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**The consumption of banality: live-streaming China**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this essay the author describes and critically reflects on the online live-streaming phenomena in mainland China. Within the last three years (2015 - 2018), online live-streaming became one of the most popular topics and potent business models in China. This relatively new media form is by now wildly accepted, to such an extent that it is used by different state departments in several cities, such as the fire department, traffic police, the communist youth league and so on and so forth. In June 2017, the number of live-stream users who had installed a streaming application was over 300 million, that is, an astonishing 45.6% of all internet users in China. In this essay the author critically reflects on the development of this new social phenomena by creating a brief genealogy of live-streaming from its origin in game-streaming in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century until today in 2018. Critical questions are asked about whether embracing whatever change called “high-tech” without hesitation, absorbing whatever new elements from any advanced models without any criticism, could cause other results worse than being technologically backwards? What happens when our private life become increasingly transparent? What does it mean to consume videos of people eating noodles in real-time? What does this desire tell us? The author also ponders upon the potential political potentiality of live-streaming and asks whether live-streaming can be used against the government, who control their online activity on a day to day basis? She also reflects on how artists can use live-streaming to make performance pieces? And, what role would chance encounters play within this context?

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# 1. Introduction

What is live-streaming? Live-streaming refers to online streaming media simultaneously recorded and broadcasted in real to the viewer.<sup>1</sup> Within the last three years (2015 - 2018), online live-streaming became one of the most popular topics and potent business models in China. This relatively new media form is by now wildly accepted, to such an extent that it is used by different state departments in several cities, such as the fire department, traffic police, the communist youth league and so on and so forth. In June 2017, the number of active live-stream users who had installed a streaming application was over 300 million, that is, an astonishing 45.6% of all internet users in China! In this essay, I will describe the history of this phenomena, from the birth of online live-stream gaming to the present day live-streaming form in China, and critically reflect on some of the issues that these phenomena raise from a cultural, socio-economic, and political perspective.

## 2. Pre-online live-streaming audio era

Long before the emergence of online live-streaming in China, there was game-streaming. Game-streaming started as a TV-program on a sport channel on China Central Television (hereafter CCTV) in the beginning of 2004.<sup>2</sup> It received a lot of attention and interest from the Chinese TV audience. By April, the same year, however, “due to the negative influence on teenagers”, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China department (hereafter SARFT) decided to censor game-streaming TV programs.<sup>3</sup> (At the time, perhaps with good reasons, the Chinese government and, more generally, Chinese parents, had started to become increasingly worried about the fact that their teenage children had become addictive to video-games. In fact, a few years later, in 2006, a treatment centre was set up by Mr. Yang YongXin, assistant dean of a public hospital in LinQi city. Mr. Yongxin controversially used electric-shock methods to treat the supposedly game-addicted teenagers. By 2008, Mr. Yongxin’s controversial activities were reported by the CCTV, and the year after a public discussion prompted the government to publish

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<sup>1</sup> “to broadcast or receive live video and sound of an event over the Internet.” See Oxford learned dictionaries (2018).

<sup>2</sup> CCTV is the main state television broadcaster in the People’s Republic of China. It is considered to be the main voice of the government. See China Central Television (2018)

<sup>3</sup> The news of the censorship was published on a law consulting website called “101”, on which one can read about new policies and laws in the People’s Republic of China. See 101.com (2004)

a paper that stated that the game-addiction was not a sickness to be treated by such methods.)<sup>4</sup> (See figure 1 in the appendix) After the ban, TV-game live-streaming in mainland China disappeared from the public eye for some time, until it emerged again in the year of 2005. It was the year when World of Warcraft (hereafter WOW) arrived in China.<sup>5</sup> WOW is a world-famous Massive-Multiplayer-Online-Role-Playing-Game (hereafter MMORPG), which was released in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment, an American, California based, company.<sup>6</sup> Today, in the year of 2018, WOW still holds “the Guinness World Record for the most popular MMORPG by subscribers”.<sup>7</sup> Due to the immense popularity of the MMORPG WOW on the Chinese mainland (the open test in 2005 registered as many as five hundred thousand users playing, “questing”, and, as it were, virtually killing each-other, at the same time!)<sup>8</sup>, an online communication application for the game was requested by the numerous dedicated users. As a response to the request, several instant audio applications were released by different companies, specifically designed for the chatting groups built into WOW. In the year of 2008, with the advantage of “free-of-charge”, high audio quality and stable high-speed network services, the application “YY audio”, designed by a Chinese private company called YY, became the most popular instant audio application among the game users.<sup>9</sup> (See Figure 2 in the appendix)

Soon thereafter, the YY company discovered certain user behaviours that could not escape their notice. For instance, many users would sing and chat with each-other in the same audio-room as an extended leisure activity of the gaming. (See 3 in the appendix) Based on this observation, the YY company created a “Singing Room” of high entertainment value, considering the popularity of the arguably most popular social space in China, the karaoke room. YY’s “Singing room” is said to be the earliest form of the phenomena, which we today call online live-streaming, consisting of private, hitherto, anonymous gamers. It marked a major moment in the

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. Yongxin is still a controversial figure in China and there is still a public discussion regarding this methods in Chinese media. In one article he was even described as a “devil still at large.” See Newqq.com (2016)

