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The care of the selfie:

Ludic chronotopes of *baifumei* in online China

by

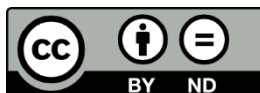
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The care of the selfie: Ludic chronotopes of *baifumei* in online China

Li Kunming & Jan Blommaert

Introduction: from the self to the selfie

In online-offline societies, both zones of social life offer specific affordances, some of which are compatible or complementary, and some of which are overlapping and conflictual.¹

Theorizing this new kind of social system is a task that still awaits the full efforts of a large scholarly community; consequently, much of the theory currently used for addressing new social phenomena draws on mainstream views designed to cope with pre-Internet societies (but see Castells, 1996; Appadurai, 1996; van Dijck, 2013; Blommaert, 2017b). In what follows, we intend to document the ways in which online infrastructures in China offer affordances for chronotopic identity work not otherwise available in offline contexts. More specifically, we shall describe the practices of young Chinese women designing and marketing imageries of feminine beauty and attractiveness on social media. While describing these phenomena, we also intend to sketch a conceptual framework for addressing such forms of online practice. The latter, we believe, is necessary, for online social practices display features that may be similar to more common offline forms of social conduct, but may still deviate in crucial ways.

It is due to such deviations that online infrastructures offer specific, complementary affordances to users, and these affordances need to be described by means of a conceptual vocabulary that does not reduce online forms of social action to their offline near-equivalents. The key issue in what follows is that of *identity*, broadly taken. There has been, and still is, a strong tendency, both in expert and lay discourse, to describe online identity work as “virtual” (with connotations of “fake”) and as opposed to offline “real” identity work (see e.g., Indalecia, 2010; also Adrian, 2008). The point we must take on board right from the start is

¹ This paper draws on cases analyzed in Li Kunming’s PhD dissertation (Li, 2018). We are grateful to Sjaak Kroon and Max Spotti for guidance and suggestions throughout the research project, and to Caixia Du, Hou Mingyi, Lu Ying and Ted Nieh for critical discussions on the issues presented in this paper.

that identity work in online context is as “real” as the work we observe in offline contexts, and that we need to be far more precise and specific in describing the peculiarities of online identity work. We can follow the tradition of Mead (1934) here, who emphasized that every social context demands specific forms of organization of the self, and add the fundamental insight of Erving Goffman (1959) that *any* form of identity is an outcome of “dramaturgical” performance work and is thus, in a sense, “ludic” (Blommaert, 2017a). Thus, what we encounter in the Chinese online contexts we will examine is as “real” a performance as any other, and we should focus on the specific nature of that kind of performance and the conditions under which it can happen.

These conditions are, as we know, determined by the technology that defines the online world. Conditions for online social interaction do not include the physical co-presence in a closed and synchronized TimeSpace arrangement characterizing, for instance, ordinary offline conversations. In that sense, these conditions exclude direct physical (tactile) contact between interlocutors, as well as the mutual monitoring access to the interlocutors’ bodies – that crucial reservoir of knowledge of the self and the other in interaction, on which Goffman focused so much of his attention.² In return, technologically mediated interactions such as the kinds we shall discuss offer a number of very different affordances. The specific set of affordances we shall discuss here revolve around the design and construction of an artefactualized, technologically mediated representation of the self. As a shorthand for these affordances, and paraphrasing Foucault (1986), we shall use “the care of the selfie”: an elaborate complex of “ludic” practices aimed at constructing and performing a *specifically online* (and more specifically small-screen) “image of personality” in which usually three different elements have to be carefully created and maintained:³

- (a) an *avatar*: an online name often containing significant clues as to the particular image of personality offered in interaction;
- (b) carefully doctored *pictures or video-streamed images* of the selfie;
- (c) specific online *interactional scripts* to be observed in contacts with audiences.

We shall see that when such rules are observed, a specific chronotopic environment emerges within which highly sophisticated forms of identity work can be interactionally performed, in

² Goffman surely was not alone, and contemporary scholarship on social interaction emphasizes the intrinsic fusion of visual, tactile and verbal aspects in communication. See, e.g., Goodwin (2007) and Bezemer & Kress (2014).

³ For alternative surveys of practices for online self-presentation, see, e.g., Adrian (2008) and boyd (2014).

ways that have no equivalent in the Chinese offline social spheres. Let us now turn to the case itself.

