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Embedding Heterogenous Forms of Surveillance in China's Autocratic Networked Media: How the Government Supports and Controls Platforms, Companies, Online Celebrities, and Users

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Embedding Heterogenous Forms of Surveillance in China's Autocratic Networked Media

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Abstract

The rise of platforms, datafication, and the new business model of platform capitalism have prompted scholars to carve out the differences between surveillance capitalism in authoritarian states and Western democracies. However, there has been little research about the mechanisms that authoritarian governments use to subject economic actors and users to state control and the subsequent social practices. The case studies presented here illustrate how the state's deep entanglement with platforms is meant to foster both economic and socio-political outcomes by allowing platforms to promote users' entrepreneurship and restricting their online business if they are radically indifferent to media content or Party censorship rules. Furthermore, the case studies demonstrate that China's model goes beyond the Western concept of surveillance capitalism, because the heterogeneous logics of marketisation are interconnected with types of state surveillance different from the ones described by Zuboff (2019) for democratic countries. Against the backdrop of Fuchs/Trottier's (2015) theoretical model of social media surveillance, the societal implications of categorical suspicion, social sorting, and surveillance creep play out differently. The diffusion of China's institutional setting into e-platforms provokes culture-specific narratives (Versailles literature) and social online practices utilising networked images (barrage subtitling, human flesh search) unseen in Western online publics to date. Hence, studies of surveillance mechanisms in China's digital space need to be embedded within the larger context of political economy and state control.

Keywords:

Platform Society; China; Social Media Surveillance; Networked Images; Autocratic Networked Media

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1. The Interaction of Political and Economic Surveillance in China

Platformisation (i.e., the rise of platforms) has become the leading economic and infrastructural model of the social web. A shift from social network sites to social media platforms has seen datafication become even more sophisticated, and the new business model of "platform capitalism" (coined by Srnicek 2017) has emerged. This transforms the social action of interconnected businesses, advertisers, and ordinary users on online platforms into quantified data that can be commodified for real-time tracking and predictive analytics (van Dijck 2014: 198). The new model characterises capitalist internet economies not only in Western democracies (here: EU and US), but also in authoritarian capitalist countries, where state intervention is not limited by public and private goods and transgresses the principle of self-limitation of government power implied by the Rule of Law (Sallai/Schnyder 2019: 3; 13).

The top ten most valuable brands (which consist of only U.S. American and Chinese platform companies like Tencent and Alibaba) are continually seeking to drive alternative platforms out of the market and expand to other online spaces (Helmond 2015: 5). To extend their core business (i.e., everlasting data extraction), these platforms collect and process networked images to use as training examples for algorithms and image-based predictive models to predict users' future behaviour (MacKenzie/Munster 2019: 10; 17-18). However, as users have no insight into the technical infrastructure and operations of platforms, they are prevented from using self-determined reason in their interaction with digital artifacts (Mühlhoff 2018: 570-571). Due to this power imbalance between IT-firms and users, Zuboff describes "surveillance capitalism" as a form of instrumentally controlling collective behaviour that was totalistic in its ambition – in both China and the West (Zuboff 2019: 404). Other scholars used the term "neoliberal psychopolitics" to emphasise how the surveillance state and market economy go hand in hand, to foster practices of exploitation and mind-control (Byong-Chul Han 2017).

However, there is a fundamental structural difference in the entanglement of instrumentarian and state power between Western democracies and China (Zuboff 2019: 393). In the US and the EU, IT-firms possess user data, and the state moves with the firms to get access, whereas in China, the state "appears determined to 'own' this complex", and firms move with the state (ibid: 443). This is because in the US, Californian high-tech artisans promoted a neoliberal ideology to foster their social privileges (Barbrook/Cameron 1996:10), whereas in post-Mao China, a technocratic elite promoted network expansion and telecommunications for military and state surveillance purposes (Zhao 2007: 100). As a result, China's neoliberal internet economy combines commodification, public relations, and marketing with state control and socialist ideology (Fuchs 2017: 381). A public sphere with deliberative outcomes is regarded as a danger to party rule and social stability, with the potential to undermine the prestige of the govern-

ment and to impede its governance (Li 2014). Hence, the Chinese government has helped national IT-companies to build native social networking platforms that allow for better control of regime-critical content (Reuter/Szakonyi 2013: 49). It follows that algorithmic control of networked images in China's authoritarian capitalism (Fuchs 2020) is not only economically but also politically motivated. Thus, scholars who have explored the institutional and cultural dimensions of the platformisation of Chinese society identify a deep entanglement between state and platforms, as well as a dynamic intersection of infrastructures, governance, and user practices (de Kloet et al. 2019).

Scholars note that the mechanisms that authoritarian governments use to subject economic actors to state control and erode the boundaries between public and private domains (in both political and economic life) have not only remained unexplored, but also differ between various authoritarian capitalist states (Sallai/Schnyder 2019: 3-4). Therefore, before we explore multifold surveillance mechanisms regulating China's online space, we first need to understand the institutional and cultural settings that enable the Chinese Communist Party to control the financial and intellectual capital of IT-firms. In a second step, case studies employing a critical discourse analysis of Chinese social media content will be discussed in order to illustrate the Chinese state's governance of platform politics in action, by shedding light on various occasions when the Chinese government either grants a certain degree of freedom to companies and users, or restricts their online activity.

First, in Western surveillance capitalism, a specialist class of software developers and data scientists owns tools to predict (computational methods) and condition (social network incentives using social pressure) collective behaviour with the goal of fostering platform growth tactics and a socially efficient collective (Zuboff 2019: 504). Such power in the hands of IT-companies is prevented by the Communist Party of China (CPC). The CPC is not only above the law in practice, but also in its control of the development of a state-dependent mercantilism. Firms in strategic and essential industries (e.g., Artificial Intelligence) are state-owned, party officials hold a personal stake in privately-owned businesses and hybrid firms, and the financial system relies heavily on state-owned banks (Witt/Redding 2012: 4-5). Hence, in China's authoritarian capitalism, Chinese companies do not enjoy the degree of freedom that firms enjoy in free-market democratic capitalism. In a capitalist system without capitalists, the knowledge (understanding the operation of the whole market and the behaviour of its actors) that IT-firms generate is subjected to state control. It follows that if IT-firms exploit their knowledge advantage by undermining the CPC's online censorship rules, they will be punished with restrictions on their business operations.

Second, the reciprocity (e.g., fair labour practices, unionisation, and collective bargaining in employment relations) that used to exist between companies and the people (i.e., employees and customers) in Western democracies is currently being eroded through structural separation of U.S. surveillance capitalists (i.e., IT-firms)

from the European and U.S. American publics (Zuboff 2019: 501). China's political economy does not display this kind of reciprocity; however, platform labour poses similar challenges in China regarding monopoly, employment, wages and labour precarity, as the case of food delivery workers illustrates (Sun 2019; Doorn/Chen 2021). The growing body of literature in this field suggests that the notion of precarity (in relation to digital labour) might be different in China due to the unique historic experience under Mao's rule, when job security was ubiquitous but still meant a life in poverty (deKloet et al. 2019: 253). Furthermore, since the Communist Party already represents the interests of the proletariat, China's Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) is an organ of political control. For example, during workers' strikes, the ACFTU does not represent labourers' interests but instead promotes the interests of management (Witt/Redding 2012: 9). Similarly, NGOs closely cooperate with the state (Hou 2015: 81), and social protest is forbidden (Ho/Jackson 2021: 508). Despite there being no state-independent representation of workers' interests (Witt/Redding 2012:14), workers still find ways to show resistance to platform labour (Sun 2019: 319). I argue that if one assumes that productive social relationships between employers and employees do not exist in China because these are regulated by the CPC, then we are likely to overlook alternative forms for negotiations of interest in China's online public (i.e., workers' internet memes).