<sup>5</sup> See Blizzard entertainment (2018)

<sup>6</sup> “Blizzard Entertainment® is a premier developer and publisher of entertainment software. After establishing the Blizzard Entertainment label in 1994, the company quickly became one of the most popular and well-respected makers of computer games. By focusing on creating well-designed, highly enjoyable entertainment experiences, Blizzard Entertainment has maintained an unparalleled reputation for quality since its inception.” See Blizzard entertainment (2018)

<sup>7</sup> See Blizzard entertainment (2018)

<sup>8</sup> See Sina (2005)

<sup>9</sup> YY is the leading live-streaming social media platform in China. Today YY has 76.5 million Mobile Monthly Active Users. In 2017 the revenue was USD 1,782,1 million. See YY (2018)

history of live-streaming in China, namely, the shift from live-streaming on TV to the Internet – where, in fact, the users could more easily evade the control of the SARFT department. One could say that this was the birth of a new grass-root entertainment industry in mainland China.

### **3. Intermezzo: grass-root culture**

Let's pause here for a brief moment and reflect on the history of “grassroots culture” within the context of mainland China. The term or notion of “grass-root culture” was imported to mainland China from the US and first translated to Chinese in the nineteen eighties. The Chinese translation “Cao Gen Wen Hua” is literal. It is a new term associated with so-called “modern” culture. However, a similar term had existed since ancient times in China, namely “xia li ba ren”. It was coined during the Warring States period (453 - 221 BC). “Xia li ba ren” is a name of a traditional folk song. When a musician (whom is not known to us by name) sang “xia li ba ren”, so the legend goes, over thousands of people followed him in the streets. Moments later, when he sang other more sophisticated songs, the followers decreased gradually. And when he sang the last song called “yang chun bai xue”, which was the most sophisticated of them all, only a few followers remained. Afterwards, when this story had entered the popular literature canon, a new definition of “xia li ba ren” and “yang chun bai xue” was created, and so, the scission between popular art forms (low culture, many followers) and elite art forms (high culture, few followers) was firmly established. The terms spread from the world of literature and soon became accepted cultural terms, terms that have been used in the Chinese language long before the arrival of the term “grass-root culture”. However, the notion of the Western “grass-root culture” a bit different meaning in the Chinese context, as often happens with imported Western terms (i.e. “Marxism with Chinese characteristics”, “Capitalism with Chinese characteristics etcetera”). At first the notion specifically referred to rural culture perhaps because the enormous economic, and cultural, difference between the urban and the rural areas had created a geographical division between high (urban) and low (rural) culture?

Now, if we fast forward to the first and second decade of the twentieth first century, Weibo (Chinese Facebook, released in 2009), WeChat (Chinese messenger, released in 2011), two of the most popular Chinese social media platforms, became associated with “grass-root-culture”. Why? The Chinese internet users were not only using these two social media platforms to share their daily life trivia with other users (i.e. uploading images of one's breakfast), but rather using



them as public platforms to reveal or comment on some social or political events which could not be shown in the traditional state-owned media. Since then, the notion of grass-root culture has been associated with social media in mainland China. In this way, we could say that online live-streaming, the newest form of social media, is also, in some way or another, attached to the notion of commenting on things that are normally censored in state-owned media. This means that live-stream media is a political weapon potentially capable of starting a political grass root movement.

Here we should also like to take the opportunity to mention another term that was invented by Chinese internet users. The term we are thinking of is “dick hair culture” (“Diao Si”), referring to “loser” or “plebeian” culture.<sup>10</sup> It was coined on an online forum and became popular among users in the year of 2012. From the very beginning it was a term associated with the self-identification of a specific social group, those so-called “unattractive” youngsters from the countryside who came to work in the cities, who carried with them an unprocurable dream of buying a car and an apartment in the city. The term gained a lot of resonance from various internet users and so, more and more young people started to use this term to identify themselves, including the comparatively privileged youngsters who were born in the cities. The fact that the gap between the rich and the poor has increased enormously during the latest thirty years of unprecedented rapid economic development, has, needless to say, fuelled loads of social anger across the entire social strata of society. Perhaps this is the reason why the “dick hair culture” has eaten up and taken over the “grass-root culture”, as social anxiety rapidly spreads on social media? The spirit of witty, social and political criticism<sup>11</sup>, which the term grass-root culture in the context of Chinese internets initially was referring to, has gradually been covered over by, or at least entangled in, dick-hair. What we have today is not a popular grass-root movement carrying a spirit of witty social criticism which the social media sparked at its beginnings, but rather a grass-root *entertainment* movement that, seemingly, leaves no space for serious critical thought. Witty, and

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<sup>10</sup> “The term *diaosi* originated as an insult for a poor, unattractive young person who stayed at home all day playing video games, with dim prospects for the future -- in other words, a loser. Yet as the term went viral on the Internet, Chinese youth from all backgrounds began to embrace it.” See Zhang C. et al. (2013)

<sup>11</sup> “The **Grass Mud Horse** or **Cǎonímǎ** (草泥马) is a Chinese Internet meme widely used as a form of symbolic defiance of the widespread Internet Censorship in China. It is a play on the Chinese words “cao ni ma” (艹你妈), literally, “fuck your mother”, and is one of the so-called 10 mythical creatures created in a hoax article on Baidu Baike in early 2009 whose names form obscene puns. It has become an Internet chat forum cult phenomenon in China and has garnered worldwide press attention, with videos, cartoons and merchandise of the animal (which is said to resemble the alpaca, having appeared).” See Wikipedia (2018)

serious, social and political criticism, which was flourishing just a few years ago, has today become an elite culture practiced by a few privileged souls (such as the world-famous artist Ai Wei Wei)<sup>12</sup>, while passive entertainment culture, far removed from politics, as is proper to a consumer society, is dominating the scene, more than ever.

