biba (2012) precisely emphasized that such qualitative-quantitative triangulation is a possible to explore the authentic representation of communities whose voices are often unheard of. Then, under a framework of capitals, we would elucidate how different types of capital gain are interchangeable in this new creative space

under their own situation. Some want to be millionaires and have economic capital gained. Some, who are "nobodies", have expressed no strong interest in making money—and also reflected in survey that that they do not have high satisfaction on income–hope to be recognized with and seek for social capital instead. Highlighted below are four cases that manifest, among all motivations for acquiring various capitals, four common ones that possibly explain why wanghong take pride in their "job".

Satisfaction and participation of wanghong

Internal data from Douyin showed that, among the 121,234 active accounts in the sampling frame, the age of users ranges from 8 to 89, with an average age of 25. In our sample of 2,375 respondents, wanghong in Douyin are in general young creative workers, as 56% are between 18 and 30 years old. Males slightly outnumber females (49.6% vs. 44.3% in the sampling frame and 69.8% vs. 30.2% in the sample). A large portion of them (60.2%) are not married. Consistent with the Western notion of a creative worker, our participants are highly educated, with 56.5% university-educated or above, and 26.4% with a high school education. Given that, these users should have earned a reasonable income in their original occupation. Many are committed to working without making money and driven by their affection—for demonstrating and sharing knowledge, producing content, or communicating messages—at least initially, when they have not acquired many fans. There is no guarantee that they will acquire an equivalent level of income by switching to virtual work on Douyin. Then what kind of capital is strong enough to lure them to make such a commitment? What are the real motivations behind the participation on the platform and the pattern of work?

The results of the survey indicate that the platform itself is a source of users' satisfaction. This finding reveals that most participants are very positive about the platform with 90% of the respondents expressing that they "like" and "like very much" Douyin as a platform with which they work. Seldom do they raise complaints against the policy and principles of Douyin. In the survey, participants are asked to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the platform as a wanghong. Their general attitude toward the platform was measured using a modified index of 14 items on organizational commitment

Table 1. Users' satisfaction with the platform.

Items	Mean	S.D.
I really care about the fate of the platform.	4.56	0.72
I am willing to put a great deal of extra effort to help this platform be successful.	4.49	0.75
I am extremely glad that I chose to create work here rather than on one of the other platforms I was considering at the time I joined.	4.45	0.81
I speak highly of the platform to my friends.	4.44	0.80
I am proud to be part of the platform.	4.42	0.82
This has improved as a platform for work over the past two years.	4.37	0.88
Morale on this platform is good.	4.33	0.91
For me, Douyin is the best of all possible organizations for which to work.	4.29	0.92
My platform inspires the best job performance from me.	4.26	0.89
I find that my values and the platform's values are very similar.	4.24	0.90
I understand how my job contributes to the platform's goals and objectives.	4.22	0.89
I create in a well-managed platform.	4.22	0.93
I would accept almost any type of production in order to keep working for this platform.	4.11	1.00
I have a good understanding of where the platform is going.	4.07	0.96

that, in general, captures workers' satisfaction with their employers (Hayday, 2003; see Table 1). This index has been validated by the Institute for Employment Studies in the UK, and localized (in Chinese) in this study. The average of the 14 items measuring satisfaction with the platform reached 4.3 (with 5 representing the strongest satisfaction, and 1 the least; Cronbach's alpha = 0.96). In general, the survey results show that wanghong on Douyin value the platform, as it helps them to excel but as to how the platform helps, we have to explore it in the interview data. Participants scored higher on items such as, "I really care about the fate of the platform" (mean = 4.56) and, "I am willing to put a great deal of extra effort to help this platform be successful" (mean = 4.49). In fact, there is no single item that scored below 4.0. While there is critical analysis under the framework of platformization mentioned earlier about potential exploitation by a platform, the survey results show no signs of this issue.

As creative workers engaging in their respective professions on Douyin, the respondents also expressed very high satisfaction with their "job", or their virtual occupation. In this study, respondents' satisfaction with their work is measured using a localized (in Chinese) version of a developed index, namely, a short version of the Minnesota Satisfaction Survey (Weiss et al., 1967; see Table 2). The results of the factor analysis confirmed the original three dimensions of satisfaction. The reliability of all three dimensions is high (with Cronbach's alpha reaching 0.91, 0.92, and 0.87, respectively).