Third, in China we can observe a similar preference for prediction products that favour content designed to direct online users to entertainment products and sensational news. One example is the ranking system of trending topics within the popular Chinese social media platform "Sina Weibo", where celebrities can either purchase favourable positioning for a topic, or rely on their fans to generate traffic and attract public attention (Nigunigu 2021). At the same time, in authoritarian media systems, media's role is not to supervise state action, but to act as a propaganda tool serving political stability. It follows that in China's instrumentarian social order, where the asocial mode of knowledge and freedom is concentrated in the state, IT-firms cannot be radically indifferent towards media content. The Chinese government closely cooperates with platforms (who must implement censorship based on politically sensitive keywords and use advanced blocking technologies) to directly control (political) public discourse (deLisle et al.2016: 21). This helps prevent the behaviours observed with US IT-firms such as constantly attempting to surmount state laws and market constraints by consumers, competitors, employees and civil society (Zuboff 2019: 403; 504). Although scholars observe that the range of political issues allowed to be debated online in China has widened, this expansion was not to encourage public reasoning with deliberative outcomes, but to foster online consumer culture (by piquing nationalism) and people's loyalty (Jiang 2012: 84-94). Due to China's ambition to turn the country into a global power of Artificial Intelligence by 2030, it is no surprise that Chinese public discourse about government use of Artificial Intelligence for mass surveillance highlights its economic and political potency while ignoring socio-

ethical implications (Zeng/Schäfer 2020: 12). If online content does not comply with the law and socialist core values as requested by the Cyberspace Administration of China, digital platforms are asked to intervene with censorship measures. It appears that Chinese IT-firms' public responsibility to promote a "healthy" internet culture and positive atmosphere (Lin/de Kloet 2019: 4) clearly goes beyond the Western model of surveillance capitalism. Ironically, the complex interplay between platformisation, datafication, networked (often image-based) practices, and the Chinese state's knowledge sharing of patient data with the public (for the sake of epidemic containment) has spurred certain forms of asocial online behaviour unseen in the West (e.g., "human flesh search", as discussed later).

2. Framework of Case Studies

As outlined previously, the concept of surveillance capitalism (with its focus on digital platforms as the dominant actor employing datafication) tends to reduce the political economy of the Internet to a narrow problem area. Against this backdrop, the focus of my analysis will be extended to explore the range of logics that are at stake in China's internet economy. This critical digital social research study applies the theoretical model of social media surveillance (Fuchs/Trottier 2015: 130) to (a) showcase how commercial social media surveillance and state surveillance interact in Chinese practice, (b) shed light on the types of incidents in which the Chinese government will either allow full autonomy to e-commerce actors, or subject economic actors and users to state control, and (c) carve out the social impact of authoritarian surveillance on online user behaviour and the social use of images on platforms.

The theoretical model is based on the assumption that social media surveillance has three societal implications: (1) permanent monitoring of citizens' social media activities (*categorical suspicion*), (2) algorithmic classification of users, which not only targets advertisements but also allocates resources to privileged individuals and discriminates against others (*social sorting*), and (3) user behaviour of habitually exposing their private lives to the public and observing other users' posts (*surveillance creep*) (Fuchs/Trottier 2015: 128-129). Against the backdrop of this model, I will discuss the diverse surveillance mechanisms and logics of marketisation in China's online space. Fuchs/Trottier's model emphasises the social, political, and lateral forms of surveillance and control going beyond the concept of surveillance capitalism, and allows us to embed China's digital economy into a wider context of political economies and state regulations. I will identify the intersections between economic and political surveillance and networked images by discussing several case studies, which are grouped here according to the dynamically intersecting parameters of "infrastructures", "governance", and "practices", as inspired by Kloet et al.'s model of the institutional and cultural dimensions of Chinese platformisation (2019).

In the *practice* section, three case studies will be presented in order to illustrate how the Chinese government not only considers instrumentarian society to be a means to work towards political and social outcomes (Zuboff 2019: 389) but also as a market opportunity. This is because certain Confucian values continue to shape China's modernity, including the crucial role of government leadership in maintaining socio-political stability *and* in providing improved material living conditions through economic growth (Tu 2002: 204-5). The Chinese government's strategy of "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" (2015) views the internet's sharing economy not only as a space that provides new opportunities to IT-giants and well-established entrepreneurs to extend their core business, but also to millions of "grassroots individuals" and start-ups (Lin/deKloet 2019: 3-4). Hence, the cases discussed in this section demonstrate how the Chinese government considers rapid platformisation and datafication as tools for promoting economic growth. The first case explores how the government allows digital platforms to economically utilise public attention and user engagement in public debates (case study of Purcotton advertisement). The following two cases explore how the government allows brands and Wang Hong (web celebrities) on popular Chinese social media platforms (i.e., Weibo, Kuaishou, and Bilibili) to stimulate users to experiment with new forms of creative entrepreneurship (case study of livestreaming on Kuaishou, case study of Versailles literature). However, despite scholars' observation that the Chinese government has hesitated to implement strict rules of content regulation to promote the IT sector's economic growth (Qin et al. 2016: 5), there have recently been legal disputes between service providers and the Chinese government due to diverging interests.

The *governance section* is devoted to platform politics and the automated censorship of images. It discusses a case study (about a prominent sex scandal discussed in Chinese public discourse in 2020) to show how IT-giants that fail to maintain an equilibrium between the promotion of platform growth tactics and their public responsibility to moderate media content will have further restrictions imposed on their operational freedom in the virtual marketplace by the state. These Chinese platform operators that display their indifference to party rule by coming up with their own – not politically, but economically motivated – censorship rules will prompt state intervention. The case study is also an interesting example of how *categorical suspicion* and *surveillance creep* can backfire and not only harm users, but also those who operate social media and e-commerce platforms.

In the *infrastructure* section, the two cases not only exemplify how users employ media art and image data to stabilise surveillance capitalism, but also demonstrate the role of networked visual images in culture-specific forms of online behaviour. The first case is devoted to Chinese delivery workers' resistance to algorithmic control of their work practices by digital platforms. Although employees cannot expect their interests to be fairly represented by labour and trade unions due to China's institutional setting, delivery work has challenged

traditional Chinese labour law with delivery drivers being governed, classified and surveilled by platform algorithms (*social sorting*), and the Chinese state is just beginning to investigate how to regulate these digital labour practices. While the Chinese government has allowed new forms of labour precarity to develop, it also allows digital labourers to publicly express their resistance to platform labour, provided they blame the operators and customers of food delivery platforms and not the Communist Party. I will show how delivery workers successfully use new media art (i.e., videoclip-based internet memes) to criticise surveillance capitalism and stimulate active public engagement – which, ironically, stabilises surveillance capitalism. Here, the social practice of barrage subtitling enhances the network effects that operators of video sharing sites are aiming for.

In contrast, the second case study in this section shows what kind of network effects prompt state intervention. For example, in the case of human flesh search, it is a merging of surveillance, modulation of viewing, and audience labour in times of health crisis. It shows how health data made publicly available by the government and platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic spurred a new type of human flesh search, in which online communities exposed images of patients' movements. Furthermore, this example illustrates how two social implications of social media surveillance fatefully 'enrich' each other when netizens engage in a human flesh search of Covid-19 patients (i.e., *categorical suspicion* in the form of both state and platforms monitoring smart phone users' activities to control the spread of an epidemic; *surveillance creep* in the form of exposing users' private lives).

In summary, the case studies discussed shed light on marketisation tendencies that are linked to state and social forms of surveillance that go beyond Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism. Applying the Fuchs/Trottier theoretical model to the Chinese context helps us to recognise that although social media surveillance in both China and the West has similar societal implications (categorical suspicion, social sorting, surveillance creep), the social effects appear to be different in China due to its peculiar institutional and cultural system.

3. Practices: How Brands and Companies Utilise User-Generated Content for Online Merchandising

3.1 Purcotton Advertisement

On January 7, 2021, the high-end daily necessity brand 'Purcotton' posted an advertisement for make-up remover-cleansing wipes online. It immediately triggered a heated online debate on the popular social media platform Weibo, especially among female netizens, because the advertisement was said to discriminate against women. In the advertisement, a man chases a young woman at night, but when she removes her make up with cleansing wipes, he walks off.

Fig. 1: Still frames from Purcotton's advertisement video

Many female Weibo users found the advertisement insulting because it not only suggested that women are ugly without make up ("The advertisement for make-up remover" 2021), but because it depicts and trivialises a gendered crime. The next morning Purcotton publicly apologised, describing it as "creative advertising", which provoked even more criticism from netizens, women's federations ("Creative advertising or insulting women?" 2021), and journalists ("China Women's Daily" 2021); "Purcotton apologises" 2021). That afternoon Purcotton published a second apology (Purcotton 2021), and deleted both the original apology and the controversial advertisement. However, commercial media (Fig. 2) and a women's newspaper (Fig. 4) provided screenshots of the deleted material (i.e., the original apology and scenes from the advertisement), and highlighted the ranking of 'PurCotton Era' ('全棉时代') on the list of trending topics on Weibo (no. 20) (Financial community network 2021) (Fig. 3). Cut versions ("Creative advertising or insulting women?" 2021) and fast motion versions of the advertisement ("China Women's Daily" 2021) were provided as well.