#### **4. PC show-room live-streaming era**

After the great success of “YY audio”, the YY company, which had the largest number of users, seized the opportunity and developed its own live-streaming website in the year of 2008. (See figure 4 in the appendix) On this website, users could play simple, locally released games and sing and chat with other users in “private rooms,” owned by private companies dedicated to making as much money as possible. That is to say, by letting the users create the content, the owners of the website could save enormous amounts of money with the help of workers that laboured for free (also known as *users*), which they and their clients profited on via targeted advertising and so on and so forth. This new development expanded the market to a great extent since they started to target non-WOW users as well and thereby they managed to bring, for lack of a better term, “ordinary people” into the fold. Technically speaking, the shift from audio to video, that is, by bringing in a visual element (i.e. moving images), created the present-day form of online live-streaming.

It was in this moment, during the Olympic year of 2008, that another live-streaming website emerged, which had a similar content structure as YY’s. It was named “Six rooms”.<sup>13</sup> In “Six Rooms”, the concept of “show room” was applied, which resembled the singing and dancing talent shows that were popular on Chinese TV at the time. Porn is illegal in China but with the help of the internet, users managed to create ways, as often happens, to evade this delicate state-censorship. This is probably the most likely reason why “Six rooms” later on became an “iconic” online night club, a side-effect of which was a break with its ordinary, if you like, more prude users. However, it did not mean that “Six rooms” lost numbers in users. Rather, the opposite was,

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<sup>12</sup> Ai Wei Wei “has employed an array of digital media platforms as the primary means to communicate and interact with his followers, both within China and worldwide. From his extensive blogging activities to his prolific use of Twitter and Instagram, as well as his creation of satirical memes and online videos, audio recordings and photos, Ai has harnessed the power of the Internet as a creative tool for public expression and discussion.” See Wei Wei. A. (2015)

<sup>13</sup> “Six rooms” is a private company owned by Beijing Six Rooms Technology Co., Ltd.

unsurprisingly, the case. Unsurprisingly, since internet users are globally speaking drawn to erotic online content like moths to fire in the night (and eventually, like the moths, they are consumed, like we all are, by what they are attracted or addicted to...) <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, because of the popularity of an online night club with pornographic content, “Six rooms” gained a lot of attention. And by 2010, the term “casters with contract”, which specifically targeted female video casters, was announced. (See figure 5 and 6 in the appendix) This was a monumental time in the history of Chinese internets when online live-streaming reached industrial proportions.

In an interview <sup>15</sup> with one of the female casters-with-contract we learn that she needs to get up at 05:00am in the morning, apply make-up for an hour, eat breakfast, catch the bus, and arrive in the office in order to start to live-stream at 07:00am. She does not clock-out until 04.00pm in the afternoon. After a three-hour break, she goes back to the office at 07.00pm and works until dawn. At night, she tells us, there is normally no public transportation available, and it is too expensive for her to take a taxi. So, given these circumstances she rather sleeps in her live-streaming room, that is to say, her office. In the beginning, she did not have many followers, and she had to work for over fourteen hours per day but only earned a few thousands renminbi per month. <sup>16</sup> After a few months of hard-working, however, she completely changed her appearance - fashionable clothes, nicer hair-cut and a “better-shaped” slim body - which gave results. Now she earned over ten thousand renminbi per month, which is to say at least double the average salary in Chinese cities. About her work, she tells us that she is a bit confused about it herself. She mentions that she speaks in fragments because she need to take care of several different types of customers at the same time. When there are viewers she can chat and dance for them, we learn, but if nobody is logged into the stream room, she has to talk to herself in front of the screen. It may sound boring, she says, but it’s quick money. The main reason for doing this, except getting money to pay the rent and put food on the table, is a dream to become a real internet celebrity, and perform in

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<sup>14</sup> Agamben reflects on the palindrome “In girum imus nocte et consuminur igni” (“We turned in the night, consumed by fire”), which the situationist Guy Debord used as title to one of his films, and states that it comes from “emblematic literature and refers to moths inexorably drawn by the flame of the candle that will consume them,” and writes that the moth drawn to the fire refers to amorous passion or “in some rare cases, to imprudence in politics or war.” See Agamben, G. (2015), p. xviii.

<sup>15</sup> See IFENG (2018)

<sup>16</sup> The average salary in cities in China is around USD900/month.

advertising and TV shows. Perhaps then and only then, she ponders, she could afford to buy a car and apartment in the city by herself without the support of her family.

