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## Article

# Platform as new "daddy": China's gendered wanghong economy and patriarchal platforms behind

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# Platform as new “daddy”: China’s gendered wanghong economy and patriarchal platforms behind

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**Keywords:** Consumers, China, Digital consumption, Digital platforms, gender

**Abstract:** Wanghong refers to a particular stream of vocational Chinese internet celebrities that have acquired their celebrity online and have acute incentives through various models to liquidate such online influence. While the wanghong economy is often projected as a new platform economy that is by the women and for the women on diverse media outlets in China, this paper highlights the structurally embedded gender hierarchy of the business ecosystem of the wanghong economy and the platform power increasingly associated with patriarchal order. This phenomenon is further exemplified by the updated meanings constructed around the Chinese term “baba” (daddy), which is extensively used by wanghong and netizens to refer to platforms, especially Douyin (Dou Baba), one of the most popular social media platforms in China. By combining the analysis of female participation at different dimensions of the wanghong economy with the “platform-as-daddy” discourses, this paper seeks to connect the industrial analysis of the wanghong economy as one of the most prominent “platform economies” in contemporary China with its cultural dimensions. It accentuates the key roles of major Chinese platform companies as not only new critical intermediaries in perpetuating the ongoing patriarchal system between the state and users but also active participants that construct, and aggressively profit from, the gendered wanghong economy value chains. Analysis of the “platform-as-daddy” discourse also suggests that wanghong and the broader internet users are aware of the asymmetric power dynamics between themselves and the popular platforms. Yet the “platform-as-daddy” narrative, which is jointly built by wanghong and users, further legitimises and even glorifies platform’s dominance.

This paper is part of **The gender of the platform economy**, a special issue of *Internet Policy Review* guest-edited by Mayo Fuster Morell, Ricard Espelt and David Megias.

## Introduction

Wanghong is short for the Chinese term “wangluo hongren”: people who have gone viral online. Covering a wide spectrum of participants including video uploader, vlogger, popular accounts on diverse social media, wanghong refers to a particular stream of vocational Chinese internet celebrities that have acquired their celebrity online and have acute incentives through various models to liquidate such online influence by transforming followers into consumers (Han, 2020a). As of late, the wanghong economy in China evolves distinctive platform-based commodification models ranging from virtual gifts, tipping, advertising, and more increasingly, e-commerce. The wanghong economy is considered to be another pole for the economic growth of the Chinese internet and it receives policy support from governments at different levels (Han, 2020a; iResearch, 2020; iResearch & Weibo, 2018). In particular, the e-commerce has always been an embedded component for the wanghong economy since its early stage (Han, 2020a). The integration between e-commerce and the wanghong economy has been further amplified in recent years by the short-video and livestreaming platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, hastily coupling with the e-commerce sector to speed up their commodification. For example, the new prospering e-commerce wanghong livestreaming often generates large volumes of real-time, customised orders in just a few hours and this has further established e-commerce as a dominant commodification model for the wanghong economy and various social media platforms. As of June 2021, viewers of e-commerce livestreaming are over 384 million in China, exceeding the number of viewers for traditional gameplay streaming since 2020 (CNNIC, 2020, 2021). With active participation of major platform companies and an expanding range of actors from online to offline, the wanghong economy has developed into a trans-platform and -sector business ecosystem as well as a new frontier for both the accelerated capital accumulation and heightened consumerism in China.

Against the backdrop of its economic prosperity, the wanghong economy, however, remains largely gendered in various dimensions. Wanghong as a new profession and industry is underpinned by the predominant female participation in the labour force. Such participants are often defined by the mixed and even contradictory public perceptions of the stigmatised image for “Nvzhubo” (female streamers), for example, as sexualised labour on the one hand, and the self-empowered and self-

made female entrepreneurs who have seized the opportunities brought by the fast growth of major Chinese internet companies and the novel platform technologies on the other (Han, 2020b; Zhang & Hjorth, 2019; Zhang & de Seta, 2018). Meanwhile, as the e-commerce being adopted by a larger proportion of wanghong as well as various popular platforms as a key monetisation strategy, the wanghong economy is fed by consumerism and neoliberal feminism, explicitly targeting female consumers in particular for its continuous growth. Such “genderedness” of wanghong economy value chains and the consumerist feminism are further perpetuated by platform algorithms and governance practices over users and thus manifests new cultural politics. In other words, the wanghong economy now stands at the nexus of the accumulation logic of internet companies and the state, the rising consumerist feminism and reviving patriarchal order, and platform power.