The case illustrates that in networked media, controversial advertisements can trigger an immediate and heated discussion among the online public. Users can quickly access the debate and the controversial content through hashtag grouping of comments and through social media platforms' ranking of trending topics. This also impacts on whether media outlets and other organisations are willing to join the debate. A company's attempt to reproduce and maintain surveillance capitalism by producing provocative, attention-seeking online ads can come into conflict with social media platforms' economic surveillance of user generated content and their efforts to transform user habits of browsing into grazing and other forms of active cognitive engagement (Creeber 2013).

Fig. 2: Commercial media; Fig. 3: Ranking as trending topic; Fig. 4: China Women's Daily

3.2 Livestreaming on Kuaishou

The social media platform Kuaishou, an algorithm-based video and live-streaming platform where registered users can upload short videos targeting second- and third-tier cities in China, took a different approach to online merchandising by making netizens into the content producers of advertisements. In 2019, the e-commerce management team of Kuaishou launched the "Kuaishou fashion product award". Bloggers were asked to upload videos in which they unpack the company's products, give tutorials on how to use certain beauty products, or show off their dressing skills when wearing fashion companies' products (Fig. 5 & 6).

Fig. 5 & 6: Participants of Kaishou fashion product award

The fashion product award became a big success, not only for the platform but also for Kuaishou anchors (who gained hundreds of thousands of additional followers), and fashion manufacturers (who saw their daily sales volumes increase). More than 70,000 users submitted 600,000 broadcasts to the competition, attracting 3.7 billion views and 130 million likes ("Hard currency" 2019). However, only the top ten bloggers that attracted the most traffic received a share of Kuaishou's revenue (traffic packages) and were offered business opportunities with respective beauty companies.

At the same time, the success of Kuaishou platform also depends on its commercial cooperation with "grassroot" content creators, mostly uneducated young Chinese living in rural areas, for whom the platform can provide a tool to build a career. While Kuaishou has been described as "democratic" because the algorithm gives users from any social stratum the chance to attract traffic with their content (Lin/deKloet 2019: 5), the operation of its algorithmic system remains invisible to users. Furthermore, content moderators need to make sure that no illegal content violates Chinese law. Kuaishou platform has already been disciplined for the distribution of harmful content, and as a result many user accounts were shut down in 2018 (ibid: 4). Hence, trying to attract as much traffic

as possible, content producers are likely to engage in acts of self-censorship in order to avoid conflicts. Thus, scholars describe the special state-platform relationship as a feature that distinguishes the Chinese platformisation of cultural production from its Western counterpart (ibid: 7).

Thus, while livestreaming can empower users by stimulating creativity and new forms of creative entrepreneurship, it can also foster labour precariousness when people move from contracted labour to platform labour (de Kloet et al. 2019: 253). While service providers and brands can exploit the labour of the average user, platforms need to ensure that user-generated content is compliant with the rules of the Cyberspace Administration of China.

3.3 Versailles Literature

One of the most searched words in China in 2020 was 'Versailles literature' ('凡尔赛文学') ("Versailles Literature" 2021). Weibo user Xiaonaiqiu (@小奶球) coined this name, inspired by "The Rose of Versailles", a novel about the late 18th century French aristocracy. Versailles literature is a lifestyle narrative in which netizens present an unsatisfying image of their life on the surface, as a technique to show off their alleged wealth and high social status (Zui et al. 2020). The narrative, which suggests that a materialistic lifestyle leads to ultimate happiness, is used to promote online consumption, since its anchors implicitly advocate the purchase of certain products to achieve the supposed happiness. Instructing netizens about the main techniques, Xiaonaiqiu has become a popular lecturer on the video-sharing platform Bilibili (Little milk ball 2020, Fig. 7):

Fig. 7: Online tutorial by Xiaonaiqiu, Bilibili

In November 2020, the social media platform Douban initiated a series of online lectures instructing people how to create a proper narrative (i.e., "Versailles study group" and "Versailles open online tutorials") (Brain instructor 2020). Awards are given to those netizens who promote the narrative successfully (Zui et al. 2020). One famous but contested representative of this narrative technique is Meng Qiqi (蒙淇淇77). She received online public attention on Weibo because of how she depicted her alleged extravagant lifestyle. Meng Qiqi name drops famous brands while describing her husband's clothing style (see post from Nov. 2, 2020, Fig. 8, lower half of screenshot):

"My husband is so thrifty; he only wears $23,000 KITON suits. Even on important occasions, he just wears $5,000 ZEGNA suits to work, and always uses the same ARMANI handbag and D&G shoes".

Fig. 8: Weibo posts by user Meng Qiqi

Some users express their dismay at Meng Qiqi's post and the kind of narrative she uses. This results in her blocking them, which is an act these users find even more ridiculous, as illustrated by the four screenshots below (User 'Max English name is too short' 2020, Fig. 10; User 'Iceberg Fire' 2020, Fig. 11; User 'Caribbean Big Bubble' 2020, Fig. 12).

Fig. 9: Censored; Fig. 10: User Max; Fig. 11: User Iceberg; Fig. 12: User Caribbean

Translation (Fig. 9-12): Fig. 9 (lower half): Censored user comment: “Fly your helicopter to Lhasa to see the starry sky”. Fig. 10 (upper half): “I can only laugh at you! You really make me sad”. (User ‘Max English name is too short’ 2020). Fig. 11 (upper half): “Damn, Meng Qiqi’s layout is too small. That’s it, you blocked me @Mengqiqi 77”. (User ‘Iceberg Fire’ 2020). Fig. 12 (upper half): “Unbelievable. Deleted my comments and blocked me!” (User ‘Caribbean Big Bubble’ 2020)

Note that the first of the four user posts shown above (Fig. 9) is no longer publicly accessible and has likely been deleted by internet censors because it contains the politically sensitive word "Lhasa" (capital of Tibet). This is an example of categorical suspicion as one major implication of social media surveillance (Fuchs/Trottier 2015: 128), as this particular comment was not meant to criticise China's policy on Tibet, but was filtered out by censors anyway. Here, we can see that Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism is insufficient to grasp the interaction of economic interests and socio-political surveillance in the case of China.

Despite extensive user criticism, Meng Qiqi is still an opinion leader on Weibo, with hundreds of thousands of fans. Authors of Versailles literature aim to capture the attention of netizens (Hello new life 2020) by creating a fabricated image of a virtual self that flaunts its alleged wealth and high social status. If they succeed, they may be promoted by platforms, brands and merchandising companies and so be able to generate profit as an online influencer. Hence, the aesthetic and narrative strategies of Versailles literature make users turn to the platform and spend their time, either creating, admiring or criticising this content. Together, this generates the network effects needed to stabilise surveillance capitalism.

To summarise, the three case studies discussed in the practice section demonstrate that the new business model of platform capitalism in China's authoritarian state centres on enabling "grassroot" content creators to make a living through online advertisement and merchandising. The Chinese state does not intervene in the e-business activities discussed, signalling its support of the parties involved reproducing an ideology based on platforms' commodification of user content creation. Hence, against Zuboff's claim that the Chinese government regards instrumentarian society as a means to pursue political and social outcomes, the examples discussed suggest that it considers instrumentarian society as a market opportunity to be equally important. That the Chinese state is equally determined to pursue socio-political outcomes is illustrated in the next section. We will see how the Chinese Cyber Administration restricts the amount of freedom it grants to IT-companies that prioritise platform growth tactics without respecting Party rule.

4. Governance: When Social Media and E-Commerce Platforms have their Own Way with Algorithmic Censorship

The first Chinese online celebrity listed by Nasdaq in 2019 was Zhang Dayi, who started her career as an e-commerce model and established herself as a fashion entrepreneur. Operating her highly successful online store on the e-commerce platform Taobao, she interacts with her followers (and customers) by raising questions about the products she sells to increase online engagement and estimate

the number of products her team should produce. Holding 13.2% of the shares, she is the chief marketing officer of Ruhan Holdings on Weibo platform, China's first ranked e-commerce company. Ruhan Holdings provides a marketing platform for online celebrities and cooperates with the online-retailing store Taobao to promote certain brands (Hangzhou Ruhan Holdings Co., Ltd. 2021). It uses the new economic operation mode of multi-channel-networks (MCN 2021) by continuously releasing professional content to promote both online celebrities and the brands these celebrities are advertising. Ruhan provides supply chain management, fabric purchases, design and pattern-making, manufacturing and production, but Zhang's task is to recruit new followers, to advertise fashion products and to stimulate user feedback on newly released products (Pan 2017). Hence, her business model is built on (a) creating audio-visual material that invites netizens to interact with her and, (b) extracting data from user engagement with the help of big data analytics (i.e., sentiment analysis). One day before Women's Day in 2019, Alibaba praised Zhang Dayi on its official Weibo account, as one of the top nine successful female "Wang Hong" practising e-commerce on Taobao and Tmall (Shandong Finance 2020). Similar to their Western counterparts, the economies of Chinese social media corporations consist of both advertising industry and financial economics, where investors purchase shares to increase market value (Fuchs 2016: 35).