## 5. Game live-streaming era

Above we mentioned the important role the MMORPG WOW played in the development of live-streaming in China. Now, by 2011, another game called “League of Legends” (hereafter LOL), which was released in 2009 by Riot Games, an American video game developer (that had nothing to do with political riots as we traditionally understand it, i.e. protesting government policies in the streets and the like), entered China. LOL was not a MMORPG, it was a MOBA, a Multiplayer-Online-Battle-Area game, in which players assume the role of an unseen “summoner” that control a “champion” with unique abilities and battle against a team of other players or computer-controlled “champions.”<sup>17</sup> It completely changed the map of Chinese online live-streaming. From WOW to LOL, the online game live-streaming audience showed their uncompromising loyalty to this new promising model. Watching online live-streaming had now definitely become part of the fabric of their so-called everyday life. The new habit attracted attention from several different live-streaming platforms, which helped them to expand their live-streaming business in mainland China, and make even more money through exploiting free labour, targeted advertising and so on and so forth.

In 2011, the YY company released a plug-in for online game live-streaming. It was made for the LOL game. Soon after, in the year of 2012, the YY company established YY TV. It became the first company that expanded online game live-streaming as one of the most important components in the live-streaming business model. Then, in the year of 2014, YY TV changed its name to HUYA live-streaming.<sup>18</sup> Up till now, in the summer of 2018, at the very moment when this essay is being written, it remains one of the most popular online game live-streaming platforms.

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<sup>17</sup>“Join the league, become a legend” is the slogan of the game. See League of Legends (2018)

<sup>18</sup> “HUYA Inc. (NYSE: HUYA) is a leading game live streaming platform in China with a large and active game live streaming community. We cooperate with e-sports event organizers, as well as major game developers and publishers, and have developed e-sports live streaming as one of the most popular content genres on our platform. Building on our success in game live streaming, we have also extended our content to other entertainment genres, such as talent shows, anime and outdoor activities. The highly dynamic content and the variety of real-time interactions contribute to the overall entertainment and social experience offered on our platform, which cultivates a strong sense of belonging and effectively increase our user stickiness and time spent. Our open platform also functions as a marketplace for broadcasters and talent agencies to congregate and closely collaborate with us.” See HUYA (2018)

Based on the information above, we can now better understand the influence of the YY/HUYA company on the development of Chinese live-streaming trends. The company led live-streaming to a bigger platform that gained enormous amount of public attention. As a result of it, the state, as it were, entered the game. Zhanqi TV, a company which equity is controlled by state owned media, was created for live-streaming business in 2014.<sup>19</sup> It created a huge inflow of capital in the live-streaming business in mainland China. By 2016, the trend had mushroomed and over two hundred live-streaming platforms had been established. At that moment, “show-rooms” and gaming were still the main content of live-streaming.

This moment in the history of the Chinese internets was not only the period that live-streaming gained more and more public attention, but also the moment when a new instant text form called “Bullet Curtain” (hereafter BC) was introduced and applied into the live-streaming “experience”. BC quickly became one of the most important components of live-streaming. (See figure 7 in the appendix)

BC was first used on the Japanese video sharing website NICONICO.<sup>20</sup> The term BC was originally a military term referring to a curtain full of bullet holes, but in the context of live-streaming it referred to the instant comments from different users that were over-layered on the video screen at the very instant the comment was written (perhaps implying that their comments were as deadly, or sharp, as a bullet?). Military terms, like BC, are, by the way, suitable for the Internets, because it connects us to its origin (and perhaps the ideology which is built into it?) of the Internets, that it is in fact the product of the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, also known as DARPA.<sup>21</sup>

Back in 2007, AcFun (“anime-comic-fun”) company, known as AC, a Chinese video sharing website, had seen the potency of the BC and soon applied this text form into their anime-comic-fun website.<sup>22</sup> This new instant text form created (the illusion of) instant “interaction” for the users/spectators and quickly became the most popular text form for communication on the

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<sup>19</sup> See Zhangqi (2018)

<sup>20</sup> “Niconico—formerly, abbreviated “Nico-dō”—is a Japanese video sharing service on the web. “Niconico” or “nikoniko” is the Japanese ideophone for smiling.” See Niconico (2018)

<sup>21</sup> “For sixty years, DARPA has held to a singular and enduring mission: to make pivotal investments in breakthrough technologies for national security.” See Darpa (2018)

<sup>22</sup> “AcFun, known as AC for short, is a Chinese video sharing website. AcFun is an abbreviation of “Anime, Comic and Fun”. It is the first video sharing website which comments are overlaid on videos.” See Acfun (2018)

website. In fact, the combination of the BC and live-streaming video images, soon occupied almost all the areas of the Chinese live-stream space.

## 6. Mobile live-streaming era

Surprisingly or not, the PC live-streaming era only remained for a very short period, due to the popularization of smart phones and 4G network technology in 2015 in mainland China. It brought live-streaming to what we can call *the mobile era*. Over hundreds of live-streaming apps were launched in 2015 and marked the starting of new live-stream platforms that were baptised “all the people of the nation’s live-stream”, a term that has gradually been accepted and is commonly used by different media. (See figure 8 in the appendix)

“Quan Min” refers to “all the people” (of the nation) in Chinese. The character on the left, “Quan”, originally meant the high-quality jade which was buried together with the emperor in ancient times, later on it came to refer to something pure and unadulterated, then developed the meaning of completing something or to maintain something or somebody. The character on the right, “Min”, originally meant slaves whose eyes were pierced so that they became blind, later on it referred to the plebeian class, and in modern times, it means ordinary people!

