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Selling rural China: The construction and commodification of rurality in Chinese promotional livestreaming

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Abstract
With promotional livestreaming transforming the digital culture and e-commerce landscape in China, rural streamers take this opportunity to not only harvest economic rewards but also construct rural identities and associated imagery. Employing a digital ethnographic approach, this article closely explored how rural spaces and rural labor activities are constructed and commodified in Chinese promotional livestreaming. I argue that although rural streamers' creative use of platform-afforded liveness and interactivity enriches Chinese digital culture by making everyday life in rural spaces visible, this constructed rurality is, however, flattened, decontextualized, and romanticized – thus, ready to be commodified and sold to the audience. In addition, agricultural labor is made hyper-visible, generating the possibility for demystifying said labor process, while other forms of labor, mainly affective labor and labor for negotiation with the platforms, are made invisible, undervalued, and exploited, deepening the precarious condition of such platform-dependent labor.

Keywords
agricultural labor, authenticity, commodification, digital labor, identity, livestreaming, platformization, rurality

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the rocketing popularity of rural promotional livestreaming, featuring streamers selling agricultural products while interacting with viewers in real time. With both in-person consumption and cross-regional transportation

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heavily restricted during the state-ordered quarantines, overstocking of agricultural products became a common issue in many rural areas (Ministry of Commerce, 2020). To solve this issue, rural residents and local government officials actively joined livestreaming platforms facilitating live events to promote the products (Meng and Zhao, 2020). These streaming events are commonly situated within recognizable rural environments such as fields and natural landscapes. They also feature a variety of activities, ranging from everyday activities such as working in the fields and conducting business, to entertaining performances like singing and chatting with the audiences. Gaining tremendous popularity and financial success, this new form of digital content became an essential part of market-dominating platforms, including the largest e-commerce platform Taobao and leading short video-sharing platforms Douyin. In merely a few years, rural promotional livestreaming has significantly transformed everyday life and economy in rural China, as well as how rural spaces are imagined. In promotional livestreaming, rural residents themselves construct the images of rural China, in contrast to traditional media representation of rurality which is often stigmatized and stereotyped, if not invisible (Wang, 2016). Such cultural productions, however, are highly contingent on platform affordances and governance (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Making visible the commodification processes and labor conditions in rural China, rural promotional livestreaming provides a unique opportunity to examine the mechanisms of platform capitalism shaped by local contexts.

Regarding Chinese rural digital content production, scholars have addressed issues such as the contingency of rural cultural production on the state-platform configurations (Lin and de Kloet, 2019), exploitation vs. empowerment (Zhou and Liu, 2021), affective labor and authenticity construction (Lin and de Kloet, 2019), spectacularization of rural life space (Li, 2020), and digital rural youth subculture (Li et al., 2020). The existing literature is, however, focused mainly on short video content and social media platforms, leaving livestreaming, especially promotional livestreaming content on e-commerce platforms, unexamined. The unique affordances such as liveness and real-time sociality afforded by livestreaming, in contrast to pre-recorded and edited video forms, further complicate the construction of rurality and rural digital labor experiences.

The current study aims to contribute to the scholarship on the platformization of cultural production, digital labor, and commodification of rural spaces by examining the construction and commodification of rurality in Chinese promotional livestreaming. More specifically, through digital ethnographic observations of rural promotional livestreaming events, I explore the construction and commodification of the materiality of rural spaces and the labor activities of both agriculturalists and streamers. I argue that although rural streamers' creative use of platform-afforded liveness and interactivity enriches Chinese digital culture by making visible rural space and everyday life, this constructed rurality is, however, one that is flattened, decontextualized, and romanticized, thus, ready to be commodified and sold to the audiences. In addition, agricultural labor is hyper-visible with real-time vicarious experiences, which possibly demystifies said labor process, while other forms of labor, mainly affective labor and labor for negotiation with the platforms, are made invisible, undervalued, exacerbating the precarity and exploitation of such platform-dependent labor. By shedding light on the nuances and layers of rural Chinese promotional livestreaming production, this research provides

insights in the richness of digital culture created by marginalized population in the global South. In addition, through illustrating the practical details in (re)producing Chinese rural space in a live digital format, I map out the specifics of how the interactions between laborers' creativity and platforms' affordances (liveness and real-time interactivities in this case) transform spaces into commodities under platform capitalism. Finally, demonstrating how certain forms of labor are rendered hyper-visible and spectacular while others deeply hidden, this study showcases the contradictions and complexities of labor precarity and exploitation within the context of digital capitalism in the global South.