Becoming *baifumei* by refusing it

The term *baifumei* has over the past number of years developed from online slang to a very widespread term in Chinese popular and media culture, pointing towards a particular “type” of Chinese woman (Li, Spotti & Kroon, 2014). The compound *baifumei* (白富美) was coined by internet users out of three Chinese lexemes, namely *bai* 白, *fu* 富 and *mei* 美. Each of these three constituent lexemes has a range of related meanings and discursive figures, grounded in Chinese tradition (as shown in Table 1). When used to describe people, especially women, *bai* primarily refers to the whiteness of one’s skin; *fu* to a great amount of wealth in one’s possession; and *mei* to an attractive appearance.

Lexemes	Meanings
Bai 白	White; pure; blank; in vain; waste efforts; free of charge (白, n.d.)
Fu 富	Rich; wealthy; abundant (富, n.d.)
Mei 美	Beauty; beautiful; good; beauteousness; prettily (美, n.d.)

Table 1: Meanings of the three lexemes of baifumei

Thus, *baifumei* identifies a woman who is attractive in a highly specific way (the white skin is critical) and who is, in addition, financially well-off. The connection between beauty and wealth brings a degree of moral ambivalence to the label due to the suggestion of prostitution or related forms of conversion of female attractiveness into money. In addition, the label is easily associated with an extravagant, luxurious and mercenary lifestyle. The caricature in Figure 1 features a stereotypic *baifumei*: a beautiful woman with a slim figure, fair skin, well-developed breasts and an elaborate hairstyle, obsessive about her looks and indulging in shopping sprees, buying piles of handbags of the big brands.



Figure 1: A caricature of a *baifumei* girl (source: http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-12/27/content_31022201.htm, last access in January 2014)

This potentially threatening ambivalence notwithstanding, *baifumei* has been adopted by large numbers of Chinese women as a *model* of self-presentation in online contexts. It has become, in other words, a model for the care of the selfie, approximations of which may result in “authentic” *baifumei* membership. This authenticity needs to be designed (in the sense of Kress, 2010) by drawing on the available resources, perceived as contributing to that kind of authenticity, and in very precise and particular ways specific to the online contexts in which it must be performed.⁴ According to Blommaert and Varis (2011, p. 144), identity practices are “discursive orientations towards sets of features that are (or can be) seen as emblematic”. In this sense, to be considered as an authentic *baifumei*, one has to comply with the semiotic array of features and discursive practices that leads to “enough” *baifumei* identity features – not too little and not too much. To get close to such level of enoughness and with that of

⁴ Kress’s notion of “design” refers to the strategic semiotic work performed by subjects in interaction with others, with particular goals in mind (Kress, 2010, pp. 26-27, italics in original):

“*Design* meets the interest of the *rhetor* (...) in full awareness of the communicational potentials of the resources which are available in the environment and needed for the implementation of the rhetor’s interest.”

authenticity, one needs to have a good control on the dose of “enoughness” that ought to be perpetually adjusted, reinvented and amended (Blommaert & Varis, 2011). And women aspiring to the *baifumei* label use specific online contexts for testing, developing and improving their identity performances.

One such online context, and a quite popular one, is the “Baifumei Bar” forum on the online platform Baidu Tieba (see Li, Spotti & Kroon, 2014; Li, 2018). On this “Baifumei Bar” forum, *baifumei* authenticity needs to be played out visibly and is constantly subject to its audience’s (both male and female) interactional assessment of the performed “selfie”. The selfie, as we have seen, consists of a stage name, a doctored visual image, and carefully scripted interactional behavior. The latter is achieved by balancing two major categories of discursive moves: “affiliating acts” and “distancing acts”. The performance of *baifumei* often begins with a *distancing* act and a self-denial as a *baifumei* person. However, underneath this initial distancing move and others that may follow, affiliating acts are implicitly articulated. A concrete example will show this.

We shall look at the profile of a woman called *fang⁵; in September 2014, Li (2018) noticed her top-ranked post in the *baifumei* bar, with 6578 replies up to the time of this contribution.⁶ The post was headlined as follows:

Example 1⁷

*fang: 不是白富美，只是喜欢爆照而已

Translation 1

*fang: I’m not a *baifumei* girl but a girl who enjoys posting selfies online.