Zhang Dayi is also interesting because she became involved in a major online event that illustrates the power of platforms in redefining digital visual culture: content that harms the platform's economic business is doomed to be made invisible by the platform's automated image censorship. When Dong Huahua publicly warned Zhang Dayi on Weibo not to contact her (Dong's) husband Jiang Fan anymore, netizens became curious. On April 17, 2020, Jiang Fan (Alibaba executive, Weibo's second largest shareholder, and president of Taobao Tmall) was suddenly on the list of hot topics for a sex scandal: he had cheated on his wife Dong Huahua in an affair with Zhang Dayi. Screenshots of Dong Huahua's Weibo posts show that the comment function of her Weibo account (@花花董花花) was blocked only one hour after she had posted the original message that had piqued netizens' attention (Su and Meng 2020, Fig. 13).

Due to surveillance creep, users involved in the discussion soon noticed that not only had the keyword "Jiang Fan" been removed from Weibo's hot topic list, but all related content was deleted on both the wife's (Huahuadonghuahua 2021) and the mistress' (Zhang Dayi's) Weibo account. Only two of the user comments shown in the screenshot below remained publicly accessible (i.e., the third comment by user 'Han Xiaofan' 2020, and the fourth by user 'handsome and witty lyc classmate' 2020). The first two comments (posted by the same user) have since been deleted (Fig. 14).

Fig. 13: Dong Huahua's posts on Weibo (censored)

Translation (Fig. 13): 1st message upper part: "Who locked the comment function of my Weibo account?" (User Dong Huhua); 2nd message, lower part: (@Zhang Dayi) "This is my last warning. Stop seeing my husband". (User Dong Huahua)

It is unclear why only some of these user comments have been deleted, despite all having the same meaning (i.e., expressing astonishment about the censorship of the two women's Weibo accounts). The fourth user comment even goes one step further, by relating the act of censorship to the power of capitalism, but this has not been deleted either (User 'handsome and witty lyc classmate' 2020, Fig. 14). Furthermore, user comments highlighting the economic stakes behind the ranking of trending topics are still visible on the social media platform Douban (User 'Calabash Baby' 2020). Public interest in Weibo's hashtag #Donghuahua# (i.e., 99 million readings between April 17, 2020 and June 18, 2021) can also still be retrieved ("#Donghuahua#" 2021). A year later, the topic is still being discussed by the online public (User 'Zheng went to buy shoes' 2021).

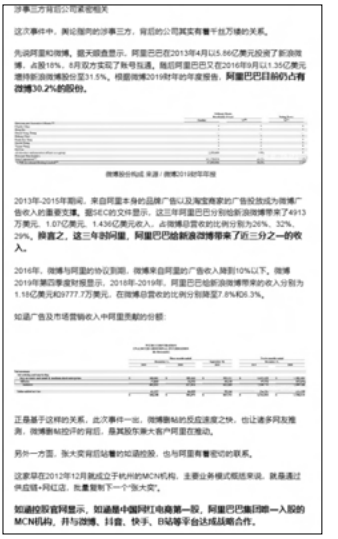
There is a commercial media article available that outlines the economic considerations behind the act of online censorship (Su/Meng 2020). It provides a screenshot of Dong Huahua's deleted Weibo posts, and points out that these had been forwarded by major Weibo big V media (i.e., Weibo accounts of verified celebrities and companies) whose official social media accounts have millions of followers. These, however, were deleted as well. Users who tried to comment on the topic would have received a notification saying "manual review required first". When asked by reporters about the rationale behind the deletions, Weibo explained that in some cases users who had replied to Dong Huahua's account deleted comments themselves, and in other cases Weibo had to shut down users' Weibo accounts entirely because of legal complaints issued by lawyers.

Fig. 14: Users comment on censorship

Translation (Fig. 14): 1st message: "What happened? Why have all these Weibo posts about Dong Huahua and Zhang Dayi been deleted?"; 3rd message: "The Weibo accounts of Zhang Dayi and Dong Huahua have all been deleted. I am so worried about it". (User 'Han Xiaofan' 2020); 4th message: "#Dong Huahua# There are more than ten new Weibo posts about this trending hashtag but Weibo comments continue to be deleted. I think capitalism is the worst!" (User 'handsome and witty lyc classmate' 2020)

Most interestingly, the journalists present net revenue statistics from Weibo advertisement and marketing, and their relation to Alibaba (Fig. 15).

Fig. 15: Weibo's net revenues and their relation to Alibaba



The journalists also report a deeper economic relationship between unfaithful husband Jiang Fan (Alibaba and Weibo) and mistress Zhang Dayi (Ruhan Holdings), revealing that "Alibaba currently holds 30.2% of Weibo's shares, and Ruhan Holdings is the only MCN institution that Alibaba Group has invested in". The reporters suggest that Weibo shareholder Jiang Fan's economic interests lie behind the act of censorship: when his name was brought into disrepute, he would have wanted to divert public attention away from his person to avoid any negative impact on his online businesses (Taobao/Tmall, Alibaba, Weibo).

But why would Chinese media want to highlight that the social media platform was employing forms of algorithmic and social control? Perhaps this was made publicly visible because the social media and e-commerce platforms involved had already incurred the Chinese authorities' displeasure through legal disputes within and outside China. For example, a year-long legal dispute with the Beijing Office of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) accused Sina Weibo of having violated the cyberspace laws and regulations by spreading illegal information and negatively affecting the online environment ("The State Cyberspace Administration of China" 2015). In 2018, Sina Weibo was ordered to conduct a "self-inspection" and make improvements in the management of "harmful information". Weibo temporarily suspended certain functions (e.g., trending topics, 'most searched hashtags', 'Weibo Q&A', 'celebrity and soft news aggregator'), and the Beijing Municipal Internet Information Office interviewed Sina Weibo's person in charge and fined Weibo ("Dongyuan boiled wine" 2018). The Dong Huahua/Zhang Dayi/Jiang Fan incident provoked another wave of investigations by the Beijing Internet Information Office, which was following the instructions of the State Internet Information Office (Xiaoxiang Morning News's official hundred accounts 2020). Within the broader context of current policy debates on anti-monopoly and data security, Weibo has been one among other platforms (e.g., DIDI app for ride-hailing) who are being subjected to legal investigations, self-inspections and regulatory changes in China's platform economy (Chan/Kwok 2021: 14).

In summary, this example not only highlights an incident in which the state feels called into action to regulate platforms, but also shows how categorical suspicion and surveillance creep (Fuchs/Trottier 2015: 129) can backfire and not only harm users, but also those who operate social media and e-commerce platforms. Against the background of Zuboff's diagnosis of the radical indifference of U.S. American IT firms to Western democracies' inclusive economic and political institutions, this case study demonstrates that if Chinese platform operators display their indifference to party rule by coming up with their own, economically motivated censorship rules, state intervention is prompted. The case also depicts the state as being in a continuing process of contention, in which it is caught in partially dragging-on negotiations with regulatory bureaus, corporate actors, public and

private sectors, and stakeholders (Hong 2017: 20), as the long-lasting legal dispute with Weibo, Alibaba and Ruhan Holdings illustrates.

Having discussed how the state controls economic actors, the final section now focuses on social actors (users) and the impact of platform surveillance on employees and patients. While these cases will highlight Chinese culture-specific forms of online behaviour that stabilise surveillance capitalism, we will also see that the power of networked images does not always play into the hands of the Chinese government.