Platformization of cultural production and Chinese rural digital culture

With digital platforms dominating the cultural industry in the past decade, how cultural commodities are produced, circulated, commodified, and consumed has been transformed fundamentally. Nieborg and Poell (2018) conceptualized this phenomenon as platformization of cultural production and argue that, under this condition, cultural productions and commodities are highly contingent on a few powerful digital platforms – with platforms setting the terms and leaving little room for negotiation from the users. Moreover, platforms hold significantly more knowledge of their algorithmic mechanisms than the producers who depend on these mechanisms for their visibility and monetization (Bucher, 2012).

In the context of China, the state is closely involved with the digital economy and platform-contingent cultural production. With the digital economy growing into the core force in the national economy, the state administration not only recognizes the platforms' significant economic impact but potential political ones. Platforms are expecting to play an important role in "optimizing societal resource distribution," "pushing industries toward informatization, digitization, and intelligence," and "increasing the level of intelligence, globalization, individualization, and refinement of the state governance" (Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China, 2021). While encouraging the platforms and content production to thrive for their economic and political benefits, the state also imposes strict censorship to sustain a compliant culture and social stability. Cultural producers, while constructing authenticity and cultivating intimacy with viewers to gain visibility, must navigate around the disciplinary regulations and align their content to the state's preferred values, experiencing "a pervasive sense of uncertainty and insecurity" (Chen et al., 2021; Lin & de Kloet, 2019: 7).

The entanglement of the digital economy, platforms, and the state is especially prominent in agricultural- and rural-related policies. Agricultural and rural information is seen as not only a key factor in developing the agricultural production force and rural industries but also the foundation supporting rural modernization and China's international economic and technological competitiveness (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2021). Since 2004, various departments of administration, state- and provincial-level, have announced policies and regulations – financial and taxation support, infrastructure construction, strategy and planning, legislation, and expert cultivation – to promote agricultural and rural information technological development (Tan et al., 2019). Governments also commissioned new platforms to be built to facilitate information exchange among

governments, experts, companies, and rural residents (Ruan et al., 2014). Most recently, the incorporation of existing e-commerce platforms has taken the center stage in the project of agricultural informatization (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, 2021). Evidence can be found in administrations actively supporting “Taobao Village” projects (Zhang, 2020), government officials participating in livestreaming, and official media frequently featuring rural streamers’ success stories (Meng and Zhao, 2020).

It is important to understand the state-scale projects of agricultural and rural informatization in the past decades within the context of structural urban-rural divide and inequality. Since the early years of People’s Republic of China (PRC), rural resources and labor have been disproportionally appropriated and exploited to fulfill the goals of the state. Gerth (2020) argues that the state accumulated capital from the rural with various means including forced surrendering of lands and livestock, pooling resources and labor into communes, monopolizing agricultural tools, low investment in agriculture, and minimizing rural consumption. Such scale of exploitation set the foundation for the significant discrepancies between rural and urban in terms of infrastructure, quality of life (Chen et al., 2018), and access to various forms of resources, capital, and social services (Fu & Ren, 2010; Hao et al., 2014), despite the state’s goal of “coordinated urban-rural development” (Jiang, 2002). These inequalities are further solidified by the Hukou (户口) system. Hukou, or household registration system, not only categorizes the population into agricultural and non-agricultural but also hierarchizes citizens: public goods are allocated accordingly, privileging the urban; rural-to-urban mobility is restrained; rural residents are discriminated against as low “quality” (suzhi, 素质; Wallis, 2008). Situated within the context of urban-rural inequality, the projects of agricultural and rural informatization can be seen as a strategy to ameliorate this issue and maintain political stability, in addition to the goal of modernization and industry restructuring mentioned earlier.

Against the background of the state-initiated rural and agricultural informatization project and the state’s promotion of platform economy, an “unlikely creative class,” comprised mostly of rural, small-town youth and young rural-to-urban migrant workers, emerged (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). They post a variety of content ranging from everyday life to talent performances, often accompanied by recognizable indicators of their rural identity such as rural background, construction sites, local accents, and certain appearances (e.g. darker skin and shabby clothes; Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Zhou and Liu, 2021). Utilizing the digital affordances provided by the platforms, rural content producers embrace and reclaim the earthiness and vulgarity – often stereotypically attached to rurality – as authenticity. Meanwhile, they also actively reconstruct their images and identities, articulating their cultural experiences that are often invisible in mainstream media (Zhou and Liu, 2021). Subcultures also emerge in these platformized rural cultural productions: rural students, for example, create a “shehui ren” (“society men,” 社会人) subculture by posting videos where they openly defy the school authorities, expressing their resistance toward an education system that failed them (Li et al., 2020). Similar act of resistance can be found in female migrant workers’ collective narrations and advocacies on platform-based alternative media: raising voices on issues such as inequality based on gender, class, and sexuality, human trafficking, domestic violence, and labor exploitation, female workers articulate their own lived experiences on digital platforms

and work against the urban-centered, middle-class, heteronormative narratives of gendered experiences (Yin, 2018).

