

# Becoming precarious playbour: Chinese migrant youth on the *Kuaishou* video-sharing platform

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## Abstract

This article investigates the practices of precarious playbour on *Kuaishou*, a short-video platform embracing the idea of ‘recording the lives of ordinary people’ and attracting massive numbers of migrant youth to produce creative content as free labour. It examines how young migrants from rural areas in China engage in *Kuaishou* as a means of realising upwards socio-economic mobility by producing a *tuwei* (earthiness) culture which has a large fan base. It also examines the way in which they collaborate to cope with precarious conditions lacking guaranteed working time and income, and labour protection. The article attempts to build a conversation with existing scholarship that addresses the ‘exploitation vs. empowerment’ dialectic of labour production. Instead, we address the complexity of digital labour production characterised by a collaborative and symbiotic relationship between social media platforms and users. Through ‘play’ with their followers that generates profit for the digital platform, migrant youth voluntarily accept the uncertain, unpredictable, and risky conditions of digital labour production. They are, however, not passively subjected to platform exploitation but can instead reclaim agency by actively seeking to collaborate with other users to cope with increasing precariousness.

**JEL Codes:** J60, Z10

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## Keywords

Collaborative production, *Kuaishou*, migrant youth, precarious playbour, *tuwei* culture, *zhubo*

## Introduction

This article investigates the emergence of Chinese rural migrant youth's digital labour production on *Kuaishou*; a user-generated, short-video platform that has become one of the most popular social media for the post-80s generation. While these migrant workers provide cheap labour for various industrial and service sectors in cities, they retain their rural identity because of their *hukou* (household registration) status. Engaged in low-income jobs such as assembly line, construction and delivery, these migrant youth have constituted the mainstay of the migrant labour force in China. Furthermore, their extensive use of social media – mainly mediated through mobile communication – has increasingly become an essential part of their daily lives and cultural production.

Migrant youth's becoming precarious playbour represents an emerging kind of labour associated with user-generated content and value production in the form of play (Kücklich, 2005; Qiu, 2016). The term 'playbour', which refers to the audience labour of digital platforms, is drawn from the form of gamer-made alterations to pre-existing games. They redesign and improve the games by modifying the code, which simultaneously involves play, fun, and unpaid labour (Kücklich, 2005). On *Kuaishou*, the migrant youth also act as a kind of 'playbourers' because they play (*wan*) *Kuaishou*, while generating profits for the company without pay (Qiu, 2016).

We take the notion of playbour as a tool to conceptualise *Kuaishou*'s free labour and economy, combining digital engagement and rewards. In the age of media convergence, users become the free labour of social media platforms. Xia (2019) indicates that current digital labour research has two main foci: the exploitation of both professional and audience labour. Studies on audience labour often focus on urban and middle-class youth (Qiu, 2016). Migrant workers are often taken as being confined to the factory (Pun, 2005) or engaged in delivery work for digital platforms (Sun, 2019). However, their playbour practice and identity as social platform users are largely ignored and insufficiently studied (De Kloet and Fung, 2016). Hence, the research purpose of this study is to address this void by examining how migrant workers become playbourers beyond the scope of professional labour.

*Kuaishou*'s playbour involves high levels of insecurity, characterised by the precarious work of the digital and creative industry, including the absence of labour protection and wages and the lack of control over working hours and working conditions (Lin, 2020; Morgan et al., 2013). Wilson and Ebert (2013) argue that precarity not only involves insecurity in industrial relations but refers to a more general and comprehensive 'state of being' which the workers themselves subjectively experience. The increasing digitisation of different aspects of their lives has blurred the line between work and play (Goggin, 2011).

In this article, we focus specifically on the creative playbour practices of migrant youth on *Kuaishou*. These users who are not secured with a contractual relationship with

the company (Van Doorn, 2017) produce value by generating content, social relationships, and networks on the platform. What interests us is that although these workers' life experiences are saturated with negative feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and frustration in their increasingly precarious situations (Wilson and Ebert, 2013), they seem to produce videos and livestreams on *Kuaishou* voluntarily. The question is what motivates them and what it means to be a playbour for the platform, how they create an affective economy, where they can establish a sense of connection and intimacy with their audiences, and how they cope with the precariousness of their *Kuaishou* roles.

## Literature review

With the popularisation of smartphones and the cost reduction of mobile services, Chinese internal migrant youth have increasingly become 'digital natives' who have grown up with digital media and acquired familiarity with digital communication (Wang, 2016). Despite the growing popularity of social media among Chinese young people, public expressions on such platforms as *Weibo*, a Chinese Twitter-like platform, remain restricted and unrepresentative of the young generation (Svensson, 2014). Notably, while urban celebrities are privileged to use their social and cultural capital to build large followings and gain influence (Yang, 2014), rural migrant workers generally lack a voice in such restricted 'public' spaces.

The 'voice' is precisely what distinguishes *Kuaishou* from other social media spaces, as it provides rural migrant workers with an algorithm-based platform where users can *zhibo* (livestream) their performances as *zhubos* (livestreamer). What makes *Kuaishou* unique is the 'unabashed earthiness of its objective contents' (Li et al., 2019) and its grassroots user base, such as construction workers, small-town teenagers, and young farmers (Li, 2020a; Schaefer, 2019). These playbourers not only act as audiences, performers, creators, and free labour on *Kuaishou*. They can also profit from their productions, which have become increasingly professionalised (Song, 2018). Thus, the platform economy also enables migrant youth to participate as cultural producers.