As we can see, *fang straightforwardly denies being a *baifumei*, explaining she is just a selfie lover. Let us now take a look at these selfies. The headline is followed by the three pictures included in Figure 2:⁸

⁵ The Chinese character *fang* (芳), which etymologically refers to a specific kind of fragrant grasses in ancient China and metaphorically refers to a girl’s desirable appearance, is often used as a girl’s call name in China. In this sense, the screen name is part of the selfie *fang puts on stage.

⁶Data are retrieved at 23:29 on 28 September, 2014 (UTC+1:00, Amsterdam).

⁷All translations from Chinese in this text are our own, unless specified otherwise. While we will consistently attempt to stay as close as possible to the Chinese originals, we opt for English stylistic equivalents.

⁸Originally, the photos are in a vertical sequence.



Figure 2: Three photos posted by *fang (source: <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=白富美>, last access on 10 August, 2015)

The choice and the visual architecture of the pictures are deliberate. Picture A in Figure 2 reproduces a screenshot of *fang's iPhone lock screen, backgrounded by a close-up photo of her. Compared with the selfie in a dim-lit bedroom in photo B, *fang's skin tone in A is much paler. While different from the half-length portrait in A, *fang in B displays her sartorial skills: a red blouse, patterned shorts, a bracelet and red high-heel shoes. C is a photo taken in a BMW car, a stereotypical emblem of wealth, not just in China. Observe that the driver in photo C is a man: *fang's boyfriend and the owner of the car, as later confessed by *fang. The photos are *designed* in a well-ordered sequence from A to C, in which the attributes of being *bai* (fair-skinned), *fu* (wealthy) and *mei* (beautiful) are highlighted one after another. This clue unveils *fang's "backstage preparation" (in Goffman's words) towards *baifumei* authentication. Observe also how the self-disqualification of *baifumei* in her opening line is instantly contradicted by the "grammar of visual design" in the three photos (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

On the second étage of her post,⁹ *fang wrote the following:

⁹ Étage or "floor" is often used in Tieba as a simulator to a construction in the offline world. The first post of a thread is called the First Etage and the rest in the same way in a chronological order. An étage can be maintained by others' replying to it. Changing an étage in Tieba usually means an ending of the previous conversation turn and the beginning of a new one.

Example 2

*fang: 我发帖没说让别人评论，我说了我长期更贴，我的生活是怎样我就跟大家分享的是怎样，不存在什么其他的，所以要讨论或者说我坏话的人省省

Translation 2

*fang: You are not in any way obliged to comment on my post. As was said before, I will continuously update my life status in this post and show you what my life is really like without any other intentions. So, those who are ready to judge me or speak ill of me are kindly asked to leave for the sake of your time and energy.

With a departure from the *baifumei*-affiliating act in Figure 2, *fang here disclaims her intention of wanting-to-be-*baifumei*: her updates should be merely seen as a realistic documentary of her daily life. She suggests challengers to save their malicious remarks and leave her profile space. This, if interpreted in Goffman's terms, is an example of *dramaturgical circumspection*, in which a prior warning serves as a defensive measure and a safeguard. In the above two examples, *fang's stance toward *baifumei* develops from the initial pronounced 'distancing' to a covert graphical 'affiliating' and then to the 'distancing' again. The orderly and multimodal stance pattern can be understood as the "line", as used by Goffman (1967), to address the pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts that a person takes in a communicative event. The line is dynamic and, as in *fang's case, is maneuvered constantly and strategically for appropriate impression management.

After the opening, we have seen in Example 2, the post thread continued and got both positive and negative comments. *fang often dismissed compliments and found a way out of the less commonplace challenges. On the 97th étage, a man (called Male A here) interacted with *fang as follows:

Example 3

Male A: 我要逆袭白富美。

*fang: 🙄

Male A: 嘿嘿，行不？

*fang: 应该不行，哈哈

Translation 3

Male A: (As a loser) I wanna procure you, the *baifumei* girl.

*fang: (A sweating face).

Male A: Lol, is that ok?