In ancient Chinese language, when these two characters were combined, “Quan Min” meant “remain people” or “protect people”. However, the meaning of the term was simplified after the new China was created in 1949 to “all the people of the nation.” It was first used in Chairman Mao’s letters. Since then the meaning of the term has not changed. In Mao’s time, we were speaking of the “all the people of the nation’s steel production,” which happened during the Great Leap Forward, and today we are speaking of “all the people of the nation’s live-stream.”

The Great Leap Forward was an economic and social campaign launched by the Chinese communist party and led by Chairman Mao and lasted between 1958 to 1962. The aim of it was to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a socialist society through rapid industrialisation and collectivisation. However, the failure of it is commonly considered to have caused the Great Chinese Famine, a period which lasted between 1959 to 1961, which caused starvation that led to the death of tens of million people. Perhaps Mao’s failures were the political reason that caused the coming cultural disaster that lasted for ten turbulent years: the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976).

Here, we do not wish to dwell on the Cultural Revolution, but rather reflect on the linguistic root of the term “all the people of the nation”, which was applied on the live-streaming phenomena without hesitation, and quickly became accepted by the public as if they were *blind* to the future problems it may cause. One could speculate that another “cultural revolution” could happen after “all the people of the nation” are pierced or blinded by the light that emanate from the live-stream screens. In fact, one could say that the “ordinary people” are today slaves to digital technology, just like they were the slaves of the ancient regime in the past.

## **7. Intermezzo: the one-minute celebrity**

What does “Internet celebrity” (hereafter IC) mean? It simply means that a person has gained a lot of attention, or is generally known, among internet users because of some events or personal behaviour which either happened in-real-life or on the net. But, here, “people”, in the context of the live-stream phenomena in China, does actually mostly refer to grass-roots people, or the plebeians about which we have written about above. The ICs as social category can be divided into several different time-periods following the development of digital technology in mainland China. The first period starts in the year of 1997 when the first popular online literature forum “Under the banyan tree” (rong shu xia) was established.<sup>23</sup> Many literary amateurs were drawn, like moths to fire in the night, to this forum and started to post their novels. It did not take long until quite many of them, in fact, had become ICs, which lead to the publishing of their work in book form by official Chinese publishing companies. It was in fact a fine example of how internet popularity could lead to cash money.

Around the year of 2000, due to the improvement of broadband cellular network technology, the era of the digital image had arrived in China. Thus, the method to gain attention from other internet users shifted from the textual to the visual. From then on, the digital image became the main tool for people who truly attempted and desired to be ICs. Most probably, perhaps without a doubt, it could explain the reason why many images of the ICs were either of pornographic content or spectacular weird behaviour of some sort or another, as it tends to draw a lot of attention. The ICs were now officially the very icons of “shallowness”, appearing on the surfaces of screens in each and every corner of the vast country.

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<sup>23</sup> See Rongshuxia (2018)

When Weibo (Chinese Facebook) was launched in the year of 2009, the ICs made a successful comeback by making use of the new social media platform. At this moment in time, however, ICs in social media mostly referred to the grass-root people who started to gain the possibility to criticise different socio-political phenomena, and so they became the spokesmen-and-women for people from the grass-root class. This golden period did not last long though. When we enter the most recent period a few years after, the live-stream phenomena had completely changed the meaning of ICs, that is to say, a new form of ICs was about to emerge on the scene, or better, screen. At this moment in time, audiences (or users), so it seems, started to get used to or, rather, bored of watching shocking images and videos that they were bombarded with on a daily basis. And live-streaming seemed to be able to provide a different kind of visual product. A product that was as real and as mundane as your own daily life. Perhaps something more relatable. From this moment on, the ICs that became known were neither known for their pornographic content nor the witty socio-political criticism. Instead they became known for their daily activities, such as eating, sleeping, walking and so on and so forth. The economic success of live-streaming did not only create huge amounts of profit for the companies involved and running the platforms, but the live-stream ICs, the very people who sat there doing nothing much but eating noodles and the like, made tones of money themselves, some even became millionaires. (See figure 9 in the appendix) Today, at the very moment as this essay is written in the summer of 2018, being a live-stream celebrity has become one of the most sought-after dream jobs among the young generation. But live-stream ICs are like fast-food. At longest, they may last for one or two years if they are truly successful.

It is well known that China carries a burdensome history of being semi-colonized by different Western powers from the time of the Opium war (4 September 1839 – 29 August 1842) up until the creation of new China in 1949. Perhaps the experience of this recent past, created a collective anxiety of being a technological backward country, once again, among the entire population? Now, thirty years of rapid development since the early nineteen eighties, moving forward by the whole state's power, the Chinese has tasted the fruit from the progress of technology. Today the Chinese has a strong belief in technology, and live-streaming is considered to be a newly-born, promising future for social media in China. Could it be one of the reason that the Chinese accepted and developed live-streaming in such high-speed? But, embracing whatever change called "high-tech" without hesitation, absorbing whatever new elements from any advanced models



without any criticism, could it cause other results worse than being technologically backwards? In comparison the West, China never really had any philosophical and theoretical critique of modern technology, although it seems more urgent than ever to create one based on the Chinese condition, language and history.<sup>24</sup> It is a question outside of the scope of this essay, but one that we should keep in mind at each and every moment of our daily lives as we seemingly have no choice but to confront the digital world on a day to day basis, whether we like it or not.