5. Infrastructure: The Power of Networked Visual Images

5.1 Workers' Internet Memes and Young Users' Barrage Subtitling Practice between the Stabilisation and Deconstruction of Surveillance Capitalism

On-demand e-commerce platforms have reconfigured the social relationship between companies, employees, and consumers. One example of this is the food delivery industry in China. Two major players provide online meal ordering services: 'Ele.me' (backed up by the e-commerce giant Alibaba), and 'Meituan Dianping' (whose main investor is Alibaba's rival, Tencent). In contrast to other digital workers, the 3 million delivery workers are deeply embedded in digitalised platforms (Sun 2019: 309). These companies use algorithms to optimise the flexibility, scalability, and tractability of labour. All the parties involved (including employers, employees, and customers) can see the algorithmic system's calculation of delivery distance and time. This helps ensure the efficiency of the delivery system (e.g., dispatching orders to the drivers, managing deliveries, etc.). The app is designed so that customers can track the delivery man on the map, and the employer can see the number of finished orders, delivery time, duration of work time, and customer ratings (Sun 2019: 316-317). Wages are based on the employee's performance (i.e., a minimum wage and a bonus calculated according to the number of orders they deliver per month). It appears that the platform's constant monitoring of the delivery worker's job execution (categorical suspicion), the algorithmic classification of drivers and allocation of privileges according to a worker's performance and customer ratings (social sorting), and the customer's observation of the delivery person's physical movement on the map (surveillance creep) subjects the worker to an overall surveillance that they can hardly escape. In addition, labour platforms that are embedded in several layers of institutional structures cooperate with third-party intermediaries to manage flexible labour, which further fosters new forms of labour precarity. Within this context, delivery workers are treated as independent contractors, whose burden of self-management and risk-absorption is further aggravated by the sense of being readily disposable (Doorn 2020: 147).

In that respect, the algorithmic management that Chinese food delivery platforms use to assign orders and assess a worker's performance does not differ largely from Western food delivery platforms that might (depending on the particular platform) also use a piece-rate model (Doorn 2020: 140), bonus pay, penalising drivers who frequently decline orders, or customer feedback as a quality-control mechanism (Griesbach et al. 2019: 5-7). At the same time, despite similarities in gamified financial incentives, researchers notice that Chinese delivery persons, if compared to their colleagues in New York, face more competition among colleagues (e.g., gamified function of stacking orders, in which drivers need to quickly pick well-paid orders shown on the platform) (Doorn/Chen 2021: 17; 20).

While scholars find that the anticipation and interpretation of platform surveillance and data extraction processes by various stakeholders still needs to be explored (Chan/Kwok 2021: 14), some researchers have enquired into how Western (Griesbach et al. 2019) and Chinese food delivery workers (Sun 2019) experience the algorithmic control over their work. Online surveys and interviews have found that although workers feel subjected to arbitrary authority, they also have a sense of agency (e.g., choice of working time). However, as I argue here, one major difference between Western and Chinese digital laborers is that due to the lack of reciprocal and productive social relationships between employers and employees, Chinese workers have limited means to show their resistance to food delivery platforms' surveillance mechanisms in an organised form. In addition, they might lack the educational background to challenge the power of platform algorithms (i.e., delivery pricing and wage calculation) by building open-source, web-based applications to collect data (on delivery fees) (Doorn 2020: 139; 142). Creating media content appears to be one loophole. The following case study analysing the public discourse of journalists, delivery workers, and customers (here: younger netizens) sheds light on the powerful impact of networked visual images on public attention and reveals culture-specific practices when users engage with media content.

A short video shared by the *NetEase Finance* Weibo account has raised public attention, showing nearby shopkeepers helping the 48-year-old delivery man Liu Jin on January 11, 2021 in Taizhou, Jiangsu Province, after he set himself on fire because he had not been paid his monthly income ("#Jiangsu delivery man" 2021, Fig. 16).

This prompted journalists to investigate the precarious working conditions of this group of employees (Li/Sun 2021), which are traced back to the emergence of "flexible employment online platforms" (e.g., Haohuo App), utilised since 2019 by companies to which the e-commerce takeaway platforms had outsourced the handling of their employment contracts. The subcontracting agreements consider delivery persons as self-employed business owners, which spares the companies from paying social security, overtime hours, or compensation for work-related injuries. The platforms' wage payment system (using the Haohuo app to

transfer money to personal Alipay accounts) does not provide a proper remuneration statement from a bank to document the labour relationship between the outsourcing company and the driver. This makes it difficult for workers to be protected by labour arbitration. Delivery workers have attempted to escape the algorithmic governance of platforms that constantly change their bonus policies (e.g., by taking routes other than those suggested by the algorithm, or by establishing groups on social networks like WeChat where they can transfer their orders to each other) (Sun 2019: 319).

Fig. 16: Delivery driver set on fire gets rescued

Journalist reports received some attention from the public, with more than 100,000 views on WeChat (Li/Sun 2021), however, it was predominantly single individuals among the group of Chinese workers themselves that drew attention to their plight through internet memes. Memes are image-text-combinations or short videoclips circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual internet users. Memes are a highly visible, important practice in popular and digital culture. Due to their form-related and visual aspects, emotion-related features and their participation and representation patterns, the viral distribution of internet memes has been described as a mirror of processes of crowd psychology (Shifman 2013). Internet memes as short videoclips have recently experienced a transformation due to the emerging social practice of barrage subtitling, which first appeared in Japan and rapidly spread to China with distinctive changes (Nakajima 2019: 99). In barrage subtitling, viewers add a large number of text comments onscreen to videos that follow the timeline of the video, so that viewers have a sense of collectiveness on the video-sharing platform.

One internet meme that was very successful in capturing attention was the so called “Dagongren” (“hard workers”) meme, distributed via the popular Chinese video sharing site Bilibili, where three-quarters of users in 2017 were below the age of 25 (Nakajima 2019: 106). This meme criticised the surveillance of delivery workers with tracking tools by platforms, employers and customers (User ‘San Lu

is poisonous' 2020), and went viral in December 2020. In less than 24 hours, the video "Good morning, Dagongren!" was watched more than 17 million times (Fig. 17), and received 11,815 comments (Fig. 18).

Fig. 17: Internet meme "Good morning, Dagongren!", Fig. 18: 11.815 comments by May 04, 2021

The video shows a barking dog with a voice-over satirically mocking the life of workers. It shouts the following text:

"Good morning, Dagongren! Dagongren has a working spirit. Dagongren are all masters. We want to work quietly and then surprise everyone. We must have faith in our hearts: there is no difficult work, only the brave Dagongren. Has your takeaway order not arrived yet? It's okay, Dagongren is not afraid of anything. It is the princess who depends on others. The Japanese depend on you. The people in the north are from Taipei. People who rely on nen [your] mothers are from Henan. We are the glorious Dagongren on our own. Are you tired? It's alright if you feel tired. Comfort is reserved for the rich. Are you cold? If you feel cold, that's it. Warmth is reserved for those who have cars. Don't be late, because money will be deducted if you are late. Don't dry your tears, because riding an electric bike like this is dangerous. Raise your fist and punch in the air. In order to fight against this world, do not fight for father, do not fight for mother, do not fight for work, do not fight for money. Just desperately be a Dagongren! Try Harder! Dagongren! As long as I work hard enough, the boss will soon be able to live a better life. Come on, Dagongren! As long as I'm good enough! Mankind will move towards a better future. Cheer up! Dagongren! When Dagongren cheers up, tomorrow's sun will no longer exist. And the dazzling light shining in the east is a sign of Dagongren's hard work. Good morning, Dagongren!"

The user speaks for the employees working for delivery services, deconstructing the customer's power to use apps to demand a rush of deliveries and restoring his pride in sentences such as: "Has your takeaway order not arrived yet? It's okay, Dagongren is not afraid of anything". Sentences like "Don't be late, otherwise money will be deducted" refer to the platform company's algorithms' tracking of different categories of driver performance. Sentences like "It is the princess who depends on others", "As long as I work hard enough, the boss will definitely live

the life he wants" and "Comfort is reserved for the rich" clearly blame the capital-owning class and deconstruct capitalist ideology.

In a next step, the video was re-edited and uploaded on two other Bilibili user accounts, containing the same content but now displaying 15,000 user comments (barrage, 弹幕) running through the video (Fig. 19).

Fig. 19: Re-edited version "Good night, beaten workers!"

Translation of one user comment running through video (barrage), captured in the screenshot above (Fig. 19): "I cried. Really ruthless. Imprisonment because of a 'wife'. Hit all Dagongren. Are you scolding again? Taiwanese people call this expert out directly. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. I could kick myself. Henan people feel very upset. The Taiwanese said it was very connotative. Imprisonment because there is no 'wife'. Public execution. People from Henan expressed their displeasure! Proletarians of the world, unite! Brothers, I am here again, in a bad mood, continuing to see Dagongren hhh. San Lu's video. I am really miserable! It hit everyone. Once a day. Watch it again a billion times. This is so true!"