Xiangfang: Honestly, it's not ok. Lol

In this example, by using the online register term “逆袭 (ni xi)”¹⁰, Male A shows his aspiration to conquer a *baifumei* girlfriend or marry a *baifumei* girl. This obviously refers to *fang, and we can see that Male A identified *fang as a *baifumei*, in spite of her systematic disclaimers. *fang replies with a sweating-face emoticon which allows her to avoid a direct positioning: *fang could either feel overwhelmed or embarrassed by Male A's words. Then Male A repeats his request and gets refused. The refusal is a reply made to Male A's befriending (or marriage) request but does not directly rebuts his allusion to *fang's *baifumei* identity. We see the play of affiliating and distancing acts at work here: disguised as a refusal, *fang tacitly got confirmed as a *baifumei* girl.

Then on the 348th étage, the following communication happened between *fang and another man (called Male B here):

Example 4

Male B: 就是白富美

*fang: ...

Male B @ *fang: 难道不是

Xiangfang @Male B: 我不觉得

Male B @*fang: 我们就是穷屌丝

*fang @Male B: 我也是

Male B: 哈哈~ 握爪

¹⁰The original Chinese term *ni xi* is a military jargon noun, which literally means “inverse attack”. It has been widely used on Chinese social media in its figurative sense to refer to one's procurement of life-changing social upward mobility.

Translation 4

Male B: You're a baifumei.

*fang: ...

Male B @ *fang: Aren't you?

Xiangfang @Male B: I don't think so.

Male B @*fang: We are undoubtedly *diaosi*.

*fang @Male B: Me, too.

Male B: Lol...A hand shake with you

On this étage, *fang identifies with Male B as a *diaosi* (屌丝, literally “penis hair” and figuratively “loser”),¹¹ distancing herself from the covert *baifumei* identity established on the 97th étage. However, *fang’s self-identification with *diaosi* fluctuates. In one of her posts, she once became outraged at a boy who had described her to as a *diaosi*. Hence, *fang’s self-identification with *diaosi* here is, to a large extent, a tactic aimed to establish a rapport with Male B. It is a form of self-belittling in Goffman’s terms, in which one’s own positive qualities are deliberately underplayed: “if a person knows that his modesty will be answered by others’ praise of him, he can fish for compliments” (Goffman, 1967, p. 24).

Seen from the above examples, *fang’s “line” is changeable and context-adaptive, from the initial distancing in the headline to the affiliating in her photo arrangement, and then distancing once more, with another affiliating act following. However, the line *fang takes is not in any way a consecutive distancing-affiliating sequence. What emerges prominently and importantly from the data is that *fang never makes her affiliating acts obvious, overt and pronounced. By contrast, she shows her distancing in a clear and assertive way. Although *fang did sometimes face questions about her true motives from critical participants, her dramaturgical circumspections and performed modesty won her a widely ratified *baifumei* identity, as attributed *by men*. It is an interactional achievement, resulting from highly skilled and flexible, “ludic” performance practices.

¹¹The term *diaosi* is widely used to describe the large groups of people feeling excluded or marginalized in China’s booming socio-economic environment. For more discussion on *diaosi*, see Yang et al., (2014) and Du, (2016).

The ludic economy of *baifumei*

The practices performed by *fang are entirely conditioned by the technological environment in which she performs them: an online forum explicitly designed for and devoted to *baifumei* identity work. They are, in that environment, entirely “normal” – an expected behavioral script that demands careful performance, and in which participants draw on available cultural and technological resources for adequate outcomes. Such practices are, consequently, chronotopic in the full sense of the term (Blommaert & Varis, 2015; Blommaert & De Fina, 2016). The chronotope, however, is not a closed TimeSpace constellation: it draws on cultural materials that have their origins in older traditions and organize conduct in a variety of social spheres.

The careful play of distancing and affiliating acts performed by *fang is a case in point. Modesty is highly valued as a traditional virtue of China. “Virtue” is called *mei de* (美德 lit. beautiful moral) in Chinese. With the same ‘*mei*’ (美) (beautiful) as in ‘*baifumei*’ (白富美), *mei de* indexes the general beauty of a person. Chinese people are, in many contexts, expected to understate their personal accomplishments rather than speak highly of their own merits. So, a woman’s modesty, if recognized, will be related to the Chinese virtue and add weight to the “enoughness” of the *baifumei* identity.