## **8. The accompany economy**

It is not sure when exactly the “accompany economy” was invented and used by internet media but accompany economical activities can be traced a few years back. In the year of 2012, on Taobao (the Chinese eBay) customers were able to buy different accompany services, such as renting a partner, morning calls, hanging out, going to the cinema and so and so forth. Along with the development of online live-streaming, especially during the mobile era, “accompany” is definitely at the core of live-streaming. Screening casters eating noodles as if you are dining together, screening casters walking in the city as if they could have such leisure time without working overtime, screening casters sleeping as if you had a relationship not affordable in your real life. The accompany economy within the context of live-streaming, not only satisfied the desire of the users to not be alone but projected the viewer’s hope or dream of a real life together with the casters, being likeable, good-looking, wealthy persons, perhaps.

We have mentioned the influence of Japanese animation culture on the Chinese live-streaming phenomena, and it has expanded the boundary of what the accompany economy can include. Now animated figures may also be “the person” to spend time with. There is a special section on the live-streaming websites called “two-dimensional life”. In the “two-dimensional life”, casters screen themselves as animation characters modelled in a computer program. This gives the opportunity for users who love animation to meet the animation characters they love, perhaps the ones they grew up with. Tencent<sup>25</sup>, one of the biggest Chinese internet companies that owns WeChat, noticed the business potential in the accompany economy based on animated characters,

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<sup>24</sup> For example, the Hong-Kongnese cultural critic Yuk Hui has just recently started such an endeavour with the publication of the book “The question concerning technology in China” and it will be interesting to see where it leads in the future. See Urbanomic (2018)

<sup>25</sup> See Tencent (2018)

even though it was not a mainstream culture at the time. Tencent did in fact make a remarkable try to market this idea in the history of Chinese live-streaming.

In 2017, Tencent company held a male-singer competition with the biblical sounding title “the Son of the Future”. One of the special contestants was Hezi, an animated character. During this competition, live-stream users were able to watch real people compete with Hezi. (See figure 10 in the appendix) Needless to say, this event, or market ploy, created a huge public discussion in China. The debate that unfolded asked if an animated character had the right to compete with a human being or not (?) It is not the place to discuss here in this essay. Rather, we wanted to use this example to show one possible direction online live-streaming in the future from the perspective of a big influential company like Tencent. We may pose and open question, however: Will the “Son of the future” be a real human being or an animated character?

## **9. Intermezzo: “the girl who wrote something online”**

In August 2018<sup>26</sup>, a three-minute video went viral on twitter that, even if it was not a live-streaming “performance” like the ones we have been writing about in this essay, it definitely could have been. What was the content of the video? The video shows a young woman in her apartment in Shajing district in Shenzhen being captured by the local police. What do we know about this woman? She was an ordinary Chinese, according to the reports, with no record as an activist or dissident whatsoever but the police came, so we learn, because “she had written something online” and therefore the police had come to bring her to the police station in Shajing district to interrogate her. Now, it seems like the young woman already knew that the police were coming, because in the video we see that she sets her mobile phone on video record, showing the entire apartment. Our vision is directed towards the door, just before the police knocks on her door. The slightly, or very, uncomfortable conversation (yes, a bit Kafkaesque), to say the least, between the police and the young woman went as follows:

” [Woman] What’s going on??

[Police] Take your ID out.

[Police] We’re coming in to look around a bit.

[Woman] I don’t have my ID here.

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<sup>26</sup>See Chinachange (2018)

[Police] What's your name?

[Police] What is your identification number?

[Woman says her name; inaudible]

[Police] You're the one we're looking for.

[Woman] Why are you coming to my home this late? What's going on?

[Police] You come with us and we'll discuss it.

[Woman] Why should I?

[Police] Because we're the police.

[Woman] So just like that you can take people away for no reason?

[Police] Yeah — so what?

[Woman] Do you have any identification?

[Police] What ID do you want?

[Woman] Or an arrest warrant??

[Police] We're not arresting you now, we just want to have a chat, OK?

[Police] We want you to come to the station with us.

[Woman] On what basis?

[Police] On what basis? We'll tell you in the station.

[Woman] I need the reason now.

[Police] I don't have to tell you now.

[Woman] So why would I go with you?

[Police] So do you think the three of us can't take you away?

[Woman] You're illegally entering a citizen's residence!

[Police] This isn't illegal.

[Woman] Then show me proof of this, I'll take a look.

[Police] What kind of evidence do we need?

[Police, largely inaudible] We'll take you to the police station and show you, no problem.

[Woman] Why do you want to interrogate me? I haven't broken any law.

[Police] So what were you up to online?

[Woman] What I was doing online??