With the increasing convergence of consumption and labour, as well as leisure and work, in the digital era, scholarly debates have primarily revolved around the 'exploitation vs. empowerment' dialectic (Zhang and Fung, 2014). Critical political economists have critiqued social media platforms for turning users into 'prosumers' or 'producers' through the exploitation of free labour (Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). Tan et al. (2020) observe that *Kuaishou* users ultimately provide highly exploited labour in the guise of innocuous play. They argue that the appearance of *zhubo* exemplifies the commodification and exploitation of participants' affective labour. In order to earn money, *zhubos* draw upon and exploit their personal experiences and stories based on what they think their audiences may like. As an emerging form of labour, a *zhubo* serves more as a subcontractor than an employee of the platform companies thus exempt from providing formal labour protection (Van Doorn, 2017).

Scholarship on digital labour has paid attention to how a playbourer becomes a precarious worker (Bulut, 2014; Kücklich, 2005; Lin, 2020). The notion of precariousness refers to employment or job insecurity, low wages, insufficient labour protection, as well as a low level of employee control over wages, hours and working conditions (Campbell and Price,

2016). Such precariousness also extends to other domains of social life where the sense of insecurity is widely felt by individuals even beyond work. In this study, migrant youth as precarious playbour also experience uncertainty and instability beyond work. As labourers, they generally lack regular employment contracts and job security. In particular, a *zhubo* spends considerable time and effort to develop fandom, while *Kuaishou* takes a 50% cut from a *zhubo*'s income. However, a few *zhubos* complain 'because they understand their livestreaming more as innocuous *wan* "play" that they should pay for, rather than a serious, money-making work' (Tan et al., 2020: 1245). Playbour is '[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited' (Terranova, 2000: 32), rendering it unclassifiable in traditional terms of work and play (Bulut, 2014; Goggin, 2011; Kücklich, 2005).

Although the perspective of exploitation provides acute insights into emerging labour conditions in the global platform economy, scholars in this field tend to overlook the agency of audience labour. Simply labelling such practices in terms of exploitation may preclude the possibility that rural youths' hopes and desires will be actualised. This possibility is expressed in upwards socio-economic mobility associated with their engagement with *Kuaishou*, as well as the subtle daily negotiations and struggles at play (Sun, 2019; Zhang and Fung, 2014). Moreover, this study seeks to demonstrate how *Kuaishou* users' agency could be exerted and the way migrant workers produce their own participatory culture (Postigo, 2014).

Our analysis of *Kuaishou*'s labour production is informed by Jenkins' (2006) notion of participatory culture that addresses the power of user collaboration and production. Li et al. (2019) examine how rural students pursue their dreams of upward socio-economic mobility on *Kuaishou* through becoming 'micro-celebrities', who seek to amplify their online popularity through the platform (Senft, 2008: 25). Lin and De Kloet (2019) argue that *Kuaishou* empowers ordinary people to become creative producers and self-employed entrepreneurs. However, critics also accuse *Kuaishou* of peddling low-quality *tuwei* (earthiness) contents (Liu, 2020).

Although existing studies have focused on young rural migrant workers' engagement in *Kuaishou* as a means of realising upward socio-economic mobility, they tend to focus on individual practices while ignoring collaborative forms of cultural production. In order to cope with the uncertain, unpredictable, and risky precarious conditions while making their videos more attractive, they have sought to collaborate with other users, a practice that stimulates more creativity and competition on the platform. Existing scholarship tends to focus on the discursive marginalisation rather than the creativity of these youngsters (Li, 2020b; Lin and De Kloet, 2019).

Based on these studies, this research seeks to move beyond the restrictions of the 'exploitation vs. empowerment' dialectic by examining why rural migrant youth play *Kuaishou*, how they produce a participatory culture, and what precarious situations they face as they become playbourers. Furthermore, we also investigate how they collaborate to enhance creativity and competitiveness, and mitigate precarity.

## Methodological statement

The selection of *Kuaishou* as our research target originates from a personal experience. On 15 October 2016, the first author met a female migrant worker named Liang, working

at a barbershop in Zhuhai. Liang, originally from Anhui Province, is one of the four children of her family. She dropped out of school and went out to work with her sister as teenagers. Intrigued by her leisurely preoccupation with her smartphone, the first author asked what she was playing. She replied that 'It's boring when we have no customers, so I'm playing *Kuaishou*. It's fun'. She continued to say that 'We all play this App . . . There are a lot of funny videos on *Kuaishou*'. She could not help laughing when sharing her experience. Since then, the authors have explored *Kuaishou* and sensed a strong connection between the platform and rural populations. Interesting to notice that *Kuaishou* has been labelled 'vulgar' and 'low-end' by commentaries was the motivation for us to probe this phenomenon.