A very similar interplay between cultural tradition and new online technological affordances can be observed in the second case we examine here: the performance of *baifumei* on *Zhibo* (直播, literally “online live-streaming”). By June 2016, there were about 325 million livestreaming users in China, accounting for nearly a half of the Chinese total netizen’s population (CNNIC, 2016). Across about 200 livestreaming platforms (iiMedia Research, 2016), there are 4 million participants (both hosts and watchers) simultaneously present in about 3000 livestreaming rooms at peak times. And one extraordinarily popular form of live-streaming involves *baifumei* women performing forms of online flirting and intimacy with male audiences, who, in return, donate “gifts”. In contrast with the static images and texts we observed on Baifumei Bar, we are facing moving real-time images and interactions here.



(a) Yizhibo(一直播) (b) Yingke(映客) (c) Momo(陌陌)

Figure 3: User interfaces of Yizhibo, Yingke and Momo (source: yizhibo.com; yingke.com; momo.com, last access on 14 December, 2016)

Such performances occur within a technologically circumscribed arena, enabling certain forms of interaction while constraining or excluding others. Almost all major internet companies in China have launched such livestreaming services, and the actual shapes of the interfaces are quite similar. Yizhibo (一直播), Yingke (映客) and Momo (陌陌), three of the most influential livestreaming platforms in China, look alike in their user interface layouts. More specifically, all of them have the status zone (marked as No. 1 in Figure 3) at the top, hostesses' performing zone at the center (No. 2), the threading of viewers' messages at the left lower part (No. 4) and the viewers' operation zone at the bottom (No. 5). The homogeneous interface designs and livestreaming technological frameworks have resulted in severe competition between different livestreaming service providers in China. The success of each depends much on how many excellent hosts they can manage to attract. One such highly successful host, active on Yizhibo, is called Dongbei Wuxue.

Dongbei Wuxue (东北污雪) is a top-ranking "talk show" hostess on Yizhibo. As mentioned earlier, the avatar or screen name used in selfie performances is of importance, so let us first examine the name. *Dongbei* (东北, literally "north east") explicitly refers to a regional background, widely seen as "peripheral" in China, and incidentally also showing the largest number of female live-stream hostesses. *Wu* (污), a Chinese adjective which literally means "polluted" and "dirty" is put in juxtaposition with *xue* (雪), the "snow", which is generally considered to be pure (as it is white) in Chinese culture. As a screen name, Dongbei Wuxue's

offers layers of inferential meaning and suggests a sense of cynicism and dark humor, matched by Dongbei Wuxue's dramatic, stylized and entertaining speech style. These characteristics prove to be effective. At the time of data collection on 11 December 2016, Dongbei Wuxue had already harvested 79,000 followers and earned 37,059,600 credits on Yizhibo, which amounts to 370,596 RMB (approximately 47,269 Euros) through 53 broadcasts within 46 days.¹² Dongbei Wuxue's income is about 54 times the average national income per capita. She is a highly successful *baifumei* entrepreneur who employs several assistants in her business.

As we have seen, the interface of Yizhibo is characterized by a multimodal design, which is meant to be interactive and spontaneously responsive to ongoing communications during livestreaming. The essential structure is: a female hostess interacts with an online (male) audience, members of which can send messages and offer "gifts" to the hostess, all of which is publicly visible. These gifts are shown as symbols on the screen but, converted by the platform, represent real money income for the hostesses. First let us have a close look at the interface design of Yizhibo as shown in Figure 4.

¹² Data are retrieved at 14:39:16 on 11 November 2016.

