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# *Richang*: An Affect-Inflected Ethnography of Chinese Livestreams

*Ge Zhang* | ORCID: 0000-0001-8317-4185

College of Media and International Culture, Zhejiang University

*playbourer@outlook.com*

## Abstract

I tracked one Chinese livestreaming platform Douyu from its emergence as experimental subsidiary of a Video on Demand platform in 2013 to its status as an ordinary medium of mass entertainment in 2018. This affect-inflected ethnography is written based on participant observation of three channels on Douyu as I exhibit the micro-contexts of each channel in chronicles of affective events, long pauses of silence, repetitive and incoherent dialogues, asymmetrical debates, and sporadic moments of emotional meltdown. This ethnographic writing is a contact zone, a provocation, and, by proxy, a dialogue between academic theories (especially from television studies), user practices, and my informants' own attempts at theorising how and what livestream feels and means for them.

## Keywords

China – everyday life – livestreaming – affect studies

## 1 Introduction

*Ri* 日 means 'daily', and *chang* 常 has at least three meanings: (1) 'often' (an indicator of temporal frequency); (2) 'to remain constant' (an indicator of repetition and regularity); and (3) 'ordinary' (an indication of normalcy).<sup>1</sup> *Richang* is an equivocal adjective that describes the generic state of everyday life, a

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<sup>1</sup> All Chinese names, terms, interview transcripts, and livestream chat logs in this article were translated by the author unless stated otherwise.

regular daily routine, an everyday object, and the average person. *Richang* can also be used as a noun to invoke a sense of documenting a person's mundane activities. From the perspective of the most disengaged viewer, taking a distracted glimpse, the most evident feature of livestreams (*zhibo* 直播) is the appearance of being resolutely ordinary. The ordinariness of livestreams seems tautological: an ordinary person does ordinary things, and an ordinary viewer ordinarily enjoys watching ordinary livestreamed events. As I tracked one livestreaming platform, Douyu, from its emergence as an experimental subsidiary of a video on demand (VoD) platform Acfun in 2013 to its status as an ordinary medium of mass entertainment in 2018, the very success of livestreaming platform depended on this circular logic of *richang* – people both celebrated and stigmatised livestreaming media because it is unconditionally ordinary.

In highlighting *richang*, I do not dismiss other research perspectives in the context of Chinese livestreams, which are all important in their own right: for example, digital labour (Zou 2018), political economy (Cunningham et al., 2019), and socio-aesthetic inequality (Li et al., 2019). Cultural hierarchies of (dis)taste, performative practices, comment culture, platform economy, and so forth are all intertwined with the socio-technological morphology of Chinese livestreaming platforms. However, my long observation of participants on Douyu from 2015 to 2018 and what immediately mattered to my informants led me to think otherwise. Contrary to the 'lightness' captured in Paola Voci's (2010) history of early/pre-internet circulation of 'light movies' (e.g. *eyao* 恶搞 videos) in China, which similarly 'fulfils the need for unsanctioned, unregulated, and intensively private realities' (ibid.: xxi), the 'affective weight' (McCarthy 2007: 19) of participating in ordinary livestreams filled my field notes. This article, while referring to televisual discourses, such as realism and authenticity, demonstrates that recurring debates between viewers and livestreamers over the authenticity of being ordinary is not motivated simply by cynicism versus reality claims or the pleasure of voyeuristic intimacy. These livestream debates in fact drive improvisational theatrics and are a reservoir of performative resources, behind which are the channelling, circulation, and management of affective flow.

The first layer of my argument concerns the affective medium-specificity of livestreams, and the second layer concerns the gradually normalised affective resignation observed in everyday life via the lens of livestreams. This observation does not lead to a transformation of everyday life in which 'the everyday' is treated as a 'potential for recovering more utopian condition' or as 'practice/tactics [and] the continuation of a striving to resist' (Bonner 2003: 31). What I encountered in the field does not immediately amount to a critique of 'the

everyday' organised by capitalism and the state but, rather, an 'overwhelming ordinary that is disorganised' (Berlant 2011: 8) and 'a zone of convergence' (ibid.: 9) between the imagined good life and the ordinary as impasse. The livestreamers whom I followed all performed being ordinary in their own ways, aspired to achieve and extend the ephemerality of internet fame, and endured the precarity of working as livestreamers; yet most hit a wall, either by running out of performative tropes or by gradually losing all their viewers. Following Lauren Berlant (2011), the optimism about achieving the 'good life' (e.g. making enough money) via livestreaming work is often misplaced and therefore cruel. More often than not, the response from livestream viewers is a 'joyful pessimism' (Frederiksen 2018: 92) that counteracts the toxic optimism inflicted by the 'mainstream society' of capital accumulation: 'if optimism can be seen as being cruel when that which ignites a sense of possibility actually makes impossible to attain, ... pessimism could perhaps be joyful when what is not sought after or what is negated never comes around anyway' (ibid.: 92). Instead of instigating a critique, this ethnography of livestreams, beyond positing the dualism of resistance and passivity, thrives in the interstices of alienation and enlightenment.

Let me make it clear: I do not engage with the theoretical whirlpool of affect studies, especially not presupposing a binary of the 'new' affective turn with the 'old' representational politics. In most cases, I simply circumvent the 'performative' versus 'representative' or 'affect' versus 'emotion' debate. Instead, I mostly build upon the concept of ordinary affect. Kathleen Stewart (2007: 2) defines ordinary affects as 'public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of': gut reactions, ineffable self-denial, shame, trauma, economic insecurity, tacitly suppressed class hatred, stigma, carnal unease as well as the inexplicable comfort of being ordinary. 'Ordinary affect' is invoked as an anthropological principle that does not hasten to 'track the predetermined effects of abstractable logics and structures' but, rather, slowly documents the 'lived affects' (Stewart 2017: 192) – in my case, also live – in a directory of ugly emotions, live altercations, online theatrics, and, most of all, awkward silence. 'Confined' by the format of writing, the chat logs I collected from Douyu's livestreams – along with transcriptions of live speech, annotations, field notes, and attached screenshots – are therefore the ethnographic documents of 'lived affects'. They help *perform* the intensity and atmosphere that make livestreams 'habitable and animate' (Stewart 2007: 4).

The concept of affect is very intuitive to the technology of a livestream, which persists as a hydrographic technological metaphor (Thibault 2015). Jinying Li (2017) captures *danmu* (on-screen user comments; literally, 'bullet

curtain') as an East Asian interface of flowing affective intensity.<sup>2</sup> Adapting this interface from pioneering video sites such as Acfun and Bilibili, livestreaming platforms in China augment this interfacial 'contact zone' with the sociality of real-time interactive liveness, which is no longer a 'virtual liveness' (ibid.: 248) in the case of VoD. The hydrographic metaphor of flowing and the circulation of digital data further extend to the social because *shuiyou* 水友 (literally, 'water friend') is how fellow livestream viewers refer to themselves online. 'Water friend' alludes to the circulation of affect between livestreamers and their viewers: ad hominem debates over nonsense, fleeting solidarity, (un)bearable boredom, anonymous friendship, all 'travelling in circuits of impacts and reaction' (Stewart 2017: 197). The circulation of ordinary affects on livestreams always attempts to exceed the confines of what is considered ordinary. The excess of affect always escapes; as Gregory J. Seigworth (2000: 231) writes, 'everyday life escapes; it exceeds'. Affect theory and the cultural politics of banality thus converge on the point of 'processual excess of everyday life' (ibid.) and how affective surplus becomes affective knowledge of being ordinary. As Christian Sorace (2019: 153) puts it, 'affective knowledge precedes cognitive recognition and elaboration'. The ordinariness of livestreams may seem imperceptible, but it is exactly in the moments of affective excess that we can viscerally 'feel' the intensity of *richang*.