Rural cultural producers' labor is, however, filled with precarity. Like all forms of platformized content creation, rural cultural production involves intense immaterial labor such as authenticity construction and intimacy building to achieve uncertain creative and financial rewards (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). The blurred line between play and labor obscured the value generated in viewing and producing content on platforms, rendering it exploitable, especially among young migrant workers (Zhou and Liu, 2021). Tan et al. (2020) also argue that creators on *Kuaishou*, a prominent platform for rural streamers, see their affective labor as "play" to justify its commodification and heavy exploitation by the platform. Exacerbating precarity facing rural producers, their content is stigmatized as vulgar and of low taste by other users and the platform-state censors, echoing the discriminative "low quality" discourse around rural population mentioned earlier (Wallis, 2008; Zhou and Liu, 2021). In addition, since rural youth realize the near impossibility of their upward socioeconomic mobility based on family status or wealth, they place the hope for a decent life on aspirational success on platforms which is unlikely to be actualized (Li et al., 2020).

Building on the body of scholarship on rural digital culture and platform-state-contingent cultural production and labor in China, the current study brings rural promotional livestreaming into focus. While platform affordances such as liveness and real-time interactivity can be new creative tools for rural producers to construct rural spaces and identities, they also pose challenges with its prolonged airtime, non-editability, and the need for more intense affective labor. Furthermore, the promotional nature foregrounds the issues of commodification, and juxtaposes material (agricultural) labor and immaterial (streaming) labor. Thus, examining rural promotional livestreaming complicates our understanding of cultural production and labor under platform capitalist logic.

The commodification of rurality and authenticity

Halfacree (2006) proposed a three-fold model to understand rural space with its diversity. He argues that rural space is composed of interwoven material and ideational within specific contextual processes (Halfacree, 2006). It consists of rural localities – which is the material aspect, such as the natural and cultural landscapes with their inscribed production and consumption activities; the formal representations of the rural in political, scientific, legal, economic, or other "expert" discourses; and the everyday lives of the rural people on both individual and social levels. In livestreaming, both the rural localities with their embedded activities and everyday rural lives are "streamed" and "gazed" upon by the audiences. In this process, rurality is commodified – transformed from "things valued for their use into marketable products that are valued for what they can bring in exchange" (Mosco, 2009: 127) – by the streamers and the platforms, thus, rendering both rural localities and rural everyday life into capitalist representations of the rural.

This commodification and "gazed-upon-ness" in livestreaming is, however, not a new or unique situation for rural space. Along with mass tourism becoming desirable in modern society, there emerges the tourist gaze. Although tourist gazes are learned, dynamic

practices that transform over time and are socially organized by factors such as gender, class, nationality, conventions, and circulating cultural texts, they share the commonality of seeking the "out of ordinary," a "departure" from the routine and everyday (Urry and Larsen, 2011). In addition to seeking the "exotic," tourist gazes also flatten spaces. As tourists, "we do not literally 'see' things," but instead see signs or things that "stand for something else" (Urry and Larsen, 2011:17). Under the romanticizing tourist gazes, rural landscapes become "tranquility," "tradition," and "rich cultural history," and rural activities become "values of hard work" (Sun et al., 2020; Zhou, 2014).

In the Chinese context, the mediation of rurality is frequently framed with romanticized tourism discourse. In her critical examination of the online discourse around Wuyuan, a village in Southeast China, Zhou (2014) argues that the imaginaries of rurality are urban-centric and market-oriented. In these imaginaries, Wuyuan is a space that is "old, traditional, and change-resistant" and a space where one can have enjoyable experiences in a tranquil, harmonious, and nostalgic environment (Zhou, 2014: 237). Negativities or controversies are omitted to maintain the attractive coherent images, echoing Bell's (2006) notion of a romanticized and idealized rural idyll. Similarly, Sun et al. (2020) demonstrate a stark contrast between Taiwan's rural images constructed on local websites and mainland Chinese social media WeChat: while the local websites feature issues like pollution and the rural hardship, images on WeChat conform to the tourist gaze of romanticized rurality with its inspirational stories of local entrepreneurs, images of aesthetically pleasing natural landscape, and admirable lifestyles of the countryside. Both studies reflect how the complexity and instability of the rural spaces are rendered into a one-dimensional facade of pleasing illusions under the tourist gaze.

In responding to the tourist gaze, local people and tourist entrepreneurs construct a "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973). Within the context of rural tourism, authenticity can be a strategy actively used by the local people to "protect themselves from the intrusion of their lives backstage and to take advantage of the opportunities it presents for profitable investment" (Urry and Larsen, 2011, p10). The convergence of authenticity and commodification echoes Banet-Weiser's (2012) argument that authenticity itself can be branded. In the context of digital culture, the performance of authenticity is an integral part of self-branding (Abidin, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2019). Although authenticity could be performed strategically for self-actualization and potentially has generative and subversive power, content creators, especially ones from marginalized groups, face an "authenticity bind" that forces them to display the "right" amount of authenticity which is highly contingent on the affordances and governance of the platform (Abidin, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2019).