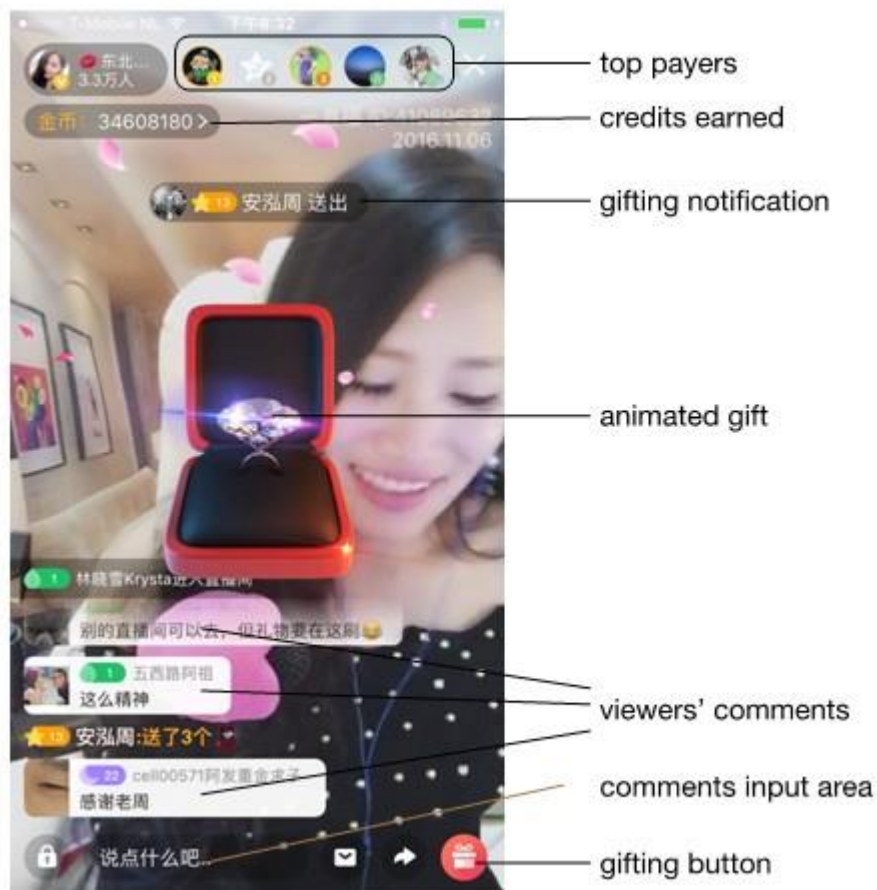


Figure 4: The Yizhibo livestreaming interface design for Dongbei Wuxue (source: Yizhibo iOS application, last access on 9 January, 2017)¹³

We now begin to understand the features of the specific chronotope of livestreaming female-male interactions. With all those multimodal elements in motion and interaction with each other, the message flow in the livestreaming is dialogical and responsive to ongoing communications. When new messages pop up, previous messages will immediately move up on the user interface and recede out of the audience's vision. Given that online livestreaming rooms are often crowded with viewers, new messages from viewers constantly appear, move up and then disappear – all at great speed. But the relative prominence of particular audience members (within the parameters of the system) is made visible. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, the Top Five spenders among the viewers are listed on the top right on the users' interface, and their prominence is immediately visible to all viewers. The system also includes interactional asymmetry: Dongbei Wuxue as the hostess runs a continuous livestreamed performance in front of an audience, members of which can only communicate with her

¹³ The line and English captions are added by the author for further analysis.

through text messages and gifting. The audience has no acoustic or visible-tangible presence. Given this exposure discrepancy, apart from text messages, gifting is an important tool for an audience to interact with Dongbei Wuxue.

Gifts occupy a large and central space in the interface design, the very epicenter of the stage, as with the glittering diamond in Figure 4. Gifts are further technologically glorified by triggering an array of enlivening animate effects. And gift senders, especially those sending expensive items, are greatly appreciated by Dongbei Wuxue and more likely to be directly addressed in friendly and intimate ways. Each time after receiving the gift of “love”, which costs 10 RMB (approximately 1 euro), Dongbei Wuxue immediately shows her “love” by air kissing and playing a piece of love music that has been popularized by *Feicheng Wurao* (非诚勿扰, “If you are the one”), a famous Chinese dating program hosted by Hunan Satellite TV. Figure 5 features Dongbei Wuxue expressing her gratitude for a gift through air kisses while depicting the heart-shaped gesture for “I love you (我爱你)”. This immediate expression of appreciation is orchestrated to a large number of viewers, amplifying the importance of generous gifts and the prominence of those who offer them.



Figure 5: Dongbei Wuxue’s gestural response to a “love” gift (source: Yizhibo iOS application, retrieved on 9th January 2017)

The gesturing and facial expressions of joy and gratitude are evident. But as we have seen, the system also allows the hostess to directly talk to her audience, while audience members can only respond through text messages. Discursively, such moments of affection are expressed as follows:

Example 5

An episode of interaction between Dongbei Wuxue and *Re, a viewer of her livestreaming, who bought her virtual gifts (Retrieved on 13 November 2016 from Yizhibo iOS application):

(Dongbei Wuxue is bantering with *Minuo, a viewer in her showroom) ...