This ethnographic writing is a contact zone and, by proxy, a dialogue between academic theories (especially in television studies), user practices, and my informants' attempts at theorising how being on livestreams on a daily basis feels and what it means for them. In the following, after a brief methodological note, I first revisit the contested real in reality television studies, as the televisual anchors such as liveness, reality, and authenticity remain a crucial colloquial language on livestreams as well as a rich theoretical resource to address emerging performative practices. In three illustrations of livestreamers – one brief chronicle of a channel's history and detailed descriptions of two short affective events – I offer an anthropological exploration of ordinary affects on livestreams in the form of annotated transcripts and chat logs.

<sup>2</sup> *Danmu* is a system of displaying user comments in streams on top of the video screen. On Chinese livestreaming sites, its widespread use has rendered its meaning almost equivalent to 'comments'.

## 2 Affect-Inflected Ethnography

As a fieldworker, given the right circumstances – for example, I deliberately follow channels with a smaller viewership – I can routinely talk to livestreamers and their audience at the same time while participating as a viewer in the ordinary setting of a livestream channel. The ethnographic potential afforded by the socio-technology of livestreaming media ordinarily obscures the traditional division between the audience and the production in television studies. I do not consider only affects as expressive audio-visibility permeated by a livestreaming video, in which the live video is treated as a televisual or cinematic artefact of societal sensibilities and representational norms, but a real-time interactive socio-technological process that actively generates and (re)articulates public feelings. The participatory ethics of livestreams intersects with anthropological fieldwork in the form of long silent pauses, continual boredom, repetitive and incoherent dialogue, asymmetrical debates, and sporadic instances of emotional meltdown.

As Stewart (2017: 194–195) proposes, an ‘affect-inflected ethnography’ focuses on ‘sense and sensation, materialities, and viscera’. In the same issue of *Cultural Anthropology* on affect and anthropology, Catherine Lutz (2017: 185) suggests that ‘this approach requires intricate, micro-contextual narrative writing, longer periods of fieldwork, and more linguistic dexterity’. The basis of this article is not an interpretation of representations in the vein of television studies (although I admit it is impossible to do away with representations entirely) but an experiment using a format of performative ethnographic writing that is sensitive to the distinctive field of livestreams and the micro-context of each channel. The basic spatio-temporality of livestreams is that, first, each channel (as opposed to the entire platform) has its own socio-cultural micro-context, and, second, liveness prompts spontaneity and discourages recording. I thus attribute the ‘affect-inflected’ ethnographic method of *chafang* 查房 to the medium specificity of livestreams.

*Chafang* literally means visiting or inspecting rooms, as it was originally used in the context of hospitals: as a morning routine, doctors visit and examine patients in their ward. In the context of livestreaming platforms, *chafang* refers to livestreamers watching and reacting to other channels on their own channel. They usually do this to ‘kill time’ between gaming sessions or while waiting in a long queue (in matchmaking games, e.g., *League of Legends*). At first, *chafang* referred to interjections or activities they performed in the downtime between activities that were more ‘engaging’ or demanded more attention. In 2015, *chafang* gradually developed into a common intermittent activity on livestreams throughout the Douyu platform. It evolved into a practice in which

a more established livestreamer helps to promote and ‘boost’ the viewership of a newer streamer, intentionally or inadvertently. I had started documenting these instances of *chafang* in 2014, as sometimes they turned out be extraordinary moments that interrupted the normal sequence of a livestream. In 2015, I also started livestreaming my own watching of other livestreams, monitoring the chatroom, showing live reactions, interacting with streamers and viewers (sometimes my own viewers) via *danmu* comments, and taking screenshots and field notes.

*Chafang* inspired a research method that emerged entirely from field practice. My livestreams and video archives of them were recordings of the livestreams that I was watching as well as indexes of the livestream events throughout the session with my own voice and webcam, as I switched between channels and reacted in various affective states – I chortled, grinned, talked to myself as I typed comments or notes, felt bored, leaned back in my armchair, or just fell asleep. These were then saved as ethnographic video archives generating screenshots, transcriptions, field notes, and further annotations, all timestamp-matched with the saved chat logs. In other words, *chafang* not only archivally documented the rhythmic flow of affects between viewers and streamers but also timestamped my own affective state.

### 3 Hauntology of the Televisual: Revisiting the Clichéd Real in Livestreams

The translation of ‘internet livestream’ in Chinese is *wangluo chuanliuzhibo* 网络串流直播, abbreviated as *zhibo* (literally ‘direct/straight cast’). The term *zhibo* derives from the televisual context, as it originally referred to live television. However, as the rapid growth of livestreaming platforms made the term topical in 2015 and 2016, and then ubiquitous in 2017 and 2018, *zhibo* now refers by default to internet livestreams, instead of live television. Although the proponents of livestreaming media try to distinguish it from television, both are built upon the same televisual language as well as the familiar, if not heightened, obsession with liveness, representation of ordinary life/people, habitual boredom in modern society, and the much-stigmatised vulgarity of the demographic groups that are addicted to watching livestreams. In this sense, livestreaming media can be seen as the televisual proper, the unfulfilled technical promise of liveness and communicative feedback realised in its most banal sense. When he was on the brink of starting his career as a ‘professional streamer’ and creating his livestreaming studio in 2015, the Douyu streamer Ligan, who later became

infamous for sleeping during a livestream, declared during his livestream that ‘streaming is infinitely superior to television’, because, first, it has no producer, and, second, a livestream is ‘interactively real’. The validity of his argument aside, Ligan’s narrative on livestreaming is similar to that of the televisual discourse. The televisual persists as a relational yardstick for both academic and ordinary understanding of livestreaming media. Therefore, a brief review of a few defining moments of reality TV in China is helpful in understanding livestreaming media in contrast to reality TV and the televisual conceptual anchors inherited by the terminology of livestreaming platforms.