It is not only that the display of users' feedback in edited videos (barrage) creates a new type of image that signals how the video is a trending topic to online audiences. It is also an indicator of a change in everyday practices in East Asian online youth culture. Users are motivated to watch the video again to read through the comments, and users are motivated to comment on the video in the hope that it will be displayed in future edited versions. However, it needs to be pointed out that although everybody can watch videos, only those can comment on them who are registered Bilibili members or who have been invited by current members to become one. Registration is free, but users need to pass a quiz about Japanese anime subculture and about the ways to engage with barrage subtitling to upgrade their level of membership (Nakajima 2019: 106-107). Hence, while user content (barrage in video-based memes) helps extend (passive) users' browsing time and

thus plays into the hands of platform operators' growth tactics, the platform seeks to attract more active users by tying exclusive membership to the "privilege" of content production. The emotional gratification that active users get from Bilibili's barrage subtitling practice is the sense of a "sociality of connections", where the main purpose of interaction is based on the formal continuation of online communication, as opposed to clarifying meaning (translation of foreign language video content) in ordinary subtitling (Nakajima 2019: 102).

Two conclusions can be drawn from this case study. First, the barrage subtitling practice demonstrates that platformisation and economic surveillance have redefined digital visual culture by combining a platform's growth tactics (i.e. extending users' browsing time, extraction of user data) with a new aesthetic of short videoclips (users' text comments onscreen to videos, following the time-line of the video) that nourishes the users' sense of collectiveness. Ironically, while criticising surveillance capitalism, workers' memes have stabilised surveillance capitalism by successfully capturing the young audience's attention and prompting them to participate in more platform labour. Second, while platform labour businesses operate in legal grey areas and pose challenges to both the Chinese and Euro-American political systems (Chan/Kwok 2021: 6), Chinese delivery workers are deprived of the means available to their Western colleagues (e.g., workers' strikes, public protest). Instead, they use other means to express their criticism of new forms of labour precarity, and turn to the online sphere (e.g., the video-sharing platform home to China's youth cultures) to generate collective support. It appears that the penetration of China's institutional setting into e-platforms is giving birth to social and cultural online practices so far unseen in the West.

Being torn between promoting management instead of proletariat interests while recognising platform labour as a problem that needs to be regulated, the Chinese government allows workers and young users to collaborate on short video-sharing sites and generate the observed network effects, presumably because it regards the behaviour of both economic actors (i.e., algorithmic categorisation of "dagongren meme" as a trending topic; e-platforms' incentives for users to engage in barrage subtitling) and of users (i.e., criticising not the government, but employers' and customers' exploitation of their labour force with big data analytics) as appropriate.

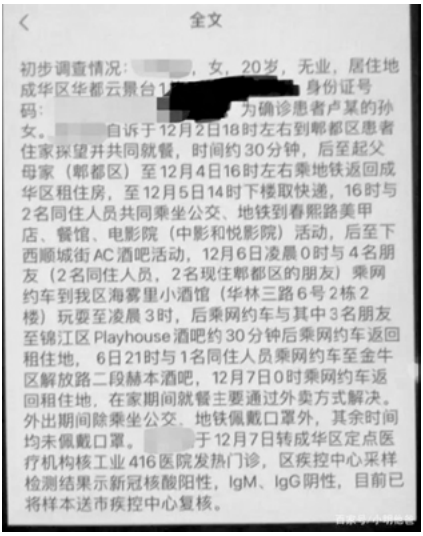
In the following section, the final case discussed will explore what kind of network effects are considered to promote an "unhealthy" online environment by the state, and so prompt intervention.

5.2 New Input for 'Human Flesh Search': The Role of Government and Platform Patient Data

The process of 'human flesh search' ('人肉搜索') emerged in China twenty years ago; it involves someone disclosing a specific individual's behaviour that allegedly violates certain moral values and socio-cultural norms. The netizen links his or

her findings to a particular question or provocative statement, which prompts the formation of an online community to track down a specific individual through a joint effort to harvest more details about the person or about a related event with the goal of revealing the 'truth' and pursuing 'justice' on their own ("Human flesh search" 2021). Recent cases of human flesh search were related to legal and moral aspects or to entertainment (Cheng et al. 2019). For example, in the case of Chinese work safety official Dacai Yang, who was caught in a photograph grinning at the scene of a tragic bus crash in Shaanxi province in 2012, online collaboration of netizens (i.e., digging out images that showed Yang wearing luxury wristwatches) prompted the legal authorities to investigate a potential case of bribery and corruption (Xinhua News Agency 2012). The fact that scholars have identified weak institutionalised trust in China's authoritarian capitalism (Witt/Redding 2012:12) might be one factor that explains this culture-specific type of social online behaviour.

Fig. 20: Wang's original Weibo post; Fig. 21: Wang's original Weibo post including visual trajectory of Zhao



Platforms have a huge interest in promoting this phenomenon, arranging the posts for human flesh search at the top of their websites, with traditional media spreading these sensational news items and turning them into social events on their social media accounts. In addition, users have become more efficient in exploiting other users' digital traces on social media platforms and visualising them to attract netizens' attention. The Covid-19 epidemic has caused a new twist in the phenomenon of human flesh search because netizens can now 'harness' available personal health data to publicly shame a particular patient who has allegedly violated public measures to control the epidemic. The general digital

surveillance and willingness of the Chinese state to share its knowledge – here the provision of data about diagnosed Covid-19 patients – with app users not only differs from other East Asian countries like Singapore, where more targeted techniques for social tagging of the sick ensure the privacy of those in quarantine (Cha 2020: 6-7) but also from the disuse or failed use of smartphone apps in European and U.S. American states for epidemic containment in 2020, as the case of the French contact-tracing app illustrates (Rowe et al. 2020).

Fig. 22: Wang's post shared by users on Baidu Tieba

Translation of Wang's post shared by users: "Chengdu Covid-19 infection Zhao Maohan: female, 20 years old, unemployed.
December 5th: AC Bar on Shuncheng Street
At 12am (midnight) on December 6th: Haiwuli Bistro
At 3am on December 6th: Playhouse Bar in Jinjiang District
At 9pm on December 6th: Hepburn Bar on the second section of Jiefang Road.
If the above is true for you too, then you might be infected with Covid-19. You don't know Zhao's occupation? At least you know now how frequently she visited these bars. Worried afterthoughts".

In December 2020, a 20-year-old woman, Zhao Maohan (赵茂涵), living in Chengdu became a hot topic on Weibo overnight. Under the heading of "Chengdu epidemic situation and Zhao Maohan's identity information and activity track", a private 24-year-old male user named Wang had revealed her personal identity and

posted an image of her personal location around 23:00 on December 7, 2020, on his Weibo account. Media eagerly reported on the case of human flesh search and published the young man's original posts ("The girl diagnosed with the virus in Chengdu" 2020, Fig. 20-21):

Using the name of the perpetrator "Wang Cang" (旺苍吧) on the Baidu post bar Tieba, users could find and share Wang's posts about Zhao's identity and location history (Wang 2020, Fig. 23):

Wang staged Zhao as a "time bomb", who had deliberately decided to infect others by visiting numerous bars, parks, cinemas, and nail salons for her own amusement within the last 14 days. Other users became engaged in the smear campaign by uploading screenshots of Zhao's social media posts showing photographs of her with friends in a bar (Wang 2020, Fig. 23).

Fig. 23: Photographs showing Zhao with friends in a bar

Hence, the internet mob staged the girl as immoral, and blamed her for causing the return of the epidemic in Chengdu ("I'm Ma Nan" 2020).

Commercial media jumped on the bandwagon ("Zhao Maohan, a girl diagnosed" 2020) and moralised the issue with sensational headlines posted on their social media accounts ("A 20-year-old girl diagnosed" 2020). State media discussed the blurred line between the public's right to know, and the violation of the privacy of user data (Luo/Li 2020), condemned the netizens for revealing a patient's personal information ("The girl diagnosed with the virus in Chengdu" 2020), and presented human flesh search as creating harmful online environments. On its official Weibo account, Chengdu Public Security concluded that Wang had severely violated the privacy rights of user Zhao and thus had to be punished legally ("The girl diagnosed with the virus in Chengdu" 2020).