To address the above ambivalence, this paper provides analysis of gender as a critical dimension of the prospering wanghong economy in China with special attention to the newly emergent e-commerce wanghong sector that is yet to be fully explored by scholars so far. This paper situates the wanghong economy within the upsurge of neoliberal feminism and patriarchy since China’s economic reform as well as Chinese women’s reconstruction and exploration of femininity through consumerism in the post-socialist era. My analysis firstly expounds the structurally embedded gender hierarchy of the wanghong economy, that is, women’s participation at the decision-making level in major platform companies and leading wanghong incubators and agencies—which together have constituted the backbone of wanghong economy—is extremely disproportionate in contrast to the predominant female participation as both labour and consumers in the wanghong economy. Secondly, by looking into the specific case of the updated meanings constructed around the term “baba” (Chinese term for daddy) that is extensively used to refer to one of the most popular platforms, Douyin (Dou Baba), by wanghong and many other netizens, I connect the structural gender hierarchy at the industrial level of the wanghong economy with platform’s algorithmic power over its users and examine how the asymmetrical power structure is manifested at the cultural-political dimension for wanghong through the “platform-as-daddy” narrative, which in turn legitimises and even glorifies platform’s dominance. Ultimately, this paper argues that platform power now has allied with the patriarchal order. Platforms are not only new critical intermediaries in perpetuating the ongoing patriarchal system between the state and users but also become active participants themselves, aggressively profiting from their own construction of the gendered wanghong economy.

# Neoliberalism, consumerist-feminism, and platform economy in China

## The neoliberal turn

The particular constructs of the wanghong economy and the power hierarchy it embeds and promotes mark both the continuities and new manifestations of state-led consumerism as well as the upsurge of patriarchy and neoliberal feminism since China's economic reform. Critical feminist scholars have long recognised the type of pseudo-feminism closely aligned with neoliberal capitalism in the West, which presumes that individual subjects are self-managing, autonomous, and enterprising, therefore recasting issues at the structural level in individualised terms (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2007a). Extending such logics, neoliberal feminism defines women as autonomous individuals, advocating women's full responsibility for their self-care by encouraging women to pursue a work-family balance with a dismissal of the structurally embedded gender inequality (Peng, 2019; Rottenberg, 2020). In particular, McRobbie (2007b) highlights a defining feature of contemporary girlhood in developed capitalist countries, that is, the attribution of capacity to the young females leading up to personal economic prosperity on the basis of her enthusiasm for work and having a career. Therefore, young, well-educated women in the developed Western capitalisms—the “top girls”—are perceived as the ideal subjects of female success, exemplars of “the new competitive meritocracy” (McRobbie, 2007b, p. 722). Top girls have become a social category and they are targeted for both of their productive and reproductive capacities by both the government and private sector. Informed by the critical perspectives into neoliberal feminism, scholars in Chinese feminist studies further situate analysis of Chinese female subjects in the longer history of the country, including its socialist past, neoliberal reform, and rapid developments in the digital economy as new frontier for capital accumulation in recent years (Meng, 2020; Meng & Huang, 2017; Peng, 2020; Thornham & Pengpeng, 2010; F. Yang, 2020). And they further advocate for a more nuanced and closer examination of the construction and evolution of contemporary Chinese female subjects.

Scholars such as David Harvey, Slavoj Žižek, Yuezhi Zhao, and Christian Fuchs recognise that China's capitalist modernisation since the 1980s was strongly underpinned by neoliberalism interdigitated with authoritarian centralised direction and control (Zhao, 2008; Harvey, 2014; Xia and Fuchs, 2016). The neoliberal reform has effectively lifted the living standards of a large proportion of the population. Meanwhile, after forty-years of opening up and integrating into the global capitalist system, China is now confronted with an uneven capitalist modernisation

process undergirded by ever expanding economic and socio-cultural gaps between different social groups across the country. In particular, the high speed economic growth has forged a middle class—an ambiguously defined concept that yet is always anchored to their level of income and corresponding consuming ability—especially in cities along the coastal area since the early 2000s, and this is in sharp contrast with the cheap rural labour that has been a key driver for the capital accumulation in China’s modernisation as the world factory (Meng & Huang, 2017; F. Yang, 2020; G. Yang, 2014; Zhao, 2008). Regardless of the social fragmentation, the reform and following economic prosperity have also brought about a shared celebration of consumerism as well as widely circulated neoliberal ethos, asserting that citizens are to be “free”, self-enterprising subjects with self-care often achieved through consumption of an array of products that are meant to optimise one’s body, mind, and spirit (Riordan, 2002). Chinese people in general are immersed in the novel pleasure of consumption, which was not experienced before during the socialist era. They also embrace the individualisation process and a sense of experienced self-empowerment through consumption that is largely led by the state as an integral part of the neoliberal economic reform (Meng & Huang, 2017; Peng, 2019; F. Yang, 2020).