In Chinese, reality TV is called *zhenrenxiu* 真人秀 (literally, ‘real person shows’) – in this case, ‘real people’ is a stand-in for ‘ordinary people’. During its early period of development beginning in 2005, the predominant format was adapted mainly from the US, Europe, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (Berg 2011). However, in China it developed differently in that, ‘rather than a reflection of reality, reality television is understood first and foremost as *entertaining programming*’ (Yang 2014: 517, emphasis added), as opposed to even the most produced versions of ordinary reality. Until recently, popular Chinese reality programmes were mostly in two subgenres: ‘reality talent contests and dating programs’ (ibid.: 517). First, this was due to their intrinsic popular appeal as entertainment by including ordinary people as the main proponents of the show; second, this was the case because other prominent subgenres such as ‘current affairs analysis or political talk shows are not encouraged or permitted’ (Shei 2013: 59). As a medium, television faces stricter scrutiny at the level of production than livestream channels that are exclusively online because ordinary life as displayed on television must be sanctioned by the state media agency before it can be broadcast. As the state censorship agencies gradually learnt to elaborately regulate the reality programming sector – such as banning voting by the audience – reality television production also adapted and became competent at ‘dancing in spite of or perhaps even because of the chains’ (Sun 2007: 201). For example, the hugely popular dating show *If You Are the One* serves to ‘reinforce and approve good social practice, moral courage, and conventional values’ (Shei 2013: 62) of the legitimate culture while sanitising the portrayal of the uninhibited ‘real’ – that is, whatever is considered uncivilised does not appear on television.

In many instances of discussing reality television, ordinary people/life and real people/life are used interchangeably (Deery 2015: 31), in which the ordinary is recast as ‘previously unmediated’ (ibid.: 32) and therefore real. As a televisual anchor (Bonner 2003), liveness becomes the crucial theoretical device that ‘both fuels and is fuelled by a belief in television’s capability to present

an *unmediated reality*' (Daubs 2011: 82, emphasis added). This desire for unmediated reality is acutely problematised in the sub-field of reality TV studies: the first but always tricky question that emerges from the rise of reality TV is its reality status. Critiquing the reality status of television, especially from the socio-cultural perspective, becomes a banal argument, as 'viewers have much the same reaction to reality television as the savvy punditry who reflexively emphasise the mediated artificial character of reality formats' (Andrejevic 2014: 42). Mark Andrejevic calls this a 'panic-stricken production of the real ... it is not the promised access to the real that participates in the logic so much as the incitation of a savvy response that desperately seeks to preserve the principle of a seemingly threatened reality' (ibid.). In other words, viewers are attentive to the 'unreal' aspects of reality TV as a method of producing the real. Questioning the unreality of reality TV is thus a crucial if not intrinsic part of the televisual performativity and cannot not be resolved within the medium itself. Misha Kavka (2008: 9) even argues that the televisual presence affectively produces a 'community of engagement' or 'zone of intimacy' that is 'not strictly illusory or a dissimulation'.

Similar arguments are made in the studies of more recent 'user-generated' video content, such as webcam sites (abbreviated as cam sites) in the late 1990s and, later, YouTube. Theresa M. Senft's (2008: 15) ethnographic research on cam-site viewers shows that 'they enjoy the images, sounds, and textual interactions transpiring on their screens while simultaneously engaging in sustained critiques of the "so real" that put most reporters and academics to shame'. As YouTube has become the dominant platform of video consumption (at least in the West), we arrive at another contradiction: 'On the one hand, the YouTube audience tends to see amateur video diaries as more real than what they see on television. On the other hand, the audience has greater awareness of the constructed nature of media artefacts' (Strangelove 2010: 75).

As the socio-technical culmination of the few early individual webcams, the emergence of livestreaming platforms in China is not merely the carving out of a new space and cultivating its own viewership but also filling a void left by the planned 'inadequacy' of Chinese reality TV programming with the least objectionable content. Livestreaming media largely prevents ordinary people's unhinged performance from having to pass through the hands of producers (let alone censors), and therefore it massively diversifies its subgenres. It can be argued that this proliferation of livestreams since 2014 is an exponentially multiplied version of Voci (2010)'s 'online small-screen cinema', which documented the early development of online video culture. However, our other thread of investigation, which is more specific to the Chinese internet and

akin to livestreamers' own socio-histories of streaming, is that livestreaming platforms as mass entertainment are far more intricately related to, or even critiques of, the televisual, rather than the cinematic. If the 'on-the-spot realism' of the 'New Documentary Movement' represented a rebellion against socialist realism, livestreaming can be seen as more of an organic – albeit very contradictory – democratised desire for 'real life' against the backdrop of artificiality on Chinese television.<sup>3</sup>

Although a dynamic machinery of real-time censorship is already in place for livestreaming platforms (employing a large human team and complex algorithms), these platforms are certainly not controlled as strictly as reality television. At the very least, most livestreaming broadcasters have the freedom to decide what they want to do on a livestream within the parameters of what is allowed, as designated by the platform. Furthermore, in terms of the digital infrastructure, the liveness of livestreams also promises that they will be more 'real' than the heavily produced and pre-recorded reality television. Viewers are also present in the chatroom and can directly challenge the broadcaster if they question their authenticity. As shown by from the limited literature on the viewing culture of Chinese reality television, the relative lack of concern with authenticity seems to contradict the arguments posited by Andrejevic (2014). As Yang (2014: 534) writes:

Audiences are not necessarily motivated to discuss the authenticity of the contestants. In a country where telling the truth from a lie, a genuine from a fake, has been a basic survival skill ... as far as some *China's Got Talent* viewers are concerned, all they care about is getting some fun out of the show.

Surveying *If You Are the One*, Shei (2013: 62) similarly argues that Chinese audiences 'apparently believe or want to believe that this is real and help to make it real'. Although I cannot confirm the validity of Yang and Shei's arguments ethnographically because I have not researched television viewers, they raise an interesting point. Livestream viewership is certainly not passive or unconcerned about the real, as seen in Yang's (2014) assessment. In contrast,

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3 The 'New Documentary Movement', as described by the book *The New Chinese Documentary Film Movement* (2010), is represented by a generation of influential Chinese documentary filmmakers such as Wang Bing and Wu Wenguang who rebelled against the dominant way of documenting reality since the 1990s. The movement champions 'on-the-spot-realism' and its main themes portray social inequality and marginalised groups during China's market reform.

these viewers often have heightened awareness of the authenticity of the livestreamed *richang*, precisely because livestreaming media is defined as, or at least promised to be, superior to television – as encapsulated by Ligan’s statement: ‘no more fake ordinary people’. Similar to Ana Voog (2000, cited in Daubs 2011: 88)’s utopian views on the advent of webcam subculture empowering ordinary people, he declared in 2015: ‘now ordinary people on livestreams can take the initiative to eliminate distorted representations’.

As I illustrate in the following figures, viewers and streamers regularly have all sorts of dialogues on the subject of realism and the authenticity of the streamers’ *richang*, sometimes ad nauseam. Ordinary life and the bland and tenacious process of personal development over a long period – as shown, verified, inspected, and interrogated on livestreams – forms the affective integrity of livestreaming media. Although I still use a televisual yardstick, as it remains relevant to the ordinary theory of livestreaming media, it is necessary to unpack how this affective integrity operates. The crucial question is thus not whether livestreams are more real than, and therefore superior to, television but how ordinary affects are channelled, circulated, and (un)managed between streamers and viewers.