In general, respondents in the study score highly on all three dimensions of satisfaction. The first dimension which could be coined as "general satisfaction" (9 items) of work, including questions about the basic conditions of an occupation, such as salary, working conditions, stability, co-workers (in this case, perhaps, fans), and the policies of the platform, the average score was 3.91 (on the 5-point scale). The improvement of their basic working conditions explains why many users switched from a traditional occupation to one online. The second dimension, "internal satisfaction" (5 items), taps into their satisfaction with having a role internally on the platform, one that they occupy without going against their conscience. The average score is high (4.13). Having

Table 2. Satisfaction with work: rotated factor matrix.

	Factor		
	1	2	3
Being able to keep busy all the time.		.737	
The chance to work alone on the job.		.773	
The chance to do different things from time to time.		.559	
The chance to be "somebody" in the community.		.555	
Being able to do things that don't go against my conscience.		.528	
The job provides me steady employment.	.564		
The chance to do things for other people.			.689
The chance to tell people what to do.			.829
The chance to do something that makes use of my abilities.			.610
The way platform policies are put into practice.	.462		
My pay and the amount of work I do.	.685		
The freedom to use my own judgement.	.593		
The chance to try my own methods of doing the job.	.545		
The working conditions.	.637		
The way my co-workers get along with each other.	.680		
The praise I get for doing a good job.	.727		
The feeling of accomplishment I get from the job.	.527		

Notes: Extraction method: maximum likelihood. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization.

autonomy, loyalty to self, and self-determination are values that these young wanghong in contemporary society find essential to their lives. The third dimension, "external satisfaction" (3 items), is about how a person can use their own abilities to help and lead others. Quite surprisingly, this is the highest-scored dimension, with a mean of 4.31. This finding suggests that wanghong find meaning in sharing knowledge with others, perhaps even as an altruistic motive, and refutes the common perception that Douyin is only a site that users flock to for earning money. Looking at the highest-scored items also yields the same picture. The highest evaluation scores are "the chance to do something that makes use of my ability" (mean = 4.39), "the chance to tell people what to do" (mean = 4.31), and "the praise I get for doing a good job" (mean = 4.30). The satisfaction derived, according to these results, is not about monetary reward or even the basic working conditions. In cultural terms, users of Douyin have stronger desires for recognition and expression, and to be an active agent for sharing knowledge.

Desiring for capitals

To further probe these desires, the results from the quantitative study were triangulated with the in-depth interviews. Four typical cases that illustrate at least four types of capitals and their interchangeability are reported below. In the quotes, we attempt to highlight the details of unheard, subjective reasons for being wanghong.

Currency of followers and economic capital

There is a public perception that one who becomes a Douyin wanghong can be rich, gain high economic capital. It is also true that in the survey, almost 10% of wanghong earn more than RMB1,000 a month, and there are 17 cases who earn more than 100,000 a month. Thus, desiring wealth and desiring for being a wanghong can be an equal sign in Douyin. Fans or followers in Douyin is on a par with currency in that it allows the number of fans can be converted into economic capital or other capitals in one way or another. For example, wanghong can share in the advertising revenues gained from placing ads on Douyin, they can promote and advertise products, and use product placement in videos, among other options to earn income. Case 617 is a plus-size fashion model in the "fashion occupational" cluster and goes by the account name "X Size Charisma". "Because I am obese and always bullied by people", she said, "I want to become prettier". Her philosophy is that large women can also dress in appealing ways. This is why she started to post videos on her Douyin channel so as to bring positive energy to her fans. Since her family business is in the clothing trade, she has the advantage of wearing in front of a camera different skirts and shorts that, she said, large women often try to avoid. Suffice it to say, this user's platform empowers her fans to be bold enough to post and to act on their real selves regardless of their appearance.