Authenticity performance is prominent in rural content in Chinese digital culture. Such performance manifests as "grassroots-ness" in Kuaishou short videos produced by rural users (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). By using indicators that are commonly recognized as rural by the audiences such as darker skin tone, shabby background, and linguistic markers like local accents, rural users make visible their rural identities and construct versions of authenticity that are connected to "grassroots-ness." In addition, migrant youth also actively demonstrate their working scenes, like carrying heavy construction materials, as part of their everyday experiences (Zhou and Liu, 2021). The demonstration of rural labor is also ubiquitous in rural promotional livestreaming the present study is

exploring. The unique features of agricultural labor – its close relationship with earth and nature – are unfamiliar to the urban population, making it a perfect target for romanticization and commodification as the "authentic" rural experience.

Method

To understand the construction and commodification of rurality in Chinese promotional livestreaming, I approached this topic with the digital ethnographic method. Digital ethnography describes an approach to studying communications and practices in digital space that is often theoretically oriented and cross-disciplinary (Pink et al., 2015; Varis, 2015). It is an approach that is flexible and adaptive depending on the specific communicative practices of interest and the issues emerging from the field. The procedures to examine promotional rural livestreaming are designed for this specific purpose. More specifically, I used what I call a "real-time lurking" practice to conduct my observations. Since rural livestreaming unfolds in real time, I was there to observe the performances of the streamers and their interactions with the audiences in real time. I avoided interacting with the streamers myself, hence the "lurking," to avoid disturbing the processes (Varis, 2015). Considering the platform's public nature, with minimal expectations for privacy from participating parties, I argue that little ethical concern could be raised for the "lurking" practice. I avoid including identifiable information about the streamers or viewers in the writing to maintain their anonymity. During my observation, I took detailed notes and screenshots of elements, events, and interactions that are relevant to rurality construction and recorded my thoughts and feelings that emerged in real time.

I chose Taobao Live as the platform for data collection since it is the earliest and most popular promotional livestream platform in China. Taobao Live provides a ranking list for rural streamers. It was not entirely clear how the list is generated, but streamers on the top of the list often have higher numbers of viewers compared to the ones lower on the list. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that popularity is among the most crucial criteria at work. I observed top-ranking streamers on this list who stream during the time of my fieldwork (not all streamers on the top list are streaming on a regular basis) and ended up observing 16 streamers in total, covering a wide range of streaming practices. Each observation lasted from 30 to 120 minutes (total around 30 hours) to ensure enough time to observe the details as they unfold. I conducted most of the fieldwork from November 2021 to January 2022 on a weekly basis (daily during the Chinese New Year shopping season). In addition, during the writing process, I revisited the field to check the validity of my findings.

Reflecting on my positionality approaching this topic, I acknowledge that my identity plays a role in my interpretation of the data, the most relevant aspect being my urban identity. Despite situating within an agriculture-centered province (Gansu) in Northwest China, the area I grew up in is considered urban. As a result, I did not experience rural life in a long-term, immersed manner outside of periodically living in the countryside with family. In the process of observing rural livestreaming, my experiences as an urban Chinese woman make me an outsider gazing upon the rural "other," with a risk of exoticizing rural life. The outsider perspective, however, also affords me the opportunity to note down more details instead of taking certain things for granted. Since I also have

some experience with rural life, I do have some, although limited, insights about Chinese rurality, which is helpful in understanding the content. By acknowledging the factors of my own identity and experiences that are relevant to the studying of the topic, I hope it can inform the readers when they assess my interpretations.

During the iterative process of my observation, note-taking, and analysis, three themes emerged regarding the construction of rurality. Firstly, through the use of the liveness and interactivity features of livestreaming and choices of settings, streamers constructed a romanticized rural spatial experience for the audiences. Secondly, rural streams commonly feature real-time agricultural labor, possibly demystifying the labor process despite its omission of context and complexity. Finally, in contrast to agricultural labor being hyper-visible, streamers' other forms of labor – affective labor and labor to negotiate with the platform – are often eclipsed and undervalued, further exacerbating the precarity of their platform-contingent labor.

The construction and commodification of rural localities

The streamers construct the materiality of the rural space through their choices of settings: nature and rural cultural signifiers are presented as the background while pre-industrial, family-centered conditions as the immediate working environment. In addition, creatively utilizing platform-afforded liveness and real-time interactivity, streamers provides transformative spatial experiences for the audiences.

Streamers often choose to set their streaming events within the larger landscape that is nature and/or signifying rural culture both visually and audibly. Nature – mountains, forests, sea, and rivers – are figured as both resources and environments for production. Imageries that align with commonly recognizable rural cultural landscapes are also included, such as unpaved roads, dusty backyards, and old stone bridges.