#### 4 Chuan’ge: The Affective Ecology of *Richang*

The story of Chuan’ge is emblematic of the growth and decline of an ordinary Douyu livestreamer. Chuan’ge (literally, ‘barbecue brother’) – also known flatteringly as the ‘king of barbecue’ and pejoratively as the ‘barbecue dog’ – was born to an impoverished family in Heilongjiang Province in the late 1980s. Before becoming a vendor of barbecued meat opposite a primary school in his hometown in 2014, he worked at various jobs: internet café receptionist, security guard, train conductor, and taxi driver. This job coincided with the rise of the livestreaming platform Douyu, so Chuan’ge started livestreaming in the hope of supplementing his income.

In 2015, when I discovered his Douyu channel, Chuan’ge usually broadcast his regular workday as a barbecue vendor from his laptop: preparing, cooking, serving, and, most of the time, idly talking while waiting for the next customer (see Figure 1). In the evening, he drank with his viewers via the mediation of his webcam and barrage of *danmu* and chat messages – he raised his glass in a toast to the webcam and said ‘drink up, brothers’ – more often than not, becoming inebriated before turning off the stream. New viewers who stumbled upon his channel often pondered in the chat:



FIGURE 1 Chuan'ge's channel. Screenshot taken on 21 May 2015

Why is this [referring to Chuan'ge's daily activities] broadcast worthy?  
 How did selling barbecued lamb earn him five tonnes [of fish balls]?<sup>4</sup>

Hundreds, then thousands, of viewers remained on his channel, where they listened to him bantering, jesting, whining, uttering strings of generic platitudes on life, and occasionally confessing and sobbing. As the viewership of his channel grew massively in 2016, Chuan'ge's personal life, which was broadcast almost uninterruptedly in his full-day livestreams, also gradually changed. Most notably, the minimalistic street stall selling barbecue was transformed into a regular restaurant with a storefront, and it was also bustling due to his popular Douyu channel. The intimate attraction shifted from his earlier self-deprecating self-awareness as a loser, to his relationship with his then-girlfriend, Huihui. The popular consensus among Chuan'ge's viewers was that Huihui was a 'good girl', who was involved in every aspect of his life, from doing laundry to waitressing at his thriving restaurant. Above all, Huihui did not mind Chuan'ge's 'loser mindset' (as lamented by his viewers) or his lowly upbringing and was even willing to marry him, despite the social climate of fierce competition in the 'marriage market' due to the widening gender gap

4 Fish balls are a virtual currency that viewers can win by watching and then donate to broadcasters. Five tons of fish balls could be converted to a lot of real-world money in 2015.

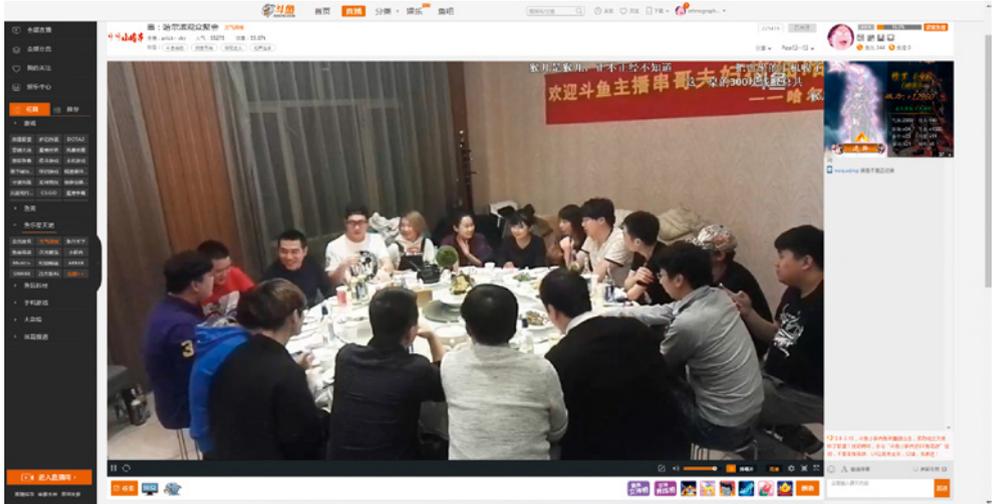


FIGURE 2 Chuan'ge's channel during his fan gathering. Screenshot taken on 8 March 2016

and class division. The trajectory of the story was nearly an urban fairy tale of someone with almost zero marriage prospects achieving major milestones in life – owning a business, a car, and property over a few years. It was upward mobility witnessed live and therefore highly ‘authentic’.

At the peak of his popularity, when Chuan'ge travelled in the northern provinces he was always surrounded by an entourage of ardent fans. By his own estimate, his fans grew from mostly single men to visibly more women and even some married couples. Figure 2 is a screenshot of a livestreamed fan gathering in Harbin, where Chuan'ge was welcomed like a celebrity, with a red banner that read ‘Welcome Douyu broadcasters Mr. and Mrs. Chuan'ge to Harbin’.

In the dramaturgy of livestreams, emotional meltdown is usually the climax and this was achieved on Chuan'ge's channel in late 2016 and early 2017. In the all-seeing collective gaze of his ‘water friends’, Chuan'ge ‘should’ have been enamoured of his life and grateful for opportunities given to him, rather than squandering them. Beginning in late 2016, Chuan'ge often muttered about Huihui on livestreams, and rumours of domestic violence began to spread among his viewers. The live theatrics peaked when Chuan'ge broke up with Huihui, and his viewers became fiercely divided about the split. More heated debates on the morality of marriage, adultery (Huihui allegedly cheated on him), and paying a bride price (Chuan'ge allegedly refused to pay it after they became engaged), ensued in a barrage of chat messages during livestreams and in an ocean of shit posting on Baidu Tieba (similar to Reddit) and QQ

(Tencent's popular instant messaging service) group chats. His reputation was severely damaged – his 'water friends' started to call him arrogant and *pengzhang* 膨胀 (literally 'swell', i.e. conceited) scum. His viewership began to dwindle, and some of his most committed fans and moderators openly boycotted his channel. On 18 August 2017, Chuan'ge was physically assaulted outside a foot massage parlour in his hometown, allegedly by non-locals (Aitijiannan, 2017). Despite his injuries, he soon began to livestream again. His story is still unfolding publicly, and that will continue as long as his livestreaming channel lasts.