Most of the data examined in this study are drawn from ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, as well as screenshots and recordings of livestreams on *Kuaishou*. From July to September 2017, we conducted the first phase of online observation to gather initial data. We used the three tabs on the *Kuaishou* interface to locate our research targets: 'trending', 'following' and 'nearby'. The 'trending' tab lists videos selected by the platform's algorithm. Users can also tap on 'follow' to keep track of someone or view the videos produced by others 'nearby'. Furthermore, our search was informed by recommendations from friends and relevant news reports. Ultimately, we located 34 users to be our primary targets, taking into account their fanbases, occupations, the city they live in and how often they post videos and do livestreaming. These workers were all born in the late 1980s and aged between 16 and 35. Their personal backgrounds reflect *Kuaishou*'s user base demographics: geographically, users are located all over China, including not only Shanghai and Guangzhou but also small cities and towns. They hold jobs ranging from construction workers and car mechanics to cooks and factory workers. Some of them quit their jobs in cities and went back to their hometowns to produce videos and livestreaming full-time. The act of returning to hometowns is strategic as it does not only reduce their cost of living but also enables them to display rural settings that could attract more attention. Furthermore, detailed field notes, screenshots and photos were taken to document their experiences from January to March 2018 and from June to August 2018, respectively. Finally, we created research profiles for each of our subjects and formulated the narratives of their life stories.

Meanwhile, we found that the method of ethnographic observation is limited in terms of retrieving 'insider' information, such as life trajectories and personal experiences. Therefore, in-depth interviews were used as supplements to enrich our data collection. We gradually established relationships with some subjects through livestreaming and *WeChat* messages, which are displayed on their *Kuaishou* profiles. We interviewed a total of 12 subjects (seven men and five women) with semi-structured questions revolving around their platform practices (See Table 1). Since the subjects of our research are located in different places across China, five of them were interviewed offline while others were done through video conferencing, as well as text and voice messages on *WeChat*. Among them, only one has become a full-time *zhubo* as others play casually as part of their work. We also communicated with the *zhubos* during their livestreaming and recorded their conversations with fans. When each interview concluded, we gave each interviewee 50 CNY as a token of our gratitude.

**Table I.** 12 interviews.

ID	Gender	Host city or town	Hometown	Job	Born	Interview date	
XY	Female	Qingdao	Tai'an	Shop assistant	1991	28 June 2018 4 September 2018	Restaurant, her home
RR	Male	Shanghai	Tai'an	Chef	1999	27 June 2018 24 September 2018	His home, WeChat
HB	Male	Weifang	Tai'an	Factory worker	1999	25 July 2018	Restaurant, WeChat
XX	Male	Linyi	Tai'an	Factory worker	1998	31 July 2018, 2 August 2018, 7 August 2018	WeChat, livestream
AX	Female	Shanghai	Fuyang	Cashier	1991	13 August 2018	Her workplace, WeChat
MB	Female	Zhengzhou	Zhumadian	Factory worker	1994	28 July 2018, 5 November 2020	WeChat, Kuaishou
	Male	Shenzhen	Yulin	Construction worker	1991	20 June 2018, 8 November 2020	WeChat, livestream
BB	Male	Weihai	Weihai	Real estate salesperson	1995	19 July 2017	WeChat
LC	Male	Anshan	Anshan	<i>zhubo</i>	1994	20 June 2018	WeChat, livestream
DF	Male	Wenzhou	Yibin	Factory worker	1986	11 August 2017, 5 April 2020	WeChat message, livestream
YY	Female	Tai'an	Tai'an	Pharmacy	1994	9 August 2017, 20 September 2017, 8 February 2018	Restaurant, her workplace
SS	Female	Zhoushan	Chongqing	Electric welder	1990	30 July 2018	WeChat, Kuaishou

## **Wan (playing) Kuaishou: Producing the tuwei culture**

### *Kuaishou as a means of killing boredom and relieving job burnout*

Many of the subjects we interviewed described their jobs as 'boring' (*wuliao*), 'dry and dull' (*kuzao*), 'tiring' (*pibei*) and 'toiling' (*xinlao*) due to the monotonous and repetitive tasks of their work (Lan, 2006; Pun, 2005; Tai and Hu, 2017). These rural migrant workers are excluded from many basic social benefits because of the country's restrictions placed on the *hukou* status. In addition, they generally work for labour-intensive,

high-risk, low-income sectors while suffering from heightened work pressure and poorly-paid jobs (Liu, 2019; Pun, 2005). They usually work an average of 66 hours per week (compared to 44.6 hours for urban employees) but earn even less than their parents (Wang and He, 2019). Thus, they have never experienced ‘secure, reasonably well-paid and acceptable working conditions’ (Keat, 2009: 123). The Internet and smartphones provide an escape from their boring and tiring work and serve as ‘backstage’ for self-expression. The cellphone becomes a ‘cellular backstage’ that migrant domestic workers could use to reach out to the outside world and relieve feelings of exhaustion and loneliness after a long working day (Lan, 2006). Here are some examples of how *Kuaishou* is used as a means of killing boredom and as entertainment.

HB works in an electronic factory in Weifang, Shandong, which produces accessories for Apple smartphones. He works more than 14 hours a day with frequent night shifts, and is not allowed to carry a phone in the workplace. Describing himself as working like a ‘machine’ repeating the same action every day, he told us that he has lived with boredom and depression since joining the company (25 July 2018, interview). After work, he smokes to kill boredom and relax, gets tattoos with a group of friends, and watches videos on *Kuaishou*, which could give him a transient moment of escape. As an early user of *Kuaishou*, he has never tried posting anything because ‘I am used to being alone since I was a child’, he said (25 July 2018, interview).