Some streams are set in nature because the activities shown occur in such places. One streamer broadcasted the process of farmers checking beehives in the mountains at night. Audience witnesses the actions of farmers – walking on rough trails, looking for hives inside of fallen logs, checking the inside of hives – against the backdrop of the night in the forest. The barely visible trees and dirt trails under farmers' shaky flashlights and the bugs' constantly chirping brought to the audience imagery of nature consistent with the action of beekeeping. Here, nature is shown not only as a background but also from which the product – honey – are extracted.

Even when the activities shown do not usually occur in a natural environment, streamers still frequently choose to include a glimpse of nature in the background. The honey bottling process in one stream was featured inside the workshop with glass walls, through which the audience can see a backyard with beehives covered by snow and surrounded by barren trees and mountains. Occasionally a small dog would walk across the yard to play next to the almost-melted snowman (see Figure 1). This image of mountain-surrounded backyard is unnecessary for the bottling process but is nonetheless essential for signifying an idyllic rural life that is close to nature and appealing to the urban audience. Such examples are plenty in my observations: selling pork while showing ancient rural architectures, demonstrating local produce in front of the dusty unpaved road leading to the woods, and the sound of roosters in almost every stream I observed.

Figure 1. Streaming of honey-bottling with the rural background (screenshot, 2022).

Setting in natural and rural cultural landscapes, streamers illustrate that the products sold are a part of such rural spaces, ones where people eat fruits and honey grown in the backyard, and pork from pigs they raised. Rural China is, thus, no longer a space with its complexity, inconsistency, and instability, but one that is symbolic – standing in for closeness to nature, tradition, nostalgia, serenity, and lack of alienating modernity. The images of rural space, together with the products are packaged and sold on livestreaming platforms to urban audiences who, too, desire to share this idyllic life through watching rural streaming and purchasing the products.

Zooming in to the immediate locales where the streamed events take place, many streams situate within workshops. Although the specific production processes differ (cutting beef jerky and packaging oranges), these workshops have in common messy environments and rudimentary production tools. In one stream, workers were working on

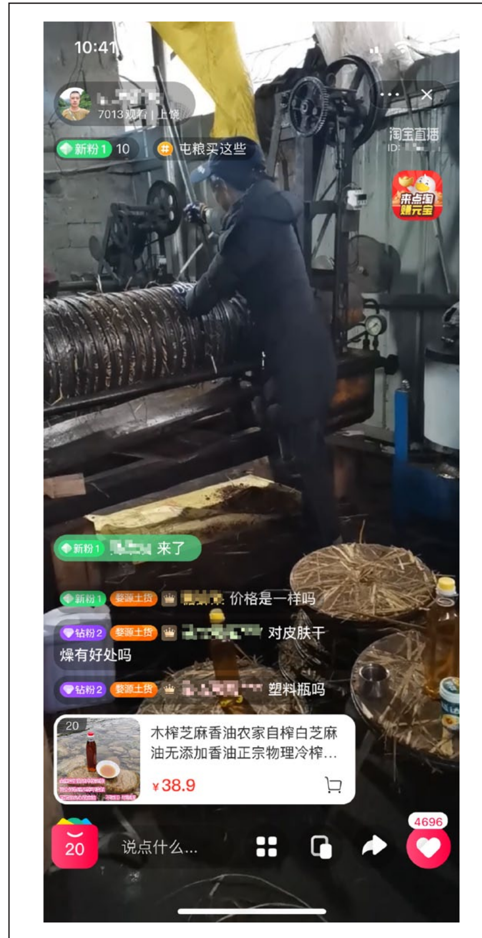

Figure 2. Oil extraction workshop (screenshot, 2022).

extracting camellia oil. They used a wooden mold to shape the seeds into cakes and straws to hold the shape. After preparing the cakes, the workers piled them on the screw oil press (usually used for small businesses) to complete the extraction. The workshop was dim and workstations were scattered around (see Figure 2), contrasting the stereotypical images of industrialized factory floors with large spaces and organized automatic machines. In another stream, broadcasting the process of selling beef, the workshop was set in, seemingly, a household living room on a large table in front of a heatable brick bed (a unique type of bed in Northern rural China). The people involved with cutting, weighing, and packaging beef are the streamer's relatives. Throughout the event, the streamer constantly reminded the audience that the beef they are selling is from a 2-year-old ox they raised themselves, not industrial-raised cattle injected with water. He even showed a picture of the ox as proof. In these examples, the visual and verbal cues constantly remind the audiences that the products sold in these streams came from small family

businesses with raw materials grown and processed by hand or simple tools, unlike the food mass-produced by automated machines from the factories. These streams invoke a sense of nostalgia, longing for a simpler time when the food came directly from the farms and tasted better.