Chuan'ge, as he confessed on livestreams, had a mental image of the average regular viewer on his channel as a male, single, lonely *diaosi* 屌丝 (loser) in his twenties.<sup>5</sup> Most likely, he is also struggling with poverty, exploitation, abusive employers, social isolation, low self-esteem, and incapacitating boredom because of being 'stuck' in life. Or, if he is running a small business, as Chinese workers often aspire to do, he is overworked and in constant anxiety. The lonely *diaosi* is vicariously participating in the spectacle of hypermediated and performative social life of a streamer who is similarly ordinary and is also experiencing the ephemeral upward mobility vaporised by rentier capitalism, gender gap, and a deeply stratified society. Like many of his fellow *diaosi* viewers, Chuan'ge was not well educated, worked at various 'low-end' jobs, and was emotionally vulnerable because of his deep sense of inferiority. These feelings of inferiority were most intensely demonstrated after he became intoxicated on a livestream. According to a Chuan'ge fan named Xiangzi, Chuan'ge's success was attributed to his demonstrative 'unremarkable humanity' (in Xiangzi's words) on display and his sincerity in confessing his struggles – an 'authentic *diaosi*', so to speak. Xiangzi contemplated Chuan'ge's livestream story during our face-to-face interview in 2017:

I think Chuan'ge is one of few streamers on Douyu who truly started low and made it to the top. I think the main reason for his success is his perseverance. He has been able to stick to what he does for a lot longer [than others]. Chuan'ge has been broadcasting for over two years, so his followers accumulated slowly on a daily basis [as opposed to explosive growth]. His hard work makes up for his lack of talent. Douyu started as a platform mostly trying to bombard you with eye candy [Xiangzi was alluding to the majority of female livestreamers at the time], and very little down-to-earth content like Chuan'ge.

5 *Diaosi*, literally 'dick hair', refers to someone who is impoverished in both materially and mentally. The term is discussed in detail below.

Xiangzi's reflection on Chuan'ge's success emphasises his slow accumulation of fans and regular viewers over time. At one level, this slow growth is in itself an indicator of authenticity, as his viewers are clearly not bots. At another level, the authenticity is verified by the intimacy, however contested, established between viewers and the broadcasters over time. Similar to Senft (2008: 61)'s argument on early camgirls, 'intimacy is one hallmark of social richness'. This conflicted intimacy – the hallmark of Chuan'ge's success – is a result of complex affects. Chuan'ge's livestreams over the years have encompassed the full spectrum of the affective ecology of *richang*: his daily routine was like that of any typical street vendor; his disclosure of almost all the details about his life over time, including his relationship with Huihui; explicit confessions after getting drunk; and, finally, the irresistible lure of witnessing his meltdown live. If this rapport, sense of solidarity, and resolute escapism represent the collective desire of 'water friends', the performative work of the livestreamer must satisfy this desire in order to hold onto the aforementioned rare opportunity for upward mobility. This desire of the 'ordinary man' (explicitly gendered in Chuan'ge's case) is deemed vulgar, therefore controlled and pathologised but not eliminated. The livestreaming industry flourishes by simultaneously encouraging and sanitising these ordinary desires.

## 5 Yuwen: 'All That Matters Is the Effect'

Whereas Chuan'ge offers a rare story of gradual ascension and perseverance, Yuwen's story is a one of inertia, unrelenting frailty, and the unspeakable helplessness of *richang*. Yuwen is a young disabled man living in rural Sichuan. I followed his channel from July 2016 to July 2017. His channel grew from 848 followers in July 2016 to 3,364 in July 2018, which was quite significant considering that Yuwen was never promoted by the platform nor co-opted to work with any livestreaming clans or commercial multichannel networks that can help significantly boost his viewership. Usually in his wheelchair due to a certain illness, he repeated similar everyday activities in the livestream: cooking on a charcoal barbecue, slowly and methodically consuming buns, soup, and Sichuanese pickled vegetables, stretching in the evening while listening to music, playing *Dungeons and Fighters* (usually gear farming without the webcam on), and chatting with viewers (intermittently while engaged in these activities). The following chat log was recorded during my first encounter with his channel on 30 July 2016 (see Figure 3), not long after he started livestreaming on Douyu, when he was initially experimenting with what he could do on a livestream.

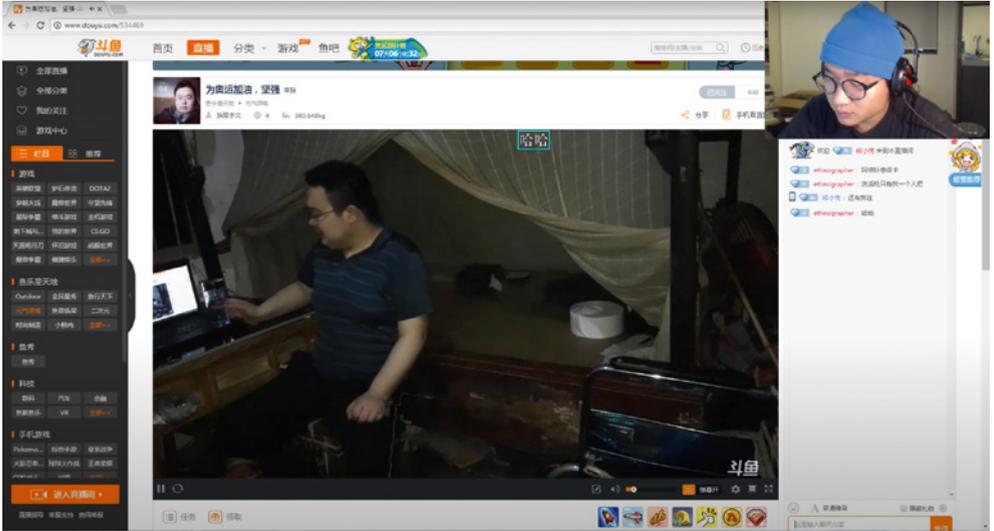


FIGURE 3 Yuwen's channel. Screenshot taken on 30 July 2016

Me (chat message): Good evening.

[Yuwen is responding to a comment sent before I started watching and recording.]

Yuwen (speaks aloud): Real can be fake; fake can be real. How can I put it? It's all to entertain everyone. When you watch livestreams, you do not care too much about whether it's real or not. *All that matters is the effect.* All you see is just a programmatic effect (*jimuxiaoguo* 节目效果). For example, in the case of those big livestreamers, you know everything they are doing is just performance, whereas if you are accusing a small streamer like me of being fake or whatever, I would prefer that you say I am just acting.

[Yuwen pauses as he reads messages on his laptop.]

Yuwen (speaks aloud): Good evening, E and No. Thank you [for watching]. I do not recognise your English-language name. [Yuwen's 'E and No' refers to my English username 'ethnographer', which I regretted immediately after registering.]

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

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

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

[As Yuwen pauses for a few seconds between sentences and organises his thoughts, I am also scrambling for questions, as I feel very insecure about asking the wrong question and type and delete several iterations of the same thing.]

Yuwen (speaks aloud): More or less, yeah. Before I just watched television or played games at night. Or just spaced out.... Just to waste time, yeah, and waste my youth, yeah. No, no, yeah, I am in it mainly for the money. But I haven't made a profit yet, though I have made some friends. Yeah, there are all kinds of things [on livestreams]. When people start to livestream for the first time, after they have done it for a while, they fall in love with this profession. So, they feel weird when they just stop livestreaming for a day. Even I feel that way now. When I don't livestream for a day, I just feel as if the day is meaningless. I would rather die. Yeah, there are a lot of things: material [referring to money], psychological, spiritual, and physical. Sorry, a slip of tongue, no body is involved.

[Yuwen is clearly embarrassed because in Chinese the term 'physical' can refer to something lewd.]

Yuwen (speaks aloud): Actually, all the stuff other livestreamers can think of, I can think of as well. All the stuff you can think of, I can as well. It is just that, sometimes, no matter how hard I try, I don't get anything out of it.