AX comes from a rural village in Fuyang, Anhui Province. She works as a cashier in a massage parlour in Shanghai. She told us that she has no friends in Shanghai but has managed to make new friends on *Kuaishou*. Working more than 11 hours a day without overtime pay and holiday, she also has to deal with frequent night shifts. Furthermore, she chose not to do livestreaming after work because it would disturb her three other colleagues with whom she shares a small dorm room offered by their employer:

There are not many guests after 10 pm, and the manager usually goes back home at that time. So, I am available for livestreaming to chat with my fans. This is the only time I could interact with them. (AX, 13 August 2018, interview)

Her sharing of daily life at the massage parlour has attracted about 20,000 fans. Based on our observation, many fans are willing to support her though she never openly asked them for virtual gifts. Moreover, when her salary payment was delayed for 2 months, many fans sent virtual gifts to support her. Thus, *Kuaishou* is not only a means of entertainment for her, but an alternative source of income supporting her in difficult times.

Some migrant workers produce *Kuaishou* videos regularly. SP, another young worker, kills boredom by connecting with friends from the same hometown. As motorcycle fans, they frequently upload pictures and videos of their travels. We found that he had started to add some funny storylines to attract more followers. SP has become a micro-celebrity known as the *Kuaishou* Stephen Chow – Hong Kong’s famous comedy actor – with millions of fans, and has become an idol of many rural young people.

LL and his wife XJ build waterproofing at a construction site in Fuzhou, Fujian Province. LL shoots videos on their daily construction life. By 2018, his followers had already surpassed 2 million. They became micro-celebrities on the platform, and were hailed by their fans as ‘the most beautiful couple on the construction site’.

In sharp contrast to their ‘boring’ routine work, the migrant workers we interviewed described their experiences of using *Kuaishou* in terms of ‘play’ (*wan*) as ‘funny’ and ‘fun’ (*gaoxiao, haowan*), ‘forgetting the present’ (*wangji dangxia*) and ‘a new life’ (*xin shenghuo*). After their long working hours, they would quickly rush back to their dormitories to access the Internet (De Kloet and Fung, 2016). Playing *Kuaishou* not only offers them a temporary escape from their exhausting work, but also allows them to reconnect with the wider social world, which has become an indispensable part of their private time. On *Kuaishou*, they discover a wonderland full of enthusiasm, passion, humour and creativity, in addition to the monetary value derived from their online performance (Song, 2018). However, rather than seeing their engagement in *Kuaishou* as ‘work’, most of them associate *Kuaishou* with the notion of ‘leisure’ activities. According to Kücklich (2005), the notion of *Kuaishou* as a ‘leisure and entertainment activity’ constitutes the very basis for an exploitative relationship between the platform and its users. Furthermore, the use of *Kuaishou* as a ‘voluntary’ and ‘non-profit’ activity would obscure its exploitative nature. The likes (by double clicks) and comments made by audiences are the user data for determining whether a particular video content would be recommended to like-minded users. Their involvement has created more content for the platform, attracted more users and became an important source of cultural and economic production.

### Performing *tuwei* styles

Despite the growing popularity of migrant youth’s performance on *Kuaishou*, mainstream media describe their homemade, mundane styles as *tuwei* – a term that connotes earthy and lowbrow – and dismiss *Kuaishou* for promoting such vulgarity (Liu, 2020). A typical *tuwei* performance is usually set in a rural background, where people could document everyday life, dance, perform a show or show off their outfits (Sun, 2020). A common phrase to describe these videos is *jie diqi* (down to earth), which connotes a personal and authentic form of self-expression and audience reception (Lin and De Kloet, 2019). Performing *tuwei* has become a common strategy of ‘impression management’ to create a sense of intimacy for the viewers who share and consume similar cultural experiences.

Papacharissi (2002) indicates that a personal homepage can be seen as a ‘carefully controlled performance through which self-presentation is achieved under optimal conditions’ (p. 644). Many migrant workers identify their profile names with different types of work, such as ‘moving bricks’, ‘cementing’, ‘car repairing’, ‘female welder’ and ‘construction site’. Some express their identities according to rural origins, village names and hometowns (such as ‘rural boy’). Studies have suggested that Chinese migrant youth tend to conceal their rural identities because in the post-Maoist era, ‘rural people’ are stereotyped as ignorant, selfish, poor and low-quality (*suzhi*; Anagnost, 2004). On *Kuaishou*, however, migrant youth do not shy away from their rural and worker identities. They construct their online personas by featuring a variety of ‘settings’, such as the environment of a village, construction site, factory and dormitory, as well as a range of physical traits such as local accents, unfashionable and dirty clothes, or dark skin that reveal their social status and identity.



For instance, from Yulin, Guangxi Province, LM lost his right leg in a car accident when he was 7 years old. He told us that he dropped out of school due to family poverty at the age of 18. 'I saw information about recruiting disabled dancers on the Internet and then went to Beijing to learn dance with a salary of 500 CNY a month' (20 June 2018, interview), he said. He appeared on stage in 2013 on a popular TV show, but that did not change his life. He has been doing temporary construction work in Shenzhen. He also performs in an art troupe and earns about 2000 CNY a month. His videos are filled with working scenes on a construction site, where he carries loads of bricks and cement. After getting off work, he does livestreaming shows in the dormitory, chats with fans about his daily life and sometimes sells honey produced by his father.