Rural spaces, through the display of small messy family workshops, are attached to nostalgia for pre-industrialized and pre-automated modes of agricultural production. Such images disregard the heavy promotion and wide application of new agricultural technologies and ongoing industrialization in the past decades. Additionally, the emphasis on "family" production belies the ongoing breaking down of traditional family structure in rural China since the 1970s (Wang, 2019). These pre-industrialized productions situated within families are ones that are romanticized with a nostalgic filter to attract urban consumers who are surrounded by industrialized ways of production.

In addition to the natural/rural landscapes and family workshops, rural livestreaming can also create a transformative spatial experience for the audiences. With a combination of real-time interaction afforded by the platform and frequent first-person point-of-view camera use, the audiences, as I experienced in my observations, could be temporarily "transported" into rural spaces. Although in some streams the audiences would see the streamers talking to them in front of the camera, either making a sales pitch or chatting, audiences also frequently access the streams with a game-like first-person POV – looking through the car front window while driving on an unpaved road next to the orchards; or walking around a village with a shaky view glancing over 100-year-old houses and trees. The immersiveness becomes even more apparent when the streams take place in local markets, where other customers walk around and negotiate prices in the camera frames, creating an illusion that the audience is one of the customers in the crowd in the morning market in Southeast China (see Figure 3). In addition to the first-person POV, real-time interactions with streamers and others also contribute to such an immersive spatial experience. In a pork-selling stream, users can see the pork laying on the cutting board through the live camera while requesting a specific cut via the live chat. They then confirm the orders in chat after the streamer weighs the requested meat and shows the prices. Interwoven with other customers walking in and out of the frames, negotiating, and purchasing as the users do, the real-time streamer-audience interactions create a realistic illusion of an in-person shopping experience.

On livestreaming platforms, rural streamers, with their cameras, invite the audiences to explore the rural space in real-time. This rural space is one that is closely connected to nature through the choice of background. It is filled with nostalgia for pre-industrialized life where production is accomplished by families instead of factories. The experience of such romanticized rural ways of life and production is sold to the audiences together with the products. Making this experience even more appealing is the immersiveness brought about by the creative choices of the streamers and their real-time interactions with the audiences, enabled by the platform's affordances of liveness and interactivity.

The demystification and commodification of agricultural labor

In addition to rural localities, streamers also actively construct the labor activities inscribed within rural spaces. Platform-afforded liveness is utilized to present the entirety

Figure 3. Streaming in a rural market from a first-person perspective (screenshot, 2022).

of such labor – time spent, specific actions, and seasonality – and create an embodied, immersive experience for the audiences, potentially leading to a demystification effect. The real-time performed labor, however, is one that is decontextualized, romanticized, rid of hardship and exploitation, and commodified by the platform as a unique consumer experience.

The liveness of rural streaming enables streamers to broadcast the entire processes of production as they take place over time. The audiences, through the screens of their devices, has the opportunity to peek into the process of human labor transforming raw material into the final product, which is commonly hidden. In the example mentioned earlier, the audience witnessed the process of making camellia seed oil. First, the workers prepare the seed cakes – they mold the seeds into cakes by hand-pressing and each

takes a few minutes. After the cakes are ready, workers carry them from the floor to the pressing machine, piling them one after another. Before operating the machine to press oil, they check the machine and place a bucket under it. About 15 minutes later, the audience, staring at the machine as the camera guides us, waits for the oil to come out, together with the workers. In the hour-long viewing, I, with thousands of other audience members, witnessed the camellia seeds turning into molded cakes and then oil, with workers' actions – pressing, carrying, checking, placing, operating – unfolding over time. A similar experience can be found in other streamed labor processes such as honey bottling, beef jerky cutting, and chicken feeding. In these cases, since there was no editing, the audiences' act of viewing and workers' act of labor occur simultaneously, which enables the audiences to experience the temporal dimension of this specific labor process on its full scale. The audiences are not told but are actually witnessing, in real-time, the amount of time fused into the product. In addition, there are extended periods of time when the streams contain only the element of labor, no talking of streamers, making the awareness of time passing even more salient. The quantity of labor, measured by time, is no longer an abstract concept but an embodied experience through the streaming of labor processes.

In addition to the embodied experience of temporality, the audiences are also frequently reminded of the seasonal nature of agricultural production. Some streamers take the role of intermediators between farmers and the audiences – they travel around different workshops, local markets, and villages to find seasonal produce to sell on their livestreaming channels on Taobao Live. During wintertime, for example, the most common fruit on streaming are oranges and streamers constantly remind the audiences that this is the best time of the year to enjoy oranges. Seasonality is key in streams selling honey. Beekeepers explain that, throughout the year, they move around the country with beehives following the seasonal blooming of different flowers, thus producing different types of honey depending on the season. Winter is the resting season when bees can produce honey as their own food. Streamers frequently emphasize that their products are "seasonal" and so is their labor, making salient the seasonal nature of rural productions. The seasonality in streaming contrasts with industrialized agricultural production supported by technologies like greenhouse farming, which significantly reduces the influence of season on crops' growth and yields products all year round. In the rural streaming world, seasonality is added back to the equation.