Me (chat message): But then, even if you say that you are trying to make money, you have fun as well? [I refresh the web page as the video was buffering due to my slow internet speed.] Sorry, my internet lags. [He responds, but I miss it because of video buffering.] Am I am the only one talking now?

Yuwen (speaks aloud): Please follow me if you are watching, as there are six viewers now. I think I still have not found the right method for livestreaming.

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

Me (chat message): This livestreamer's voice [viewers usually refer to a livestreamer in the third person] is very relaxing.

Yuwen (speaks aloud): That's because there is just me. If more people were here, the channel would be more lively.

Anonymous viewer 1 (chat message): You speak well.

Yuwen (speaks aloud): Not many people like my livestreaming method, and [other] people don't support you for some reason [alluding to his disability]. Good at speaking? Nah. Just normal. My good speaking ability is

very lowbrow. I think that people who are more intellectual, read more books, and more experienced are good at speaking. My speaking ability is not very good. [long pause. As his body freezes, he looks into the screen and suddenly sneezes.] It's just that I am forced to be like this. [He starts to do some stretching exercises while playing unidentified K-pop music in the background.]

## 6 Performative Context of Livestreaming Talk

Yuwen's 'programmatic effect' is a term borrowed directly from the context of television to refer to how television structures performances and manufactures effects. In claiming 'real can be fake; fake can be real', Yuwen is already approximating 'performative realism' (Gade & Jerslev 2005), which alludes to a state that vacillates between artifice and reality without a point of resolution. As suggested by the literature on reality TV, the performed ordinary is often located between transparency and artifice. Yuwen opted for accepting the intricacy of the real. The ordinariness cannot merely be raw, which renders ordinariness banal and invisible, but 'a form of improvisation that encourages *structured spontaneity*' (Deery 2015: 29; emphasis added). As Grindstaff (2012: 25–26) writes, 'ordinary people [are incorporated] into television entertainment ... to create or control the *performative context* – that is, to erect the conditions of possibility for maximalising emotional expressiveness'.

The performative context of livestreams first depends on whether the livestreamer is independent from the external role of a 'producer'. In many internet celebrity incubators, streamers were trained in stylistic or performative routines and techniques that are easy to follow and repeated without effort, called *taolu* 套路, which includes certain ways of talking and addressing viewers and particular facial expressions. It is imperative for the incubator to do this training even though the term *taolu* also has a pejorative meaning of an insincere repetitive performance. This logic of *taolu* resembles what Grindstaff and Murray (2015: 130) call 'celebrity branding': 'brands mark and standardise, rendering people and things legible within a commercial logic'. Like many who experiment with the medium of livestreaming without prior training, Yuwen gradually co-produced this performative context or 'structure' with his viewers. This performative context is highly channel specific, and a generic platform, such as Douyu, can encompass many different kinds of performative contexts, which can be categorised by gender, class, disability, streaming activity,

and so forth.<sup>6</sup> As Yuwen says, ‘if more people were here, the channel would be more lively’. The liveliness of the channel is not simply a technical matter, i.e. the affordances of the livestreaming video, but also an affective matter of interactivity and circulation of different kinds of emotional energy through online comments. Yuwen’s ‘method’ of non-performance, as he emphasised, is slightly different. Yuwen is limited to his wheelchair, but he could talk, doing so in a passive manner, in contrast to Chuan’ge’s agitated conversational style.

Paddy Scannell (1996: 23) considers ‘conversational style ... the most fundamental aspect of broadcasting’s communicative ethos’. The majority of ordinary livestreams also fundamentally depend on conversation. By ‘talk’, I also mean a ‘communicative ethos’ that is not necessarily dialogic because a streamer does not always have an interlocutor (either viewers or co-participants on the stream); even streamers with viewers sometimes have to improvise conversations or monologues in order to make the livestream ‘bearable’, in Yuwen’s own words. For instance, Chuan’ge often said he was ‘handing his heart’ (*jiaoxin* 交心) to his viewers. The affective atmosphere of confessional talk is particularly crucial when streamers want to calm down their enraged ‘water friends’ in various situations. As Christian Sorace (2019: 148) writes about Chinese televisual confessions, ‘a public confession’s ability to reassure a wounded public and restores a damaged social bond depends on its perceived sincerity’. The affective dynamics of Yuwen’s channel are vastly different from Chuan’ge’s, in that ‘talk is [for] talk’s sake’ (Scannell 1996: 4). For instance, Yuwen often experienced anxiety that his commentary was drying up, as he clearly scrambled to find something to talk about. The word *galiao* 尬聊 (embarrassed [and forced] chatter) is a fitting description of the affective state of navigating to the cul-de-sac of a conversation. Talking to oneself on a livestream has no useful purpose other than making the livestream relatable or bearable for (prospective) viewers.

Anna McCarthy (2007: 19) distinguished certain genres of reality television as a ‘painful civic pedagogy’ in which ‘people learn how to govern, and be governed by, affects such as shame and kindness’. For Yuwen, the exposure of the inner self is not simply the foundation of authenticity claims for his livestreams; rather, this intimate disclosure has a therapeutic quality, similar to what McCarthy calls ‘reality television’s quasi-therapeutic public service ethos’

6 One category on Douyu was called ‘positive energy’, which explicitly encouraged people with disabilities to include their channels in the category to ‘spread positive energy’ by ‘demonstrating perseverance despite hardship in life’. Yuwen refused to be included in this category, as he found it patronising and sometimes downright disheartening. Moreover, one of the attractions on Douyu was the spectacle of freakish bodies and disability; viewers of these channels can be disturbingly insensitive and even abusive.

(ibid.: 21). Unlike McCarthy's exposé of 'undercover philanthropy' of make-over shows as 'social reform' that end up reinforcing neoliberal values, Yuwen's monologues are 'quasi-therapeutic' in the sense that they enhance his 'sense of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and well-being' (Grindstaff & Murray 2015: 115). This self-enhancement of the 'talking cure' is particularly important for Yuwen, as a young man stayed at home most of the time because of his disability. He might not earn much from viewer donations. However, as opposed to merely offering sympathy about his disability, over time at least some of his viewers came to enjoy his banter and persona. As Brian Massumi (2002: 212) writes, 'when you affect something, you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn'. For him, livestreaming is a window onto the outside world as much as it is one into his world, a safe space co-inhabited by him and his viewers, and presents a certain veracity, in contrast to the environment in the real world.

This sense of self-development should not be viewed uncritically, as we learn from reality television. The 'everyday pedagogy' of reality television 'mobilises the intensity of such passions as shame and contempt for its intimate cultural politics' (Highmore 2011: 16). Yuwen's constant self-effacement, humility, and sense of shame – especially when faced with insults and repetitive and insensitive questions about his disability – can be seen as a form of pre-emptive self-defence and an example of how the governing role of shame and scolding enforces the politics of (in)civility on livestreams. In locating himself in the open marketplace of livestreaming platform, by default Yuwen conforms to the commercial logic of livestream exhibitionism, no matter how much he obliquely refuses to be labelled as someone who (in his words) 'sells his trauma and misery'. As reflected in my follow-up interviews, for his viewers, it is less a matter of feeling intense guilt (as I was sometimes overwhelmed by guilt via his livestreams) than of bearing witness to 'the theatre of suffering' (McCarthy 2007). Pili Wuwang's confession in the following section is another example of how insensitive viewer comments can drive the streamer to the point of abjection.