*Re:

[Sends out 11 lollipops (gift)]

*Yilai (One of Dongbei Wuxue's showroom assistants):

Thank you, Re (an abbreviated addressing of *Re).

Dongbei Wuxue:

感谢热

Thank you, Re.

*Minuo:

我的妈

Oh my God.

Dongbei Wuxue:

我的妈我的妈

(Reading out *Minuo's comment) Oh my God. Oh my God.

开玩笑的

I'm just kidding.

*Hushou:

我来了，我是黑粉

I'm coming. I'm one of your anti-fans.

Dongbei Wuxue:

我来了我是黑粉

(Reading out a *Hushou's comment) I'm coming. I'm one of your anti-fans.

Hahaha... (Big laughter)

(...)

*Re:

[Sends out a love (gift)]

Dongbei Wuxue:

谢谢我热送的 I love you 哦

Thank you, my Re (still addressing *Re for short). Love you, ó (a sentence-final particle that conveys intimacy)

*Gangwan (another assistant in Dongbei Wuxue's showroom):

谢谢热

Thanks, Re.

*Yilai:

谢谢热 love

Thanks for Re's love (gift).

Dongbei Wuxue:

[(action) gesturing the heart shape for "love" in front of the camera]

Mwah [Giving out a "pronounced" air kiss to *Re]

Dongbei Wuxue:

I love you 哟 [Still keeping the gesture of "love"]

I love you, yó (a particle that serves to soften the expression before it)

谢谢热啊

Thank you ā (a particle intensifying what precedes), Re.

As soon as *Re sends in his gifts, Dongbei Wuxue's attention focuses on him, while interaction with other participants is not entirely interrupted. *Re, however, gets treated to repeated and emphatic verbal and nonverbal expressions of love and intimacy. Such moments of direct address in interaction shape the kind of ludic "imagined togetherness" (Mortensen, 2017) which is a key feature of online flirting, and which is much coveted by male audience members. All of this evolves in the highly specific contours of the online livestreaming chronotope, in which such ludic roles, relationships and practices can be enacted as features of "normal" interactional conduct.

With a slim figure, well-developed breasts and long hair, white-skinned Dongbei Wuxue embodies the *baifumei* model of feminine "selfie" beauty. She is often scantily clad and as a good jokes teller (more specifically, an excellent teller of *risqué* jokes), she is good at drawing male audience's attention. Being energetic, optimistic and talkative, Dongbei Wuxue has excellent social skills to maintain a nice rapport with her audience, including shifts from collective audience address into one-on-one interactions addressing specific audience members in acts of "imagined closeness". The "selfie" she presents online is a virtuoso one, drawing on a vast repertoire of identity features and characterized by superbly executed performances. An important part of this revolves around handling the gifts from her male audience members.

Different from traditional business and mercantile practices, economic transactions in livestreaming undergo a semiotic "romanticization" process, where the audience's money spent in showrooms is sugar-coated by a dazzling array of virtual gifts, which serve as cultural proxies that navigate the ambivalences mentioned earlier and reduce the risk of moral condemnations and allegations of prostitution. The semiotic representation of the gifts, in particular, avoids the connotation of "payment-for-sex" by calling – in a "ludic" way – on established Chinese traditions of courtesy and hospitality. In China, which is characterized by collectivism and *Guanxi*, gifting practices are widely seen at all walks of life (see Steidlmeier 1999; Luo et al. 2012). Compared to the potentially high cost for offline safe intimacies, the gifting expenses for live-streamed intimacies can be quite low. Hence, emerging livestreaming platforms provide males more chances to communicate with and befriend those desirable hostesses, who are less accessible to most men in their offline lives. For someone like Dongbei Wuxue, the reference to traditional forms of gift-giving enables her to be (sometimes explicitly) erotically appealing to the men, while avoiding the social stigma (and

legal sanctions) attached to prostitution. In addition, it enables her to earn an income many times larger than what ‘regular’ offline jobs would offer her.