Enabled by platform-afforded liveness, rural promotional livestreaming has a demystifying effect on the agricultural labor performed. Marx (1887) argues that commodity fetishism occurs in capitalist production when the value of the commodity is mistakenly seen as inherent to the commodity itself instead of rooted in the infused human labor. In this situation, the relationship of commodities stands in for, thus concealing, the social relations between the producers. The labor process is thus mystified. To some extent, the livestreaming of agricultural labor resists the commodity fetishism process. Through experiencing the temporality of such labor, both the amount of time and type of specific human activities devoted to each production process, the audiences participate in a ceremony of agricultural labor demystification. In this process, the audiences are encouraged to make the connection between human labor and the value of the product: it becomes apparent, the camellia seed oil is worth 90 yuan not because of the properties of

the oil itself but the molding, extracting, machine-handling labor performed by the workers spending hours of their time.

While rural streaming has the potential to demystify the agricultural labor, this labor, however, is romanticized and commodified into cultural commodities for audiences to consume, like the rural localities. The audiences see hardworking farmers, workers, and beekeepers infusing time and energy into products, but these production processes are decontextualized. The production processes are taken out of their social and political relations: in these streams, we do not see, for example, the ownership of the lands and equipment for production, the way production is organized and coordinated in the society, the distribution of the profit, the political agenda imposed by the governments, the inequality along gender, ethnicity, and rural-urban lines. What we are presented with are labor processes free from complications – fantasies of the labor processes.

Fascinated by the wide range of production processes, urban audiences are drawn to these performances as an integral part of their consumption experiences. The embodied, immersive experience of rural labor is also one that is rather romanticized with the hardship, exploitation, and inequality omitted. It brings only lighthearted, fun, fresh fantasies to pair with the fresh produce to purchase.

Affective labor and negotiation with the platform

While livestreaming reveals the agricultural labor, it hides the immaterial types of labor performed by the streamers simultaneously. In addition to providing product-related information and entertaining the audiences – by chatting, joking, and maintaining a cheerful and energetic appearance – throughout the hours-long streaming events, streamers also need to perform labor to create authentic identities and connections, negotiate with the platform, and strategically build boundaries between the front and backstage. In contrast to the agricultural labor that takes center stage, these immaterial forms of labor risk invisibility, thus precarity.

Throughout the streaming events, rural streamers are dedicated to creating intimacy with the viewers. One common strategy is to use nicknames that indicate intimacy. For example, one streamer uses "自家人儿" ("my own family" with local accent) to address his followers. Many established streamers also assign unique nicknames to their followers utilizing the platform-afforded categorization system – viewers are grouped into different levels according to their intimacy index with the specific streamer, which is accumulated with each interaction including following, liking, sharing, commenting, visiting the product page, and purchasing. These nicknames would appear before the username in the chat section, indicating the viewer's fan identity. Some streamers also create chat groups for their followers, maintaining consistent communication and a sense of community, even outside of streaming. It is also extremely common for streamers to share rather private matters in their personal lives with their followers, such as thoughts about their kids and major personal events like giving birth. By sharing details of their personal life with followers, addressing viewers with special titles, and utilizing the platform-afforded categorization function, streamers carefully foster intimate communities with their viewers.

If building intimacy is shared across all promotional streamers, rural streamers, specifically, also use a range of resources to create a sense of authenticity in relation to their rural identities. As elaborated earlier, rural streamers often set their streams in natural or rural landscapes that are apparent to the audiences. Besides the choice of setting, the images are often shaky, and lack any flattering lighting or professional sound-collecting device which could filter out background noises. This indicates that the streams are not produced by media professionals – top streamers who stream in studio settings – but by peasants who record their everyday surroundings and activities faithfully. Additionally, streamers often speak Mandarin with local accents that reflect their hometown dialects, further providing evidence of their rural identities. Sometimes streamers even switch from Mandarin with local accents to local dialects which are incomprehensible for most audiences, especially when they speak on the phone or with others around them. The local dialect not only strengthens the authentic rural identities of the streamers, but also create a linguistic barrier that protects the audiences from intruding further into their private world – since the audiences cannot understand their conversations – even during livestreaming. This echoes Urry and Larsen's (2011) argument that staged authenticity is a way to protect their backstage life from the intrusion of the tourist gaze.