Neither the journalists nor the Public Security Bureau ever discussed how the government's online publication of personal patient data may have contributed to the emergence of this human flesh search occurrence. Media reports state that it was unclear how Zhao's personal information was leaked ("The girl diagnosed with the virus in Chengdu" 2020). However, for the purpose of containing the epidemic, Chengdu's Health Commission consistently published private infor-

mation about Covid-19 patients on its website, so this may have spurred Wang's search. Public notification records about the first newly discovered Covid-19 cases in Chengdu from the morning of December 8 (07:47) suggest that the family names of Zhao's grandparents were already disclosed by the Health Commission on December 7:

> "Patient 1: Zhao X, female, 20 years old, no fixed occupation, living in Huadu Yunjingtai Community, Cuijiadian, Chenghua District, is the granddaughter of the cases Lu and Zhao in Pidu District confirmed yesterday. Nucleic acid tests were found to be positive and Lu's close contacts were isolated on December 8. After consultation with provincial, municipal and district experts, comprehensive clinics, and after the findings from imaging and laboratory nucleic acid test results, the virus (common type) was confirmed and the patient was transferred to Chengdu Public Health Clinical Medical Center Hospital for isolation and treatment. In the past 14 days, the main places where the patients spent time include: MCC Central Park, Hi Blues Nail Salon, Alley Mala Tang, Haiwuli Small Bar, Playhouse Bar, Hepburn Bar, etc.".

It is likely that Wang came across the details provided by the local Health Commission about Zhao's grandparents (family names, name of residential area and location history), and took these as a starting point to uncover further private information (patient's given name, exact address, and daily activities) in order to identify the people behind the newly confirmed cases in Chengdu. On December 9, Zhao apologised publicly using her Weibo account (User 'Fish balls are not good in Chengdu' 2020).

In summary, the case of the woman from Chengdu illustrates how economic surveillance (i.e., platforms prominently arranging user posts for human flesh search; hashtag grouping of comments) interacts with state surveillance (publication of patient data for epidemic containment) by stimulating a culture-specific social online behaviour through which netizens use a victim's own social media posts to map out the victim's movements, capture audience attention (the girl from Chengdu as a hot topic on Weibo) and motivate other users to become engaged in the smear campaign. Hence, the government's new approach to handling the epidemic (i.e., disseminating real-time data) has provided human flesh search-communities with a new dataset. This example also illustrates how two social implications of social media surveillance - categorical suspicion in the form of state and platform monitoring of smart phone users' activities to control the spread of an epidemic and users' exposure of private lives (surveillance creep) - fatefully 'enrich' each other when netizens engage in human flesh search for Covid-19 patients. The radical indifference of authoritarian states towards the privacy protection of patient data - or, to put it differently, the willingness of authoritarian states to publicly share their knowledge - can accelerate existing forms of problematic online behaviour.

6. Conclusion

Against the background of the theoretical model of social media surveillance, the case studies highlight that some similar societal implications of surveillance capitalism (categorical suspicion, social sorting, surveillance creep) are at stake in both authoritarian and Western democratic states. However, China's institutional setting (i.e., economic, governmental, infrastructural) penetrates e-platforms, and we can observe different effects on users' online behaviour regarding the social use of images on platforms, and users' interaction with visual images and their networkedness. For example, the two case studies in the Infrastructure section suggest that Chinese delivery workers, in collaboration with young Chinese netizens, show their resistance to social sorting in platform labour in different ways (video-based internet memes and their reediting with the barrage subtitling practice) to their Western colleagues (worker strikes). Similarly, Chinese private users engage in types of online behaviour (human flesh search) unseen in the West because the implementation of categorical suspicion for the sake of epidemic control by both the Chinese state and platforms provides Chinese users with access to patient data that Western users do not have due to data privacy protection laws. Furthermore, this culture-specific social online behaviour is fostered by the interaction of economic and state surveillance.

The case studies outlined in the Practice section exemplify how the Chinese government grants economic actors (platforms, brands, celebrities) freedom to commodify user content creation and to mobilise a great mass of people to become entrepreneurs in the digital economy. At the same time, we observe how politically sensitive words are automatically filtered out (categorical suspicion). This state-commerce relationship impacts content production on these platforms and distinguishes Chinese platformisation from its Western counterpart. In the Governance section, the case of the online celebrity Zhang Dayi illustrates that when social media platforms (Weibo) and e-commerce platforms (Alibaba) enact algorithmic censorship of content considered to be a threat to their business, users quickly notice their action due to surveillance creep being in place. Coming up with their own censorship rules suggests a radical indifference to Party rule and thus triggers intervention from China's Cyber Administration (restriction of online business activities).

Hence, the diverse logics of marketisation and economic surveillance (which combine user, platform and state perspectives), interact with different forms of social, political and lateral surveillance and lead to culture-specific social practices of online behaviour. The observed surveillance mechanisms go beyond the concept of surveillance capitalism, so that any analysis of China's internet economy and the online behaviour of its economic and social actors must be embedded into a wider context of political economies and state regulations.

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List of images

Fig. 1: Two screenshots taken from advertisement from video version in: China Women's Daily (2021). "#Response: backfiring advertisement# ('Creativity' is not an excuse for abdicating from responsibility). Recently, #Purcotton# released a backfiring advertisement titled 'When you go home late at night and you are followed by a man in black, what method will you use to get rid of him?' triggered a vibrant discussion among netizens". Weibo account of *China Women's Daily*, Weibo, January 08, 2021 15:39. URL: https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/235307059.html?weibo_id=4591119284830606 [Original source in Chinese: "#全棉时代回应反转广告# ('创意'不是开脱责任的挡箭牌) 近日 , #全棉时代#发布的反转广告 '深夜回家遇黑衣人尾随 , 你会用什么方法摆脱"引发网友热议'。" . 微博账号 : 中国妇女报, 微博].

Fig. 2: Financial community network. "Hot search on scolding! PurCotton's advertisement is accused of insulting women. The company's response: It's creative advertisement". *Tencent.com*, January 8, 2021. URL: https://new.qq.com/omn/20210108/20210108A067XZ00.html [Original source in Chinese: 金融界网。"骂上热搜！全棉时代广告被指侮辱女性 公司回应称为广告创意"。腾讯网].

Fig. 3: Financial community network. "Hot search on scolding! PurCotton's advertisement is accused of insulting women. The company's response: It's creative advertisement". *Tencent.com*, January 8, 2021. URL: https://new.qq.com/omn/20210108/20210108A067XZ00.html [Original source in Chinese: 金融界网。"骂上热搜！全棉时代广告被指侮辱女性 公司回应称为广告创意"。腾讯网].

Fig. 4: China Women's Daily (2021). "#Response: backfiring advertisement# ('Creativity' is not an excuse for abdicating from responsibility). Recently, #Purcotton# released a backfiring advertisement titled 'When you go home late at night and you are followed by a man in black, what method will you use to get rid of him?' triggered a vibrant discussion among netizens". Weibo account of *China Women's Daily*, Weibo, January 08, 2021 15:39. URL: https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/235307059.html?weibo_id=4591119284830606 [Original source in Chinese: "#全棉时代回应反转广告# 【'创意'不是开脱责任的挡箭牌) 近日 , #全棉时代#发布的反转广告 '深夜回家遇黑衣人尾随 , 你会用什么方法摆脱"引发网友热议'。" . 微博账号 : 中国妇女报, 微博].

Fig. 5: "Hard currency: 5 core rules of Kuaishou live streaming". *Yibang Power Network*, August 15, 2019. URL: https://www.niuxuan.cn/redian/51950.html [Original source in Chinese: 硬通货 : 快手直播带货的5个核心法则。2019-08-15。亿邦动力网].

Fig. 6: Source: "Hard currency: 5 core rules of Kuaishou live streaming". *Yibang Power Network*, August 15, 2019. URL: https://www.niuxuan.cn/redian/51950.html [Original source in Chinese: 硬通货 : 快手直播带货的5个核心法则。2019-08-15。亿邦动力网].

Fig. 7: Little milk ball. "'Little milk ball Versailles open class'. Number of views: 100.000, barrage: 614". *Bilibili*, May 09, 2020, 20:37. URL: https://www.bilibili.com/video/av838098912/ [Original source in Chinese: 小奶球. "小奶球 凡尔赛公开课"。10.0万播放 ,614弹幕. Bilibili].

Fig. 8: Meng Qiqi (2020). Two Weibo posts by @Meng Qiqi77 on Nov. 2 and Nov. 7, 2020 [@蒙淇淇77, 微博], quoted after "Why has "Versailles Literature" become a trending topic?". *Jiemian News*, Sohu.com., November 9, 2020. URL: https://www.sohu.com/a/430696123_313745 [Original source in Chinese: "凡尔赛文学"冲上热搜是怎么回事?". 界面新闻, 搜狐网].