[Police; inaudible]

[Police] What did you post online?  
[Woman] What did I post? I didn't post anything.  
[Police] You didn't publish anything? Then come with us.  
[Woman] Why should I?  
[Police] How dare you!? [and says her name, which is inaudible]  
[Police mumbling, shouting]: 'Cooperate, cooperate!'  
[Woman] How can you just come in like that?  
[Police shouts] Are you gonna cooperate or not?  
[Police inaudible; demands she cooperate; says they're going to take her away.]  
[Police shouts] Either you come with us or we'll force you!  
[Woman] What is going on here?  
[Police crosstalk] Just cooperate. We're doing an investigation.  
[Woman] I didn't break the law!  
[Police interrupts] You're not the one who decides whether you broke the law!  
[Police] What nonsense did you write online?  
[Woman] So many of you breaking into my home...  
[Police] Take her away!  
[Police] Don't reason with her!  
[Police directs his colleague to drag her out]  
[Woman] All of you breaking into the house of a woman, what's going on here?  
[Police] Let's go, let's go, let's go.  
[Woman] What are you doing?!  
[Woman] What is this? How can you do this?  
[Woman] I have absolutely no sense of safety.  
[Woman] Why?  
[Woman] You're breaking the law!  
[Woman] This is against the law.  
[Police] We're enforcing the law, not breaking the law.  
[Police] I hope you'll cooperate with our investigation.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Chinachange (2018)

Now, imagine if this woman was one of the live-streamers we have written about above. Perhaps she has thousands of followers, or just a few. It does not matter that much. The important thing here, it seems, is that while the live-streaming and all kinds of online activity evidently leads to the possibility of stricter surveillance and control of the Chinese citizens by the Chinese government as the lives of the citizens become increasingly transparent, it also seems to create a possibility for people to feel safe, should this not to uncommon incident occur, again. By constantly recording and live-streaming yourself you can be sure in a country with as large populations as China, that there will always be someone watching, and we are not only thinking of spies from the government machine. Given the current strict political climate in China, which we read about on a day to day basis in the newspapers and (Western) social media, perhaps this is a way to use the technology that the government use to control your activity, against themselves?

We predict that unexpected incidents or encounters will also play a part in the world of live-streaming. One can imagine someone walking down the street and unexpectedly being hit by a car during the live-streaming session, and we can think of many other examples. When live-streaming enters public space, especially, the live-streaming definitely becomes a form of performance, even if the performance is just about walking down the street without going anywhere or doing anything particular but walking. The artist, and later architect, Vito Acconci (1940 – 2017) once made piece called “The following piece”, in which he followed people randomly through the streets of New York. (See figure 11 in the appendix) “The underlying idea”, we read in the description of the work:

“was to select a person from the passers-by who were by chance walking by and to follow the person until he or she disappeared into a private place where Acconci could not enter. The act of following could last a few minutes, if the person then got into a car, or four or five hours, if the person went to a cinema or restaurant. Acconci carried out this performance every day for a month. And he typed up an account of each <pursuit>, sending it each time to a different member of the art community.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Media Kuntz Netz (2018)

What if Acconci would have performed his piece in the China of today, streaming it live and making loads of money in the process? That seems to be an opportunity for poor artists to make a living perhaps, to transform cultural capital into cash (but perhaps it would not be an interesting piece any longer since he would just be another user who helped the business companies to make more money by using his free labour and time?).

The French artist Sophie Calle (1953 -) made a similar piece in Paris, in 1979, called “Following strangers”. (See figure 12 in the appendix) She started to follow strangers in her native city about which we can read:

“At the end of January 1981, on the streets of Paris, I followed a man whom I lost sight of a few minutes later in the crowd... That very evening, quite by chance, he was introduced to me at an opening. During the course of our conversation, he told me he was planning an imminent trip to Venice, I decided to follow him.”<sup>29</sup>

Chance encounters. During the research for this essay, no live-streaming user on the Chinese internets was found that purposefully introduced the idea of chance into the “performance”, like Vito and Sophie did. However, one could easily imagine such a live-streaming account but, perhaps, since it seems to be the very mundane without anything particular happening that the current followers seems to be interested in, perhaps it is to dramatic to introduce chance and follow someone you meet on the streets all the way from Beijing to Venice without planning in advance? Whatever will happen, the important aspect of live-streaming in real-time, from this perspective, is that chance can never be excluded. One could even imagine applying the concepts in “I Ching” (The book of changes) and create an entire live-stream performance based on it like a form of John Cage composition (i.e. “Music of changes”).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See Miller N. (2016)

<sup>30</sup> “*Music of Changes* was named in honour of the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, the ancient Chinese book of oracles that had become Cage’s means of synthesizing chance with rigorous discipline.” See Holzaepfel, J (1997)

## 10. Final reflections: the screen that separates the everyday from life

In one by now iconic scene in “Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles”<sup>31</sup>, directed by the Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman (1950 – 2015), the main character Jeanne, a single mother that prostitutes herself in order to support her son and whom we follow for three days performing regular tasks such as cooking, cleaning and parenting, peels potatoes for what seems like an eternity. (See figure 12 in the appendix) It is an unforgettable scene, as emotional as it is non-emotional at the same time. In light of this cinematic memory, one cannot help but make the connection between this anti-commercial film and the commercial live-streaming of the mundane day to day activities in contemporary China. One could wonder what the success of a live-stream account by a single mother in a difficult economic situation, peeling potato day in and day out, could be?