Putting aside the cultural impact of the platform, Douyin creates a cultural economy in which Case 617 posts links where followers can purchase the dresses she sells on Taobao (China's equivalent to Amazon). Her followers not only mimic her persona and appearance, but also support her by purchasing outfits from her Douyin-linked online shop. This is how a wanghong converts her knowledge, courage, determination, and her network to money, or economic capital. X Size Charisma used to earn a small amount

of 3,000 RMB monthly, but as followers showed her how to sell her clothing by attaching a link on Douyin, she said "I once got 80,000 a month, which terrified me, for I had never earned much money in my life". In this case, clearly, money is the desire that is fulfilled by being a wanghong. Yet, she casually mentioned a minor episode at the end of the interview. Once, she was travelling for a vacation. Followers there asked her to go out to dinner and meet her face-to-face, and this became a memorable and happy experience in her life. On this aspect, Douyin does connect people to the host and among users, and for the wanghong, she has her own social capital gained, but in this particular interview she indicates that she finds more excitement in economic capital.

Walking out her identity and symbolic capital

Case 1918 shared a touching story about how she has earned and shaped her identity as symbolic capital by running her "Flower Jewelry" platform on Douyin with a picture of her in a wheelchair. She is one of the typical cases in the survey who has the desire to be "somebody" (79%) or an identity in the community. She posted a pun, "Those who love you would not run away; there is no reason to hang on to those who don't love you. Thanks for staying with me". She is a disabled young woman who literally cannot "run away". Lacking confidence, unsociable, and an introvert, all day long she used to be an ordinary person confined to work and eat in her family-owned furniture shop, essentially a shelter and refuge for her. Three years ago, she started to post her rehabilitation videos, primarily physical exercises for the disabled. But she also realized that this is also a job that requires real labouring and therefore she sell bijou as a business on Douyin. One day, one of her fans purchased a bracelet from her for 10,000 RMB. This was her first reward for her creative labouring. But in fact, as her business expands, rarely does someone spend over 10,000 RMB. Yet, she told us that monetary return for her is not too vital. Rather, she felt truly grateful to Douyin, which enabled her to leave her solitary zone and discover her own identity and self-value—all are symbolic in kind. Fans buy from her because they trust her as a genuine person cherishing life, values, and health, imbued with positive energy, and readily available to offer help to those who are in need. Despite her physical disability, she began to formulate her own identity as an optimistic and conscientious person. As to what she really gained, it was not tangible goods or economic capital (which she didn't really need), but a kind of symbolic capital. She said, "now I have more confidence and appreciate my life. . . . I will not bury myself in my own world as I did before". This is highly consistent with the predominant result of the survey in which 89% of people valuing their jobs in Douyin because they can fully use their abilities, and 86.5% rediscover themselves because they find their sense of accomplishment.

Knowledge sharing and cultural capital

Case 506 is another wanghong expressing an altruistic value, which is a rationale that is well reflected in the survey; 86.5% of wanghong desire their jobs simply because they would like to serve and do things for others. Case 506 is a chef desiring to demonstrate his skill in cooking or as someone who possess a specific cultural capital. Under the title of "Culinary Mr. Lee", he said, "as long as I have it, or something that I can help, I'll help them [all online followers] without charge, not a single penny". He is a professional chef who oversees teams of chefs for a chain of restaurants. In quite a coincidence, in spring

2019, a friend persuaded him to play with Douyin, and he then made a daily video to teach people how to cook. On the third day, the number of followers surged, and one video exceeded 10 million views. This when he committed to being a wangong, spending 10–15 min after work to create and post his videos. Among his active 700,000 monthly followers, there are other chefs, some of whom might also want to start their own businesses. He remembered that when he began working as a chef, when there was no Douyin, there was no avenue to acquire such "practical knowledge". He could have used his fame and knowledge to make money on Douyin but he prefers using the platform as a knowledge-sharing hub. Now, instead of acquiring economic capital, he shows other that he has that cultural capital, sharing his cooking secrets and gastronomic tips, which for him is a favourite epicurean hobby, and for others is a big help. In the eyes of his fans, Culinary Mr Lee is a knowledgeable KOL, and from Mr Lee's point of view, his desire to brand himself as a chef with cultural capital is fulfilled.