## 7 Pili Wuwang's Money Shot: 'I Am Just a *Diaosi*'

Pili Wuwang (literally, 'the king of breakdancing') or Dawang (literally, 'king', as his fans call him) was a migrant worker who worked at Foxconn on an assembly line before he started working full time as a streamer. His main livestream activities include dancing, eating, and chatting with viewers. His livestream channel lasted for almost two years, before he eventually

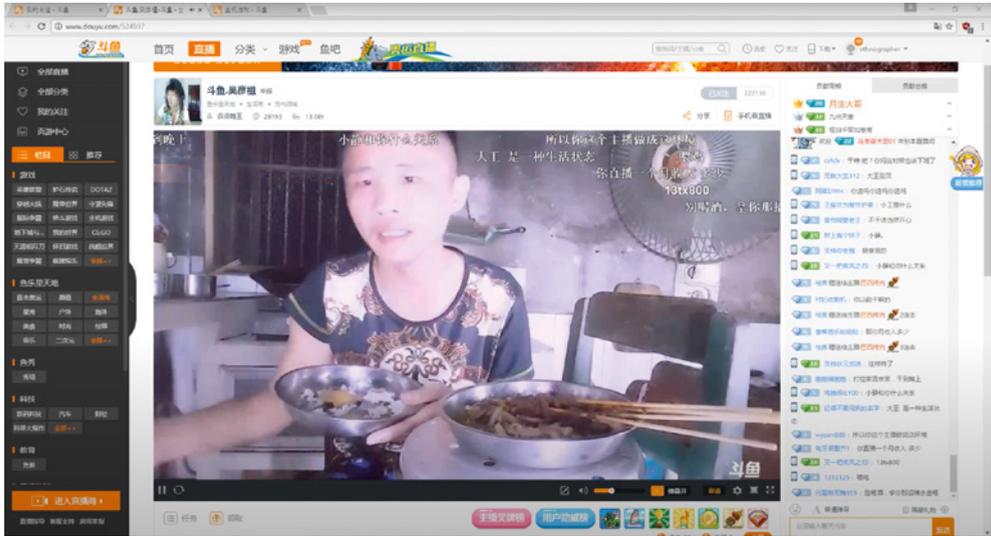


FIGURE 4 Pili Wuwang's channel. Screenshot taken on 13 August 2016

quit streaming because of the low pay and was said to have gone back to factory work. The following chat log is the transcript of my *chafang* livestream recorded 13 August 2016 (see Figure 4).

Dawang (speaks aloud): You all want to watch a real livestream. For example, Xiangxi Xiaopang just streams his daily life.<sup>7</sup> Eating, talking with viewers – that is enough. He didn't go to fancy restaurants. My stream is all about my daily life plus some dancing. That's already very good. We need the real side, not the pretentious stuff. If they want to make or [already] have money, that's their business.

I am not lecturing you; the content of my show is like this. I am not flexible.

To be honest, I already have plenty of content [for my livestream] with my ordinary stuff and dancing. If I can stream while I working, that's really great. Therefore, if some of these streamers go somewhere and eat fancy food, so what? I am not even jealous. I am just a *diaosi*. [Dawang pauses and responds to a viewer comment.] Yes, they are simply consuming [the expensive food] for the sake of 'face' [i.e. to make themselves look good].

7 Xiangxi Xiaopang is another rural livestreamer whom I followed for a year. His story is included in my video essay, available at <https://displacements.jhu.edu/precarious-colli-sions-field-encounters-with-mobility-in-east-asia/>.

Dawang (speaks aloud): Somebody told me just now that my lifestyle is 'comfortable'. That's not true. Apart from livestreaming, I still have other things to do. I have no girlfriend. I don't know whom to talk to. I talk to you [referring to viewers] when I stream, but when I get off the stream, I don't know whom to talk to. My family is not at home. When I am not working, I sometimes watch other livestreams. My mum is not home most of the time. After ending work at the epidemic-prevention station, she just goes straight to sleep. My dad works at a construction site and is rarely home. I am truly happy when I talk to you guys. Livestreaming is my job. After I finish streaming, I need to feed the chickens.... I wish I had a girlfriend, so I could lay in her arms when I am tired and take a stroll [with her] after dinner.

Anonymous viewer 1: Just hire a prostitute.

[Dawang started to sound agitated.]

Dawang (speaks aloud): No, I cannot hire a prostitute. It takes money. My money is hard earned. I rely on donations from you guys: fish fins (another virtual currency similar to fish balls), fish balls. I cannot spend this money on prostitutes. This is totally against my sense of morality. I'd rather save this money for my own future [business] endeavours.

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

Dawang (speaks aloud): I am not drunk. I don't deserve this. I have worked for many years. I have known quite a few women. After I quit my job at Foxconn, I started working as a streamer. Then I stopped going out with women. It has been over half a year. I just chat with you guys, then I shower, do laundry, and sleep – then the next day I do it all over again. I have had girlfriends but still ended up single. I believe 85 percent of the 'post-1990s' [males] are single and will not find wives [Dawang is exaggerating the number to make his point on the gender gap and social inequality].

Anonymous viewer 3 (chat message): Bullshit. You must be drinking fake alcohol [fake alcohol made with poor quality ingredients is very common in China and the word is often used as a joke to say someone is getting drunk too soon].

Dawang (speaks aloud): Sure, I can find a girlfriend but finding a wife is totally a different matter.

Anonymous viewer 4 (chat message): In this society, everything [referring to relationships] is easy once you have money. What is your monthly income?

Dawang (speaks aloud): Stop asking this question. I cannot say it here. If you ask again, I will commit suicide.

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

Dawang (speaks aloud): I spend about RMB 15 on grocery shopping every day, and I do not buy expensive stuff... Of course, I am from the countryside. I remember that when I worked at the factory, right after they received their monthly wages, a lot of workers I knew just went straight to brothels and karaoke parlours. At the end of the month, they often ran out of money. So many young people are like this.

Anonymous viewer 6 (chat message): Dawang, do you know how long I have observed you? Since you were drinking directly from the electric water kettle [Dawang often drinks directly from the kettle as a stunt].

Dawang (speaks aloud): I don't know what I am doing. I just talk. I don't know what else I can do.

Anonymous viewer 7 (chat message): Your parents work every day, and you just waste your days away.

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

Dawang (speaks aloud): Livestreaming is my job. I work hard to provide livestream content. This is my work.