All of this is made possible by an online technology and its semiotic and interactional affordances. In livestreaming some viewers are willing to pay very substantial sums to buy virtual gifts to please the hostesses they prefer (see Li & Wei, 2017). In return, hostesses conspicuously display their gratefulness for the viewers’ gifting and perform that appreciation to an extent that a big audience can well recognize and glorify the gift sender. All of this, however, stays in the online environment and does not migrate offline: the courtesy of the gift is responded to by means of a dramaturgy of online flirtation. The livestreaming hostesses usually respond more actively, elaborately and intimately to those big spenders, with directly addressed words, facial expressions, body postures and gestures. In other words, with a certain amount of payment in the form of gifting, a viewer can get involved in specific public but intimate genres of interaction, ranging from being mentioned by name to being air-kissed and offered a love confession. Interactional events such as these can only happen in the tightly circumscribed online TimeSpace configurations provided by the Internet applications; and when they happen, they happen according to the normative formats befitting this specific chronotope.

Conclusion: ludic selfie chronotopes

In his classic *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga (1950/2014) emphasized the playful character of many social, cultural and political practices. In our tendency to organize societies along rational management patterns, Huizinga insisted, we risked losing sight of the fact that much of what people do is governed by an *irrational* logic, a ludic pattern of action. Even more, much of what we see as the rational organization of societies is grounded, in fact, in play. Huizinga (1950/2014, chapter 1) listed several features of “play”. Play is *significant*, for instance: it is a site of meaning-making in which “something is at play”; it is at the same time relatively *unregulated* and unconstrained by established rules and forms of control; it is also an *authentic* activity in which we observe the unconstrained “playing out” of the self; it is an *enclosed* activity in the sense that it often requires a particular spatiotemporal organization different from that of other activities (a “playground”); and finally, it is also a *serious* activity demanding focus, intensity and skill (see Blommaert 2017b for a discussion).

We have examined “playgrounds” here – technologically mediated and configured enclosed TimeSpace configurations in which ludic activities revolving around authenticity can be played out. With respect to this authenticity, it must be underscored that it is perfectly normal to *play someone else while expressing some essential “self”*. In fact, forms of play in which roles are assumed by players, masks or other garments are worn or names are being changed for the duration of the event are found everywhere. In the online world, it suffices to think of highly developed communities such as those of cosplay and gaming to see the point; but think also of the widespread use of aliases or nicknames on social media platforms. Just as we can distinguish a Foucauldian “care of the self” in various forms of play, we see a “care of the selfie” in online play as well. This selfie, we hope to have illustrated, demands forms of knowledge and skill specific to the online chronotopes in which it is presented and performed. We have seen complexes of norms at play in our examples, in which older and established cultural material was blended with the particular affordances of online platforms in such a way that different forms of identity work and male-female relationships could be constructed and enacted in playful ways – by elaborate forms of graphic doctoring of images, delicate forms of interaction and joint choreographies of the body and the features of the online apps. These playful practices are, however, significant and serious, and certainly in our discussion of Dongbei Wuxue’s work, something “was at play” – there was a real, “hard” economic transaction buried within the ludic, frivolous and artful interactional work she performed for her audience, and this transaction takes place in a neoliberal competitive market arena. There is nothing “virtual” to the income she generates through her talk shows, even if the stuff she offers in the transaction is just a “selfie”, a semiotic, immaterial artifact that needs to be meticulously and carefully constructed and checked (as *fang showed us) in order to be ready for economic transaction.

Online identity work and processes of community formation remain poorly understood social facts, often suffering from reductionist interpretations grounded in a pre-Internet sociological imagination. We believe it is helpful to approach the complexities of such new social facts with the help of frameworks such as the one we have attempted to illustrate here. In the cases we have discussed here, we detect traces of significant socio-economic change. The women engaging with the ludic selfie chronotopes offered by Internet providers can enter a labor market and develop economic activities not legitimately accessible, or more strictly policed, in offline spheres of society. Of course, such new economic activities will always look insignificant when measured against the standards of the mammoth Chinese formal economy;

at the same time, as we have mentioned earlier, they are not marginal and may constitute more than just symbolic opportunities for people often marginalized in the bigger socio-economic game. This in itself should suffice as a reason to explore phenomena such as these as integral parts of the development of new social systems.

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