Networked harmony and social capital

Among all the users' motivation, it is not difficult to identify those with "pure" motives. This group of users has no urgent need to earn money from the platform or to demonstrate their abilities; they are also senior enough that they do not require recognition. What they need is a network of friends, companions, or relationships in which they can share their laughter, daily anecdotes, and stimulating thoughts, to name a few. Mr Zhang, or Case 1713, with the account name "Piano Ensemble", is one of the popular wanghong who regularly uploads his father's piano recitals on Douyin. Even with 2 million fans, there is no monetary transaction online. Mr Zhang said that there were times when fans discovered his father's watermarked video on piano performance had been pirated for advertising purposes on online shopping sites like Taobao. These fans requested that the shops remove the videos from their sites. The fans, together with Mr Zhang, have become a very cohesive community with a clear goal, insisting translating its potential economic capital to social capital. The spirit of the Zhang's channel can be summarized in his own saying: "With frequent communication with music listeners of the same wavelength . . . life is fuller and richer. . . . It feels like they are family members". One of the stories mentioned in the interview was about a fan requesting Zhang's dad to play a song called "Our Life is Full of Sunlight". The fan's father is a late-stage cancer patient, and Zhang's dad immediately responded to fulfil the wish of the fan and encourage his "family members" on Douyin. Such reciprocal support, a network of people and a harmonized network of friendship—or social capital—is what Zhang gain and how he finds reward in his posts. Mr Zhang's idea is perhaps one of the typical wanghong on Douyin as reflected in the survey. The quantitative data also show that Douyin wanghong do think connectedness and being followed by more people (88.5% agreement) and recognition by relatives and family members (with 69% agreement) are their strong motivations. This is exactly made possible through Douyin which is a site for assemblage of people.

New wage logics on Douyin

The summary of these interviews probably answers a few basic theoretical questions about labour. The first response is about the precarity of creative labour, which often

begins with exploitation in terms of wages. It is shown that some users make a fortune from Douyin, as happened in the first two cases. But it is also true that the survey results also show that that income from Douyin is often only mediocre (i.e. only a few thousand RMB). This is close to the median income in China (approximately 2,000 RMB as of 2018; Business Weekly, 2019), and, for many (around 17.6%), is a reasonable freelance income that supplements the income from their main job. The respondents were asked to tell their income in their traditional occupation prior to being Douyin wanghong and after they have become wanghong. There are also respondents who said explicitly that money is not the major motivation for participating.

While the study of creative labour is preoccupied with the agenda of precarity, this study reveals untold desires. It is true that there are still a percentage of Douyin wanghong who receive low income (with two-third of respondents earning less than RMB1,000 monthly). But this study demonstrates that there are cases that creative workers can be self-empowering and this study presents an alternative perspective with their voices. As self-reflection by the researchers and also from a cultural studies perspective, should the working conditions of creative labour be considered from a creative-worker-centric perspective? (Cunningham et al., 2019). Much of the essence of the condition of labour does not involve the wage. In fact, Lee's (2013) review of creative labour studies concludes that, quite often, major empirical sociological research highlights "precarity" as "political openings"—often pertaining to creative labourers' exploitation and self-exploitation in an unpaid or underpaid circumstance—and yet much of the research is "speculative, unempirical, generalizing and unsubstantiated" (p. 10). In this study, wanghong on Douyin have revealed that the cultural factor of this cultural-cum-economic activities carry much more weight than do wages.

But from the point of view of "capital" (Bourdieu, 1986), different wanghong are able to locate the kind of capital they desire for. Some seek economic capital and others cultural capital, and that capitals are seen changeable. Digital technology, at this point, has created an alternative path for people to live. Whereas in a consumerist society, professionals earn real wages in their own jobs and, in turn, spend it on commodities, practice leisure, and conspicuously make a public appearance to demonstrate their identity (Veblen, 2009), digital platforms simply accelerate the process: by using Douyin, those who need cultural capital can secure it directly by performing on their own channels with thousands of followers without needing to acquire money. Through platform or platformization, materializing cultural capital happens in a more compressed space and timeframe. In the participatory process, wanghong can candidly maximize the kinds of capital they want, from real, economic capital to social capital, or any combination of those. In fact, among the 50 interviewees, hardly anyone mentioned that they only needed money as a reward. Given that very few wanghong complained about their low wages or exploitation on the platform, it is reasonably to argue that the logic of wages on this emerging platform economy is simply different (Digital Content & Creative Media Center of Beijing Normal University & Platform Responsibility Research Center of Byte-Dance, 2019). Their conception of wages is much wider than what the common definition in traditional occupations in capitalist societies. But what is clear is that all kinds of capital are desires of these workers.