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

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

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

## 8 The Ordinary Impasse of *Diaosi*

In addition to the idea of performative context, Laura Grindstaff (2002) also builds on the term 'money shot' – 'the eruption of raw real emotion on-screen' (Grindstaff & Murray 2015: 111). These moments of spectacular outbursts of confessions, stressful arguments, and volatile situations are the best examples of the unpredictable production of affect, which often become the most memorable events of livestream channels. Liveness presupposes not just routine

and regularity – that is, ordinariness – but, more crucially, the potential disruptions of such normalcy. As Patricia Mellencamp (1992: 80) reminds us, ‘anxiety is television’s affect’. And the same can be said for livestreams.

The concurrent viewers of Dawang’s channel grew by the hundreds during the outburst of confession described above. The point of contention was Dawang’s authenticity as an ordinary person. Dawang attempted to prove his ‘membership’ as a *diaosi* by claiming that he had no money and no girlfriend. In this case, Dawang equates *diaosi* with ordinariness – by default, he acknowledges that monetary as well as emotional poverty is the societal norm. The dilemma of ordinariness as a crucial resource of performativity is that once the performer is accepted as ‘being ordinary’ in one specific performativity by their viewers, shifting or transcending this accepted performativity of ordinariness or poverty invalidates the earlier structures of affective legitimacy. As Grindstaff (2014: 341) writes, ‘performativity becomes a quality of the cultural construction of ordinariness and the cultural construction of ordinariness requires performativity’. This circular structure is best exemplified by the contradictory nature of the term *diaosi*.

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

The fantasy of the ‘moral-intimate-economic’ (Berlant 2011: 2) good life – from the perspective of a single young Chinese male ‘entering society’ (i.e. adulting) – can be summarised as having a stable and decently compensated job, owning property (or more than one, for greater security), and being happily married with child(ren). This fantasy has become ‘cruel’ because the sheer volume of competition in the ‘marriage market’ and high property prices have made it unattainable. Instead of imposing a class analysis, I would argue that the affective politics of precarity are to some degree the dominant undercurrent of livestreaming platform, at least in its sectarian politics that ‘take pride’ in this precarity as proof of authenticity. The good life may well have already become out of reach, and attaining it ‘no longer

masks the living precarity of this historical present' (ibid.: 196). In claiming to be a *diaosi*, Dawang becomes vulnerable to an ordinary impasse and to anxiety. Dawang adapted to a life of relative discipline – in his words, not squandering money on non-essentials – without any assurance of futurity. The prospect of starting a business, which is a common aspiration of many Chinese workers due to the prevalent exploitation in most occupations that rely on manual labour, remains hypothetical. While insisting on livestreaming as his proper job, Dawang maintains the 'good life' as a façade that sustains normalcy; however, he denies that he will succeed in the desirable pursuit of 'finding a wife'. 'Upward mobility tips over into the impasse, into phrases like "it is what it is"' (ibid.: 204). Dawang states, 'I work hard, eat cheap shit, and I do not have a girlfriend ... [but] I just put up with it'. Berlant remarks: 'Shame is the trace of disavowed class anxiety, the darker side of aspiration's optimism' (ibid.: 209).

In Dawang's confessional outburst, *diaosi* is better understood as an ordinary affect, in which he affects and is affected by his viewers. In validating his claim to ordinariness as impasse, the nebulous definition of *diaosi* demonstrates the politics of the ordinary man, in which 'the unfinished quality of the ordinary is so much a deficiency as a *resource*' (Stewart 2007: 127, emphasis added). Ordinariness is performed in relation to the established roles of gender and class – this performativity vacillates greatly depending on the situation (e.g. whom you are arguing for/against) – rather than as an accurate representation of class and gender hierarchy. It is more of a politics of affective withdrawal than a politics of entitlement. One of the most popular accusations against a livestreamer who gradually achieves fame is that of becoming conceited [*pengzhang* – literally 'swell']. It describes someone who transitions from an ordinary person prior to media exposure to a self-obsessed celebrity, however ordinary they remain even after achieving fame. As it has become a popular slang on Douyu, *pengzhang* is often used in situations of memes, jokes, and daily rituals of comments, rather than as a serious insult. Dawang cannot afford to be conceited not only because he is, indeed, poor in real life but also because poverty is the indispensable performative resource and legitimacy for his ordinariness.

## 9 Parable for a Low-Affect Society

The ordinary impasse of a *diaosi* is well encapsulated by the saying 'working [*dagong* 打工] is not possible; I will never *dagong* in my life' expressed by

'Qie Guevara' (in Mandarin pronunciation, *qie* [steal] sounds like Che). Qie Guevara's original name was Zhou Liqi. He was arrested multiple times for petty theft since 2007 and a video of his interview at a police station in 2012 went viral in July 2016. When a reporter asked him, 'why steal and why not find a job if you are healthy?', he responded with that saying. Several months before the video went viral in 2016, he was sentenced 4 years and 6 months in prison for multiple thefts and robberies. While he was in prison, the viral video made him an internet celebrity and a 'spiritual leader' for many who were fed up with working life. In April 2020, after he was released from prison, multiple livestreaming platforms approached him with million-renminbi contracts, but he refused and claimed he was not interested in his unintended internet fame. If he ever begins to livestream, he is most likely to replicate a performativity of ordinary affects similar to that of Chuan'ge, Yuwen, and Dawang, and he would probably struggle to satisfy his viewers' high expectations. His fame as Qie Guevara, in thousands of memes and mashup videos circulated online since 2012, does not belong to his alone, nor does he have control over his own public image. The rhetorical question posed by the reporter assumes the goal of the 'good life' for which many ordinary people strive but failed to achieve, leading to their disillusion. Qie Guevara's response went viral precisely because it resonated with many who never felt brave enough to replicate his outright refusal to work.

As Sun Wanning (2007: 201) writes, 'a history of Chinese television is necessarily an account of Chinese society and its people becoming modern'. Liu Fengshu documents a similar historical period from the 90s until the early 2000s, claiming that in China's 'dual modernity' of 'economic liberalism and political authoritarianism' (2010: 196), Chinese youths were simultaneously radicals pursuing individual expression and 'dismal pragmatists bent on the goal of the "middle-class dream" based on material achievement' (ibid.: 76). My ethnography of early livestreams is bound to become history very soon, in which livestreaming media is also an account of Chinese society in a specific spatio-temporality, against the backdrop of a Chinese modernity that can no longer boast rapid and high economic growth at all costs but, instead, attempts to maintain social ties in times of slow or even stagnant growth. If anything, livestreaming platforms exemplify an emergent affective politics in anticipation of the coming recession. In a sense, Japan already provides a roadmap of similar generational narratives – for example, the younger generation being apathetic and passive – and a future of 'the age of subtraction' (Roquet 2016: 136). As always, this roadmap will have Chinese characteristics. If the dream of the 'good life' (which is a dubious abstraction in itself) has reached an

impasse, perhaps it is not worth working overtime for the future burn-out that lies ahead with so little reward. Those who succeeded in joining the middle class, having worked their way up in the 1980s to the early 2000s, flaunt their designer brands, but those now coming of age are trending towards 'embracing impotency' (ibid.: 136), and some sections of the underclass have given up on the fantasy of the 'good life'. The ordinary affects of livestreams offer both evidence and a parable for a low-affect society that no longer thrives on unalloyed optimism.

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