The curious thing about the online live-streaming phenomena of the most mundane aspects of everyday life, is that while people are, as it were, retreating from everyday life into the virtual space they are increasingly attracted to watching it unfold on their screens, as if they yearned for something lost, but know in their hearts they cannot experience. Or, so it seems, at least.

While a retreat from the common social life is an ancient phenomena, and lest not forget that the most profound literature in China was written by exiled scholars in remote regions of China, the curious thing about retreating into the private realm in this day and age, is that the secrecy, which was the allure of the private in times past, is entirely gone as it evidently becomes more and more transparent, and therefore subject of control and surveillance, like it or not, and the aura of the private, we believe, has effaced without a trace. In fact, the Chinese word for private includes the character for “secret”. Hence, one could wonder if a new definition of private should be introduced in contemporary Chinese language?

During the course of this essay, we have evidently been writing a lot about streaming but little about the screen on which all this takes place. The Chinese word for Tv/computer screen is a relatively modern term that consists of the combination of two ancient characters and is

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<sup>31</sup>“A lonely widowed housewife does her daily chores, takes care of her apartment where she lives with her teenage son, and turns the occasional trick to make ends meet. However, something happens that changes her safe routine.” See Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. (1975).

pronounced “Ping Mu”. “Ping”, the left character, originally referred to an officer commanding the soldiers to retreat and later on the character came to mean “clapboard”. “Mu”, the right character, means “fabric in the dark”, specifically referring to a fabric that was used to cover light in a military camp, in order to hide from the enemy. The word “Ping” is also used to name the indoor screens in traditional Chinese homes, which often had decorative paintings on them. They were used to keep out the wind. Later it also referred to the screen doors that were placed between the outer and inner courtyards of an old-style Chinese residence. The ancient screen is, in other words, an obstacle, or something that divides. The common modern meaning of the term screen refers to a surface on which symbols and images appear, but we do seldom think of the screen as such, its materiality, as something that divides.<sup>32</sup>

Thinking of the original military meaning of the word “Ping”, perhaps the ancients has left us a cipher, a code to what is happening in our present time. I am thinking of the command asking soldiers to retreat from the battlefield, which leads to the idea that the digital screen and its magical pseudo-world perhaps secretly commands us to retreat from our everyday life in physical space in order to be absorbed into the sea of data?

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<sup>32</sup> Similar reflections about the materiality of the screen and how the original meaning of the term as an “obstacle” can be found in Agamben’s essay “From the book to the screen” in Agamben, G. (2017), pp 105 – 108.



## APPENDIX



Figure 1: Mr. Yongxin's electro-shock treatment.



Figure 2: YY Audio application.



Figure 3: “YY Audio” users in “Internet Bar”, WOW player, singing during the break time.

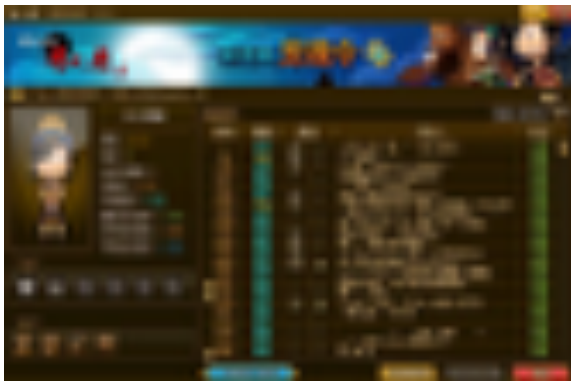


Figure 4: 2008, Screenshot of the “YY live streaming” website, the first live streaming website in China.

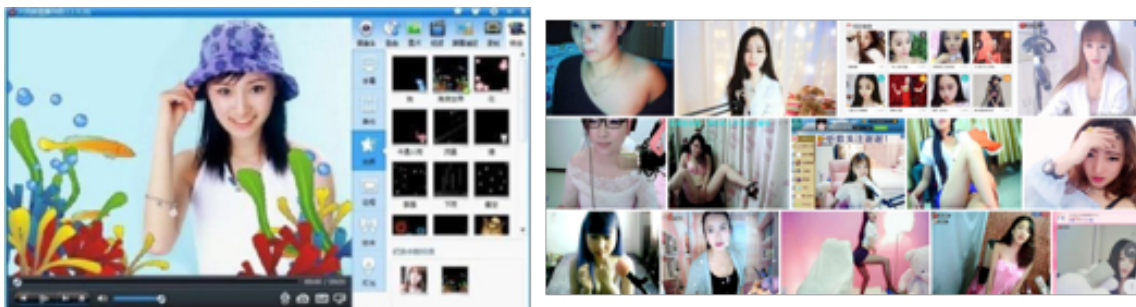


Figure 5 & 6: 2008, Screenshot of “Six Rooms”.



Figure 7: A popular “League of Legends” game live-streamer with “Bullet Curtain”.



Figure 8. Screen shot of mobile live-streaming application logos.



Figure 9. Eating noodles live-stream.



Figure 10. The animated character “Hezi” competes with a human singer.



Figure 11. Vito Acconci "The following piece".



Figure 12. Sophie Calle "Following strangers".



Figure 13. Still from Chantal Akerman's film "Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles".

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