### **Contemporary Chinese female subjects**

In the socialist era, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) project of women’s liberation has made huge progress in liberating women and improving women’s rights and social-economic status while still bearing undeniable limitations. On the one hand, female participation in the labour force grew quickly with the calling of women to “hold up half of the sky” by joining the collective project of building socialism. Meanwhile, the ratio of female legislators in the people’s congress has also been steadily increased in the socialist decades (Meng & Huang, 2017; F. Yang, 2020). Yet, the state’s feminism addressed gender hierarchy mostly as an economic and class issue and the state promoted a neutered socialist woman model that predominantly focused on one’s class and, as a result, Chinese women have been largely alienated from femininity (Meng & Huang, 2017; Peng, 2019; Rofel, 2007). Additionally, while women’s participation in building the national economy and politics was highlighted, the conventional gender-based division of domestic labour remained hardly challenged (Peng, 2019).

Nowadays, the image from the socialist era of the “iron girl” who behaves in the same way as men with no trace of femininity is rejected by the young generations of Chinese women, who no longer consider women’s liberation as emancipation from the oppression of feudalism and capitalist patriarchy, as their mother’s genera-

tions did (Meng & Huang, 2017; F. Yang, 2020). Instead, contemporary women consider their liberation as the freedom from state control and over-politicised daily life as well as the expanding parameter to explore and express their femininity (Meng & Huang, 2017; Peng, 2019; Pun, 2003; Rofel, 2007). With such an embedded socialist history, consumerist feminism rises to be particularly appealing for young Chinese women and it is often projected to be a liberating and progressive counterpart of state's feminism from the past. Consumption has been celebrated as the most visible way for Chinese women of different social classes to specify and valorise their femininity, which marks the retreat from the public to the domestic and the shift from socialist equality to consumerist femininity (Meng & Huang, 2017). Such a perception undoubtedly provides optimal conditions for the further prospering consumer capitalism and state-led consumerism. Moreover, given the visible social stratification and expanding social-economic gaps between women from different social fractions brought by the neoliberal reform, the intersectionality of class and gender become increasingly manifested in Chinese society, which has complicated the construction of Chinese women's subjectivities (Meng & Huang, 2017; Song & Hird, 2013).

With no surprise, Chinese women—middle class women with rapidly rising income in particular—have become ideal targets in recent years for corporations through the rhetoric repertoire of consumerist “girl power” (McRobbie, 2009; F. Yang, 2020). Together, there also appeared terms such as “women's consumerism”, “her-economy”, and “the women's consumerism era” circulating on media starting from the 2000s and they all stress the importance of women as consumers to contemporary China—for which maintaining a high level of consumer demand is of crucial importance for both its national economy and social stability (Meng & Huang, 2017; Peng, 2019; F. Yang, 2020). Such targeting of women as consumers is further advanced by the booming digital economy, various specialised social media platforms in particular, which have enabled better delivery of well-targeted marketing campaigns to female users (Duffy & Schwartz, 2018; Turow & Couldry, 2018).

As reminded by McRobbie (2009), when women are targeted as consumers, the structural inequalities between male and female, such as earning power and political participation, tend to go unnoticed and unchallenged. For example, the ratio of female legislators in the People's Congress dropped after the neoliberal reform and failed to reach the 1975 peak of 22.6% over the next four decades (F. Yang, 2020; M. Yu, 2018). Furthermore, under the surface of the flourishing “her-economy” that celebrates women's purchasing power, women only make up approximately a third of the total middle class population in China and they possess far



fewer assets and social resources than their male counterparts (F. Yang, 2020). In fact, there is a 20% gap between the lowest female ratio based on income and the highest female ratio based on consumption (Li, 2003; F. Yang, 2020). It reveals that a great number of women consume commodities at a much higher level than their income can allow, and consequently, leading to an increasing dependence on their male financial provider to maintain a certain level of consumption and thus a middle-class identity (F. Yang, 2020). This is explicitly rendered in the stereotype of spendthrift wives widely circulated in diverse marketing campaigns, particularly in the Double-Eleven shopping festival held by the top Chinese e-commerce platform Taobao in recent years (Meng & Huang, 2017).