LC, known as 'little dance king' (*xiao wu wang*) on *Kuaishou*, loves mechanical dance performances. He learned dancing by watching online videos from when he was 8 years old. At that time, the Internet was the only source from which he learned dance because there were no dance classes in his village or nearby towns. He became the only boy in the village who could dance, so he created his online name, 'little dance king'. After graduating from junior high school, he went to Anshan, Liaoning Province, to work in a restaurant. In his spare time, he plays *Kuaishou* and uploads his dancing videos. In July 2017, a video of his 'broken head dance' became popular; within just 1 hour, hundreds of thousands of people clicked and watched the video, through which his fans immediately increased by more than 100,000. Ultimately, more than 12.3 million people viewed the video. In our interview, he told us that the popularity of that video prompted him to start livestreaming, which now helps him earn hundreds of CNY a day, higher than his salary in the restaurant (20 June 2018, interview). He left his job at the end of 2017 and returned to his hometown in Yingluo village, where he started focusing on shooting videos and live dancing. He identifies himself as a 'rural child' (*nongcun haizi*) on *Kuaishou*, and his video often chooses shabby villages as background. Unlike the urban young dancers' fashion style and heavy makeup, he is known for the plain military-style green uniform and rubber shoes, which construction workers often wear.

ZF, known as 'cement girl' (*shui ni mei*) on *Kuaishou*, is from Datun Village, Anhui Province. She used to work with her husband away from home, but after her husband injured his eyes doing electric welding work, they decided to return to their hometown and make a living by carrying cement on construction sites. On *Kuaishou*, she is known for visually contrasting her typical image as a worker (dark-skinned, dusty-faced, messy-haired and wearing worn-out clothes) with a completely different, off-work casual image of a young lady with makeup skills, dressed in neat clothes. However, her off-work image is also contrasted with the mainstream standard of *zhubos* with heavy makeup and sexy clothes (Li, 2020b; Schaefer, 2019). Her performances represent a return to 'grass-roots' and 'authenticity', implying that although their work creates imperfect physical appearances, they could change their looks and reshape the notion of beauty (Lin and De Kloet, 2019). Thus, it can be argued that migrant workers are learning to manipulate their everyday appearance on *Kuaishou*.

*Kuaishou* provides a platform for ordinary people to display and reshape their identities. The *tuwei* performances in these videos not only represent transient rural-worker identities and subaltern experiences, but can also be seen as different ways of producing participants' own cultures through bodily engagement, dress, daily settings and fan

participation. While Pun (2005) observes that Chinese female migrant workers desire to transform their rural identity by changing physical appearance, our research finds that migrant youth deliberately present themselves as earthy and vulgar on *Kuaishou* to create a space for their own cultural experiences. These *tuwei* performances express their subtle refusal of the mainstream discourse that represents rural youth as backward and uncivilised.

We observe that their *tuwei* performances produce a sense of authenticity – arguably the most central element ascribed to subculture and necessary for acquiring subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995). A crucial difference between these worker-performers and mainstream celebrities is their relationship with the audience: ‘a micro-celebrity’s popularity depends on a connection to their audience rather than an enforced separation from them’ (Senft, 2008: 26). Thus, those seeking to become micro-celebrities should be receptive to audiences that expect transparency and authenticity, and are committed to directly interacting with them (Marwick, 2013). In so doing, they increase the sense of cultural intimacy with followers who share similar subaltern backgrounds and daily experiences (Li et al., 2019).

Moreover, to display rural scenes and attract more attention, some migrant youth quit their jobs and return to their hometowns. For the same reason, SP returned to his native Guangxi from Guangdong to continue producing homemade micro-films, where he usually tells stories about rebellious teenagers, love, family life and friendship. These videos represent the attempt to modify the rural image and selfhood of migrant youth. In reconfiguring the sense of earthiness, the characters in these videos bear a set of traits that differ drastically from the stigmatised image of rural youth – exaggerated hairstyles, body piercings, trendy fashions and their preoccupation with motorcycle or tricycle racing. The altered self-image implies migrant youths’ desire to recreate a unique appearance and their resistance to mainstream discourse (Li et al., 2019), allowing them to redefine their identity as active and creative subjects capable of producing their own cultures.

## Precariousness with Chinese characteristics

Playing *Kuaishou* was originally meant for migrant youth to ease their sense of precariousness caused by work. However, their *Kuaishou* production has prompted them to become precarious playbour, moving between play and work. In order to arouse fans’ attention, *zhubos* have to be hyperactive, constantly give viewers something new to look at, respond to, or comment on, and minimise the downtime that might lead to disinterest and viewership decline (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). They enthusiastically share every single detail of their lives, thereby increasingly eroding the boundaries between their private realities and public personae (Tan et al., 2020). Meanwhile, some migrant youth choose to highlight their personal conflicts in daily life as a selling point. For example, ZF is known for picking a fight with her *Kuaishou* micro-celebrity sister-in-law named YX. During livestreaming on 30 July 2018, they fought each other before the audience until a fan intervened. Just like a soap opera, this conflict became a hit among fans and immediately increased their popularity. While ZF’s number of viewers used to be around 2000, the family conflict had apparently boosted it to more than 9000. Such performance offers the audiences an opportunity to satisfy their desire for voyeurism by peeking into private lives (Song, 2018).