In addition to the various forms of affective labor, streamers also actively engage in negotiation with platform rules and algorithms. Despite the opacity of Taobao's ranking algorithms for streaming content, streamers imagine numbers like viewing, likes, comments, and shares could be taken into consideration. Such imagination is demonstrated by their continuous effort on improving these indexes. In the streams, streamers constantly ask viewers to follow, like, and share their streams. Moreover, streamers are on constant alert to any possible platform restrictions and punishments. One streamer showed the audience a record of fines he received from the platform because his shipping staff accidentally missed the shipping deadline set by the platform. Additionally, to circumvent platform content censorship, streamers show tremendous creativity. For example, streamers are often aware of certain terms (medical terms, COVID policy related terms, etc.) that might lead to "限流" or "traffic restriction," – similar to "shadow-banning," a form of platform punishment by drastically reducing content visibility instead of removing the content (Myers West, 2018), thus using tactics to dodge censorship such as replacing them with related terms or to spell out the pronunciations. Since the rules and regulations are created by platforms with little negotiation room, if any, and are mostly ambiguous and open to interpretation, streamers are subjected to high degrees of uncertainty. With the platform holding the right to reward or punish the streamers for any action, the streamer-platform power imbalance is apparent. To navigate such a precarious situation, streamers devote labor to gain visibility, align with platform requirements, and creatively circumvent platform restrictions.

In the process of constructing a commodifiable rural China, the streamers devote affective labor and labor of negotiation with the platforms, aiming to create an intimate and pleasant affective experience for the audiences while navigating the murky water of platform-streamer relationship. These forms of labor stand in striking contrast with the more visible agricultural labor, as the center of the frame and attention, risking being overlooked and devalued. Such risk of invisibility further exacerbates the precarity associated with digital labor.

Conclusion

As promotional livestreaming transformed the landscape of Chinese digital culture and consumer culture in the last few years, it also provided a unique opportunity for traditionally marginalized rural residents to participate in digital cultural production. While seeking financial benefit from this new form of promotion, rural streamers also actively shape how rurality, both rural localities and rural labor, is constructed.

In this new form of cultural production, the relations and interactions between rural cultural producers and the platforms are rather complex. Streamers creatively employ platform-afforded features, especially liveness and real-time interactivity, to transport the viewers into romantic rural spaces, consisting of symbols for a way of life and production that is close to nature, nostalgic, pre-industrial, and family-centered. By adapting recognizable symbolic indicators of rural identities, such as rural backgrounds and local accents, that are already existing in earlier forms of rural digital content (Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Zhou and Liu, 2021), they perform authenticity that not only "sells" but also "protects" (Urry and Larsen, 2011). In addition, using the platform-afforded liveness and interactivity, rural streamers enrich Chinese digital culture, not only through innovatively creating immersive experiences with agricultural labor for the audiences, which might function to demystify such labor processes, but also by the action of participating in digital culture as an "unlikely creative class" (Lin and de Kloet, 2019). Moreover, they cultivate intimate relations and communities with their audiences which, despite the rather instructional purpose of trading, always contain political potential (Hardt, 1999).

The darker side of the platform-streamer relationship manifests in the clear power imbalance and precarity of such digital labor. With the platforms holding the power to set and impose rules and restrictions, which also lack transparency, streamers have few choices but to tread carefully while devoting a considerable amount of labor to gain visibility and prevent punishment. Moreover, the authenticity, intimacy, and community building mentioned earlier require constant performance of affective labor which is often invisible (especially in contrast to the hyper-visible agricultural labor), and undervalued, thus, ripe for platform exploitation. Although able to actively take advantage of the platform affordances, rural streamers are highly dependent on the platforms, subject to their rules and regulations, and exploited for the range of labor they perform.

With the collective effort of Chinese state and platform corporations urging the rural into participating in the platform economy without addressing the existing cultural and economic marginalization, rural laborers are, once again, entangled in the capitalist exploitation mechanism. Although rural spaces with their inscribed activities are made more visible in digital culture, such constructed rural spaces are flattened, romanticized, and commodified. Any complexity, controversy, inconsistency, instability, exploitation, and hardship are omitted in these constructions. The activities, labor, or otherwise, and everyday life are decontextualized – isolated from their social, economic, and cultural context, especially the historically-formed urban-rural inequality. What is left for the audiences are imageries of the idyllic rural lifestyles with staged authenticity to be gazed at, experienced vicariously and, most importantly, purchased, together with the products. Despite the cultural significance of rural participation in digital culture, this visibility of constructed rural spaces is in line with Banet-Weiser's "economies of

visibility" – visibility that is absorbed into the economy instead of for the purpose of political change (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

Although this study illustrates the nuances and complications in platform-centered commodification processes and labor precarity shaped by local socio-cultural contexts, this particular version of digital ethnography limits observations to what is presented on screen during streaming. More research is needed for ethnographic interpretations in the physical spaces where such live content is produced, especially in examining the processes and actions that take place off screen and off stream.

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