Fig. 9: Cannot be found anymore (URL deleted)

Fig. 10: User 'Max English name is too short, not allowed'. "I can only laugh at you! You really make me sad". *Weibo*, December 15, 2020, 22:37. URL: https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/235254604.html?weibo_id=4582527120186116 [Original source in Chinese: Max英文名太短要求不得. "#蒙淇淇77# 说好了当你的忠实粉丝 , 看你装逼 , 再天天踏雪你 ,今天真的伤心了。微博].

Fig. 11: User 'Iceberg Fire' (2020). "Damn, Meng Qiqi's layout is too small. That's it, you blocked me @Mengqiqi 77". *Weibo*, December 15, 2020, 20:24. URL: https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/235254355.html?weibo_id=4582491820655671 [Original source in Chinese: 冰山大火. "妈的 蒙淇淇的格局也太小了吧 这就给我拉黑了@蒙淇淇77 ". 微博].

Fig. 12.: User 'Caribbean Big Bubble' (2020). "@Meng Qiqi 77 That's amazing, you deleted my comment and blocked me". *Weibo*, December 15, 2020 20:17. URL: https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/235254355.html?weibo_id=4582491820655671 [Original source in Chinese: 加勒比大泡泡. "#蒙淇淇77# 牛逼死了 , 删评论还拉黑". 微博].

Fig. 13: Screenshot of two posts on Donghuahua's Weibo account [(@花花董花花] from April 17, 2020, quoted after: Su Qi, Meng Yana (authors), Wei Jia (editor). "Internet celebrity Zhang Dayi was scolded at, why did Weibo quickly 'delete posts, ban and remove hot searches'"? *Burning Finance*. April 18, 2020. URL: https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1664273220065234150&wfr=spider&for=pc [Original source in Chinese: 苏琦 孟亚娜 (作者), 魏佳 (编辑)。"网红张大奕被隔空喊话 , 微博为何迅速'删帖禁言撤热搜'"？燃财].

Fig. 14: Screenshot of 4 user comments posted on Weibo

- 1st and 2nd user comment has meanwhile be deleted (URL cannot be found anymore)
- 3rd user comment: User 'Han Xiaofan' (2020). "I saw Zhang Dayi and Dong Huahua's posts constantly being deleted. People who want to know more are so worried about it". Weibo account of user Han Xiaofan. *Weibo*, April 17, 2020. URL: https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/234265485.html?weibo_id=4494733567205550 [Original source in Chinese: 晗小饭. "亲眼看见张大奕董花花的帖子不断被删 吃瓜群众好着急 ". 微博账号 : 晗小饭. 微博].
- 4th user comment: User 'handsome and witty lyc classmate'. "#Huahuadonghuahua#Amazing Amazing. "This entry clearly shows that other users had re-posted more than a dozen of Weibo comments. Hence, many Weibo comments were deleted. This demonstrates the power of the capital". Weibo account. Weibo, April 17, 2020. URL: https://share.api.weibo.cn/share/234265356.html?weibo_id=4494736926475048 [Original

source in Chinese: 帅气又不失机智的lyc同学. "#花花董花花#牛批牛批. 这个词条明明别人更新了十几条微博. 还是被删了好几个. 只能说 资本牛批 ". 微博账号 : 帅气又不失机智的lyc同学。微博].

Fig. 15: Su Qi, Meng Yana (authors), Wei Jia (editor). "Internet celebrity Zhang Dayi was scolded at, why did Weibo quickly 'delete posts, ban and remove hot searches'"? *Burning Finance*. April 18, 2020. URL: https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1664273220065234150&wfr=spider&for=pc [Original source in Chinese: 苏琦 孟亚娜 (作者), 魏佳 (编辑)。"网红张大奕被隔空喊话 , 微博为何迅速'删帖禁言撤热搜'"？燃财经].

Fig. 16: "#Jiangsu delivery man set himself on fire with gasoline#: 'I don't want my life, I want my hard-earned money'". Weibo account of *NetEase Finance*, NetEase Wangyi video, January 11, 2021, 20:37, length: 00:37 seconds. URL: https://weibo.com/1974561081/JCIEPtsIl?sudaref=cn.bing.com&type=comment [Original source in Chinese: "#江苏外卖员点汽油自焚# : '我不要命 , 我要血汗钱'". 网易财经 (来自 微博视频号) , 易视频, 网易视频]

Fig. 17: Li Xiulian, Sun Yidan (2021a). "A delivery man sets himself on fire to ask for a salary of 4,000 yuan. How to protect the rights and interests of delivery staff". Official Weibo account of *Sanlian Life Weekly*, February 3, 2021. URL: https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23%E5%A4%96%E5%8D%96%E5%91%98%E5%9B%A04000%E5%85%83%E8%AE%A8%E8%96%AA%E8%87%AA%E7%84%9A%23 Original source in Chinese: 李秀莲 , 孙一丹. "外卖员自焚讨薪 , 想要回4000块为什么那么难". 三联生活周刊

Fig. 18: User 'San Lu is poisonous'. "Good morning, Dagongren! 17.089 million views, 15.000 barrage, comments". *Bilibili* account of user 'San Lu is poisonous', Oct. 22, 2020. URL: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Mt4y1e7JY?p=1&share_medium=iphone&share_plat=ios&share_source=COPY&share_tag=s_i&timestamp=1608268806&unique_k=WTVvEu [Original source in Chinese: 三Lu有毒. "早安 , 打工人 ! 1708.9万播放 · 1.5万弹幕". b站账号 : 三Lu有毒].

Fig. 19: User 'San Lu is poisonous'. "Good morning, Dagongren! 17.089 million views, 15.000 barrage, comments". *Bilibili* account of user 'San Lu is poisonous', Oct. 22, 2020. URL: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Mt4y1e7JY?p=1&share_medium=iphone&share_plat=ios&share_source=COPY&share_tag=s_i&timestamp=1608268806&unique_k=WTVvEu [Original source in Chinese: 三Lu有毒. "早安 , 打工人 ! 1708.9万播放 · 1.5万弹幕". b站账号 : 三Lu有毒].

Fig. 20: "Good night, beaten workers! 5.394 million views, barrage: 3558, Top 5 in the ranking". *Bilibili*, October 27, 2020 (video length 01:17). URL: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Fi4y177he/?spm_id_from=autoNext [Original source in

Chinese: "活动作品晚安 , 被打工人 ! 539.4万播放, 3558弹幕, 全站排行榜最高第5名].

Fig. 21: Screenshot from Wang's original posts, quoted after: "The girl diagnosed with the virus in Chengdu whose private information was publicly exposed: the man who leaked her information was punished. The real-name system will become trend". *Investigation Factory*, December 10, 2020. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1685686672774761636&wfr=spider&for=pc [Original source in Chinese: 成都确诊女孩遭信息泄露 , 泄露信息男子被处罚 , 实名制将是趋势.调研工厂].

Fig. 22: Screenshot from Wang's original posts, quoted after: "The girl diagnosed with the virus in Chengdu whose private information was publicly exposed: the man who leaked her information was punished. The real-name system will become trend". *Investigation Factory*, December 10, 2020. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1685686672774761636&wfr=spider&for=pc [Original source in Chinese: 成都确诊女孩遭信息泄露 , 泄露信息男子被处罚 , 实名制将是趋势.调研工厂].

Fig. 23: Wang Cang (2020). "Chengdu Covid-19 infection Zhao Maohan: female, 20 years old, unemployed. December 5: Shuncheng Street". *Baidu Post Bar,* December 8, 2020. URL: https://tieba.baidu.com/p/7137116345 [Original source in Chinese: 旺苍吧吧。"成都新冠感染赵茂涵 : 女 , 20岁 , 无业. 顺城街".百度贴吧].

Fig. 24: User comments to post by Wang, see: Wang Cang (2020). "Chengdu Covid-19 infection Zhao Maohan: female, 20 years old, unemployed. December 5: Shuncheng Street". *Baidu Post Bar,* December 8, 2020. URL: https://tieba.baidu.com/p/7137116345 [Original source in Chinese: 旺苍吧吧。"成都新冠感染赵茂涵 : 女 , 20岁 , 无业. 顺城街".百度贴吧].

Fig. 25: "The girl diagnosed with the virus in Chengdu whose private information was publicly exposed: the man who leaked her information was punished. The real-name system will become trend". *Investigation Factory*, December 10, 2020. https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1685686672774761636&wfr=spider&for=pc [Original source in Chinese: 成都确诊女孩遭信息泄露 , 泄露信息男子被处罚 , 实名制将是趋势.调研工厂].