In order to sustain fan support, many *zhubos* push themselves to the limit, livestreaming 7 days a week and more than 8 hours a day. This is because fans would migrate to other *zhubos* or platforms if they ceased livestreaming (Zhang et al., 2019). Thus, *Kuaishou* embodies the idea of the social factory, meaning that value extraction occurs anywhere and anytime (Tan et al., 2020). Despite the serious disruption of daily life routines, nothing guarantees their income. LC said during a livestream:

In 2017, I can earn more than 10,000 CNY a month, while this year [2018] is more difficult, sometimes four to five thousand a month, sometimes seven to eight thousand a month, but it is still better than working as a waiter with only 1800 CNY a month. (29 June 2018)

*Zhubos* are constantly met with unfriendly troublemakers, *heifen* (Black fans), who post aggressive and hateful comments to discredit them. Nevertheless, the ability to respond quickly to these negative comments may earn them a reputation (Woodcock and Johnson, 2019). In addition, they generally ignore verbal harassment to avoid conflicts with followers and suppress their emotions to control their performance while livestreaming.

The growing popularity of these young rural migrant workers has also met with more challenges. First, their videos have caused public debates over the ‘taste’ of *Kuaishou* micro-celebrities (Liu, 2020). Some urban bloggers on *Weibo* describe these works as unintelligible and absurd, and label them as *tuwei* that connotes incivility, tastelessness and low-end characteristics. However, those who produce the videos contest such claims (Sun, 2020). Meanwhile, taste is closely related to class power (Bourdieu, 1984), and the debate can be seen as a mark of social distinction (Sun, 2020). Despite these criticisms, it is clear that *Kuaishou* provides new opportunities for migrant workers to become cultural producers, brings the traditionally marginalised groups into the national spotlight, and enables them to increase income.

Moreover, the state criticised *Kuaishou* in April 2018 for displaying videos involving tattoos, social-shake dance (a form of dance that features ear-bashing soundtracks and is accompanied by rhythmic, intense and identical upper body movement of performers), and other controversial videos, such as unmarried teenage girls showing off their pregnant belly. As a result, *Kuaishou* tightened up its censorship measures. Some top-ranked micro-celebrities’ accounts were also blocked, like Tianyou, who became famous for performing *hanmai* (shouting with a microphone), a Chinese rap-like performance. Since *hanmai*’s lyrics are catchy and entertaining, and the rhythm is easy to learn, it became immensely popular among rural youth and migrant workers (Archerberg, 2017). On 12 February 2018, Tianyou was named by *CCTV* as a ‘malign’ micro-celebrity who allegedly encouraged drug use in his show (Xu and Zhang, 2021). In response, *Kuaishou* and other video-sharing platforms swiftly removed Tianyou’s accounts and all content related to him. The incident has resulted in a tightening of state and commercial censorship that has tended to make the social media business more precarious.

*Zhubos*’ revenue comes from fans’ virtual gifts rather than wages. As a result, they have to endure long ‘playing’ time, uncertain incomes and harassment. In addition to platform censorship, *zhubos* have to take legal or political risks associated with their performance. These precarious conditions have caused many users to regard *zhuho* only as non-serious ‘play’ (Tan et al., 2020). The blurred distinction between work and play is

characteristic of *Kuaishou* playbour (Goggin, 2011). SP gave up his factory job to shoot videos. Although the number of fans has steadily increased, his virtual gift income is not high compared to regular micro-celebrities. The uncertainty of being a playbourer has prompted him to use the money earned from *Kuaishou* to open a milk-tea shop and a grilled fish shop in his hometown.

XX, an auto repair worker, loves social-shake dancing, which relies on collective participation – with the belief that dancing alone cannot produce sufficient emotional momentum to sustain audience attention. Tired of his dirty and low-paying job in the workshop, he decided to return to his hometown, Tai'an, Shandong Province and devote himself to *Kuaishou* video production full-time:

I often send private messages to 'nearby' (a function in the app) people who also dance social shake, then adding them to my WeChat. We are all boys, so it's easier to get acquainted with each other. We often dance and make videos together. (XX, 31 July 2018, interview)

XX used the money earned from *Kuaishou* to buy the long-awaited iPhone. However, since the ban on the social-shake dance craze in April 2018, his team was dismissed, and XX became jobless again. Such precarity of playbour bears the risk of production while remaining unprotected by labour standards (Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Tan et al., 2020).

Even though *Kuaishou* takes 50% out of *zhuo*'s earnings, few have complained and even take it for granted. On the contrary, they often refer to *Kuaishou* as 'official master' (*guanfang daren*) and express their appreciation on their homepage, such as 'thanking *Kuaishou* for providing such a wonderful platform'. In particular, Lin and De Kloet (2019) indicate that this is because the governance of *Kuaishou* creates a pervasive sense of insecurity among users, making them feel obliged to post these statements on their homepage. When asked about her attitude towards the platform, XY said,

I had seen other people writing thanks to *Kuaishou* on their homepage, so I imitated them. I sincerely appreciate that the *Kuaishou* platform allows me to be seen by so many strangers. I also hope that my video will be more widely disseminated on the platform and seen by more people. (XY, 4 September 2018, interview)

Her response implies that migrant workers are not entirely subjected to platform exploitation. Instead, they creatively use the platform to produce and display culture in ways that help them to cope with the growing precariousness.