Re-theorizing creative workers

Based on users' participation on Douyin, this paper re-theorizes creative workers based on the bottom-up perspective of the live streamers and users. As discussed earlier, the study of creative industries and new platforms often concludes with a precarious condition in that platforms circumvent the state regulatory regime in China, but at the same time revert them to a cultural economy that further accelerates the exploitation of labour they are supposed to be protecting in a socialist economy (de Kloet et al., 2019). Lin and de Kloet's recent study of Kuaishou (2019) cited earlier claim that although marginalized grassroots entrepreneurs are "unlikely" to become creative workers, they at least now move out of the state-controlled system, become self-employed and are able to negotiate under a new cultural economy. With more flexible forms of gameplay and interactive AI-enhanced interactive platforms, it is likely that Chinese users would enjoy a greater degree of opportunities than those on platforms such as YouTube (e.g. Cunningham et al., 2019). Despite the continual existence of state surveillance, regulatory restraints, censorship, capitalist exploitation, and cultural economies, as well as individuals' possible lack of awareness, we believe listening to creative workers—who at least believe they are creative and relatively free—is central to exploring the status of creative labour nowadays.

In the pursuit of individual desires, cultural labour in Douyin is willing to be allured into the platform as a productive force. Our cases suggest that Douyin offers a more flexible way of life, and even helps overcome structural limitations of the users, from a physical restriction of the disabled jewellery seller to a commercial culture that discourages knowledge sharing for the chef's case in the analysis. The participation in this hype of platformization seems to be a foreseeable way for laymen to possibly fulfil their desires. It however does not mean that in traditional occupation in China, there is no desire gained. It is just that their satisfaction—which is often in money term–is relatively fixed under the current social and economic context. In other words, creative labouring in various forms offers such flexibility of capital choices and conversion. Creative workers are given choices for their financial gain, self-identification, status of knowledge, and companionship.

Then, apart from various downside of creative labouring, platformization of Douyin can be understood in two ways. First, Douyin is an assemblage of both ByteDance's technology, social media platform, followers as audience, and users who share their video on the platform. In this assemblage, different parties acquire their own capitals: ByteDance's economic capital and wanghong's acquisition of various capital. Second, from the perspective of the wanghong interviewed like Mr Zhang, the assemblage is a function of networking with others—for sharing and expression—or it can function to connect fans to fulfil other desires, such as monetary rewards, reputation, or recognition. For many wanghong, the pursuit of the assemblage, including network of sharing, grid of relationships and platformization of Douyin–as it has been described in the interviews quoted earlier, is the end in itself. It is a very unique space surrounded by a political, state-monitored public sphere.

With this assemblage capacity bestowed by Douyin, an intriguing concern relates to the implications of such social media apps for society, democracy, and social change. It is generally understood that various social media formats, whether formal (microblogging

in Weibo as the equivalent of Facebook in China; e.g. Han, 2016) or informal, such as shanzhai culture (Zhang & Fung, 2013), have to a certain extent pushed for a larger degree of autonomous voices. Likewise, we cannot deny that the emergence of Douyin in China—and perhaps in other authoritarian regions—has opened up a relatively autonomous, creative sphere for those who need alternatives. When users decide to relinquish their jobs in state-owned enterprises, or other jobs in private companies, the act itself is creative in that it terminates the link to relying on the state or commercial agenda. Yet, we have to admit that, similar to any social media in China, platformization of everyday life that enables wanghong to fulfil their desires is equally subject to censorship, government scrutiny, and opponents who snitch to the authorities about its revolutionary potential. We don't exclude the fact that wanghong in Douyin, in the process of expressing their desires, might inadvertently push the limits of political boundaries, but it is also true that the outcomes of these short videos are compromised versions of users' ideals. It is perhaps sufficient to say, given that in the eyes of the authorities, Douyin's content is meaninglessness, trivial, and not politically defiant, users could be subject to fewer disruptions or interventions. From their point of view, they see themselves as sharing and interacting with their in-group, which is less panoptic than any public activity.

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