## Not just for fun: Collaborative production

Although most of *Kuaishou*'s users start as 'hobbyists with little intention of developing income' (Cunningham and Craig, 2019: 16), the potential social, cultural, and economic rewards motivate some to engage in a collaborative production characterised by spontaneous and free participation (Mehta, 2019). Some even turn themselves into full-time producers. With the intensification of Internet censorship since April 2018, there has been a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity among *Kuaishou* producers (Lin and De Kloet, 2019), who resort to improving the quality of their shows. In order to cope with market competition, more users have worked together to foster a collaborative form of production.

So far, three forms of collaboration have been taking shape on *Kuaishou*. First, some like-minded users may form a team, and those with the most fans become protagonists and ‘mentors’, while other ‘apprentices’ become supporting actors or actresses. LJ became popular on *Kuaishou* for his *duanzi*, which literally means jokes and humour. In August 2017, five youngsters from rural Guizhou came to his hometown, Fenggang Village, Zunyi, Guizhou Province, and asked to become his apprentices. They participated in LJ’s videos where, in return, they enlarged their own fanbases through LJ’s popularity. Among them, JY, aged 18, is the youngest and has just finished high school. He manages all members’ *Kuaishou* accounts daily and even does household chores for the mentor’s family. Since then, JY’s personal *Kuaishou* account has grown from almost none to 136,000 fans in merely 2 months. However, not all are as successful as JY; the other three apprentices left after 2 months.

LC recruits female apprentices directly on *Kuaishou*. He told audiences during a livestream on 21 June 2018 that ‘if there are girls willing to play *Kuaishou* with me, send me private messages. I can teach you to dance for free’. His *Kuaishou* and WeChat profiles read, ‘Call for female apprentices with basic level of dance skills, guarantee to increase fan numbers, a monthly salary of more than 10,000 CNY!’

On *Kuaishou*, many participants call each other mentors and apprentices in an attempt to cultivate a family-like relationship. Apprentices usually work as free labourers for their mentors, as in the case of interns (Xia, 2019). Xia (2019) finds that in China, interns’ hard work is never fairly rewarded by their employers. In order to obtain a full-time position after completing their internships, they must build strong *guanxi* (personal relationships) with mentors; which also explains why some *Kuaishou* participants are willing to do all kinds of work for their mentors.

The second form of collaboration involves active fan participation. *Zhubo*’s livestreaming is primarily meant to interact with followers, such as answering their questions and creating a ‘gift economy’ that can be converted into income. Similar to the ‘like’ button on Facebook, which converts user engagement into tradeable data flows (Wang, 2019), the number of fans and their participation (i.e. likes and comments) affect both the content of *zhubos*’ livestreams and their incomes – the more popular they are, the more advertising revenue they receive from sponsors who want to promote products through *zhubo*.

A *zhubo* primarily benefits from their fans in the form of ‘sending gifts’ (*shua liwu*) that followers purchase using platform currencies (*Kuaishou* Coin, hereafter KC). Viewers cannot send money directly to *zhubos*, only through gifts offered by the platform. There are 32 types of virtual gifts. The most expensive gift that one can send costs 6666 KC, worth approximately 952 CNY (See Table 2). The gifts can also be used to make animations for *zhubos*’ shows. For example, 328 KC shows an arrow shooting into the sky, 208 KC displays fireworks, while the smallest donation (1 KC) displays a lollipop on the screen. If a user purchases virtual presents for a *zhubo*, their account details will automatically pop up on the *zhubo*’s feed.

**Table 2.** Value of KC.

CNY	6	40	68	98	198	698
KC	42	280	476	686	1386	4886

The platform's gift system is implemented through a set of visual symbols; the greater the value, the more spectacular the visual effect (Zhang et al., 2019). For example, if an audience wants to create the number '6' on the screen, around 30 beer bottle emojis (worth 10KC for each) need to be created. In this way, special visual appeals are programmed to entice platform users to spend more real money on virtual gifting.

However, the gift economy does not solely function to meet the fans' psychological needs (Zhang et al., 2019). Some people who want to promote products or themselves would send gifts to a *zhubo* as well. In return, a *zhubo* may help them by 'calling attention' (*han guan Zhu*), which is meant to call on their audiences to follow them. This has become a key strategy for aspiring *zhubos* to increase their visibility.

Acquiring a virtual gift on *Kuaishou* requires not only a sufficient number of viewers, but also active cooperation of audiences. It also requires *zhubos* to actively manage their emotions and personality to cultivate a sense of intimacy with audiences (Lin and De Kloet, 2019). They usually refer to their fans as *laotie* (very close friends) or 'family' while fan groups would coalesce into a gang-like 'family army' (*jia jun*). For example, Tianyou's fans are 'You *jiajun*' while LC calls his followers 'Nong *jiajun*' (peasant army).

The third mode of revenue creation based on virtual gifting is the collaborative production between *Kuaishou* and *zhubos*. By continually adding new technological affordances, the platform enables *zhubos* to attract attention and generate revenue, thereby raising more revenues for the platform. This form of collaboration is featured by the 'VS' mode (also known as PK), where two performers showcase their competition to attract more audiences. This form of collaboration stimulates the gift economy by arousing fans' sympathy and sense of competitiveness, as much as mobilising their emotional investment. When a *zhubo* is livestreaming, they can randomly match up with the other *zhubos* who agree on the battle rules. The scores of the two rivals change in real-time at the bar on top of the screen, showing the value of virtual gifts they receive. In some cases, the loser needs to do pushups, sing or do face-painting. The PK strategy helps increase viewership for some *zhubos*.

The 18-year-old girl FB migrated to Guangzhou from her native Anhui Province. She has been working in a garment factory for 3 years, earning about 3000 CNY per month. She has produced many videos showing her long legs on *Kuaishou*. In order to increase viewership, she often launches contests with other *zhubos* and uses emotional language to solicit support. After COVID-19, FB did not return to Guangzhou but stayed in her hometown to become a full-time *zhubo*. The content produced by FB and many *zhubos* is underpinned by constant emotional investments and viewers' affective responses (Wang, 2019). However, as Zhang et al. (2019) point out, during the 'sell-out' transition from self-expression to self-promotion, *zhubos*, especially female *zhubos*, are increasingly treated by the audience as objects of gaze, desire and consumption. These practices demonstrate how *Kuaishou*'s micro-celebrities use 'emotional labour' to capitalise on character and intimacy (Li, 2020a; Raun, 2018).

### *The unlikely creative class*

The collaborative form of production is conducive to stimulating creativity, such as songs, jokes, memes and humorous videos that reflect migrant workers' daily lives. Although migrant youth are often stigmatised as uncivilised, illiterate and cultureless (Anagnost, 2004), digital platforms offer opportunities for them to become self-employed

creative producers. Lin and De Kloet (2019) refer to these grassroots individuals as an ‘unlikely creative class’, focusing on how they display class identity through accent, dress or behaviour. However, contrary to their accounts on how these videos intentionally parody the trendy life of Chinese urban youth, we found that many users prefer to present their hardships and everyday lives. Notably, these videos are well received by viewers from various social strata (Li, 2020b).

Followed by 2 million fans, construction worker LL and his wife XJ form a team called ‘*Xiaogong Online*’ to perform songs that reflect the daily lives of migrant workers. LL’s wife, XJ, is the singer, while XQ and GG are the dancers. One member, XL, is good at recontextualising pop songs to reflect his working life. For example, in one video, he remade the lyrics of the popular song *Shanghai Beach* to express the emotional feelings of construction workers:

Returning late and getting up early makes life difficult for migrant workers

The hot sun and cold wind are just to earn some renminbi

Youth and ideals have been dedicated to the construction site

Sad and wronged silently hide in my heart

(LL’s post on *Kuaishou*, 27 October 2018)

At the end of 2015, SP decided to shift attention to his hometown. With more people joining his team, their videos have become more diverse and creative in terms of themes and styles. The ‘Rebellious Boys’ series, which tells the story of the experience of rural youth, was produced out of the collective efforts and made SP’s team famous. In addition, SP himself created the iconic hand gesture of the punching machine operator JB, who raises three fingers, which many viewers see as ‘cool’. The gesture was well received on *Kuaishou* because it connotes migrant workers’ sufferings and pain experienced in factory life.

Furthermore, these *tuwei* style videos are also well received by urban users. LL released their first video in June 2019 on *Douyin*, and the number of fans reached 7.9 million in just 1 year. *Douyin*’s target audience is educated young adults in first- and second-tier cities aged between 20 and 30. Compared to *Kuaishou*’s targeting of lower class urban users, *Douyin* has attracted younger users by focusing explicitly on music and creative activities (Hargrave, 2019). Many *Kuaishou* micro-celebrities have been invited to public talks and talent shows. Their growing creativity and popularity have pushed the *tuwei* culture beyond cyberspace and into wider popular culture (Schaefer, 2019), reconfiguring the public perception of rural youth culture.

## Conclusion

This article investigates the emergence of playbour as a dynamic process on *Kuaishou*. We examine the group of people whose cultures are often ignored. Becoming a playbourer on *Kuaishou* has low entry barriers, without particular knowledge or skills,

education, or qualifications (Tai and Hu, 2017). *Kuaishou* has attracted countless rural youth, who lack access to social rights and protections, to engage in creative production as a means of self-expression and self-branding, passing boredom and increasing income. We have explored how they construct their ambivalent identities by performing in daily spaces such as the village, construction site, factory and dormitory. Their expressive and creative practices enable them to obtain social, cultural and economic capital and showcase the ‘authenticity’ of their daily lives, and offer a sense of cultural intimacy to the audience. However, these cultural practices have also triggered a moral panic and debates over the cultural value of *tuwei*.

This article has also examined three forms of collaboration that incorporate emotions and authenticity into production. We consider *zhubos*’ precarious production on *Kuaishou*, enduring long work hours without social security or stable income. Nonetheless, *Kuaishou* does provide a platform for many rural migrant workers to pursue upwards mobility and economic success. Overall, this article presents original data in a non-Western context, where forms of worker self-expression and digital labour apply in different ways. Moreover, we suggest that future research pay more attention to how their precarious status affects playbourers’ platform production and the consequence of the cultural development of migrant workers in China.

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