The aggressive promotion of material practices of consumption targeting women as well as the sexist image of women as “spendthrift wives” reflect the increasingly commodified femininity in contemporary China in the form of “capital” to be accrued from women’s beauty and their domestic duties. More importantly, it also has perpetuated the asymmetrical power relation and structural inequality between sexes, crystalising a trend of patriarchal ideology being intensified through consumerism since China’s economic reform (Meng & Huang, 2017; F. Yang, 2020). Further, more recent developments of the e-commerce wanghong sector has manifested new practices of the reinforced gender hierarchy, bringing it up to a new level aided by various platform technologies and novel business value chains constructed around wanghong.

## **Gender and platform economy**

Gender has been a salient dimension of the wanghong industry in China since its early days back in the mid-2010s. Existing literature interrogates the gender politics constructed around individual participants in wanghong/influencer economies across different contexts, such as beauty bloggers, net idols, and female streamers, who have gained prominence along with the rise of various platforms as well as how they have contributed to a feminised social media culture (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2016; Limkangvanmongkol & Abidin, 2018; Zhang & de Seta, 2018). In particular, scholarly attention has been paid to address the controversies around the predominance of women performers and their commodified femininities and sexualities on major video and livestreaming platforms with a focus on female wanghong’s gender performativity (Zhang & de Seta, 2018; Zhang & Hjorth, 2019). There is also recent literature looking into the roles and practices of wanghong, female wanghong in particular, as entrepreneurs and increasingly platformised labour with precarious status (Cunningham et al., 2019; Guan, 2020; Liao, 2019).



While shedding light on gender as a critical dimension of the wanghong industry, existing research yet has mainly focused on the type of wanghong that primarily rely on virtual gifts and tips as the key monetisation strategy and therefore fails to capture the rapidly growing e-commerce wanghong sector as an integral part of the expanding wanghong economy. Meanwhile, there generally lacks critical industrial-level analyses of the wanghong economy, given that wanghong were often foregrounded as both a cultural phenomenon and individual entrepreneurs in existing literature. The close connection between the structural inequality in the wanghong economy and the discursive construction on/around platforms is often missing, too. This paper, therefore, aims to (at least partly) fill such gaps with empirically grounded analysis of the new sector of e-commerce wanghong in the wanghong economy through the lens of gender and provides sketches for the structurally-embedded gender hierarchy in this new platform-based economy in connection with the patriarchal “platform-as-daddy” narrative of the Chinese internet.

## Theoretical approach and data collection

My analysis of China’s gendered wanghong economy brings together feminist political economy and platform studies to connect the structural analysis with the operationalisation of the power hierarchy on platforms. To begin with, political economy offers a holistic approach to study the social relations and operation of power of capitalism that underpin the production, distribution, and consumption of material goods and communication resources (Harvey, 2007; Mosco, 2009; Schiller, 1999; Steeves & Wasko, 2002). The moral imperative of political economy therefore urges researchers to pay close attention to the praxis and moral texture of different stages of economic activities as well as the wider implications that such economic activities entail. In my analysis, I take gender as both a crucial dimension in problematising the wanghong economy and an analytical category to render visible particular power relations and hierarchy in the economic production and social reproduction of this new type of platform-based economy in China. Gender has always remained highly relevant to the production and distribution of social wealth with capitalism structurally naturalising patriarchal practices at multiple dimensions (McLaughlin, 2002; Meng & Huang, 2017; Power, 2004; Riordan, 2002; Waring, 1988, 1999). In particular, Lisa McLaughlin (2002) highlights that the analysis of patriarchy cannot be separated from the analysis of capitalism and she calls for an integral and holistic approach to bring together the structures with women’s experience. Likewise, Ellen Riordan (2002) also contends that women need to understand their lives as both gendered and economic, which are shaped

by both patriarchy and capitalism. My analysis of the wanghong economy adopts this holistic approach towards patriarchy and capitalism that mutually feeds on each other, and it considers women and their subordinated status as a result of not only the patriarchy that plays out at the socio-cultural and/or domestic spheres but as an embedded part of both the infrastructure and superstructure of contemporary Chinese digital capitalism, as exemplified by the wanghong economy.

Another prospering field that paves the way for my analysis of the wanghong economy is platform studies, which define platforms as (re)programmable data infrastructures and foreground platforms in the inseparable and dialectic relation between a platform's technical artefacts and commercial logics (Helmond et al., 2017; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019; van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2019). Platforms, essentially, serve the role of the new "fix" through which capital sought to renew the accumulation process through data harvesting (Srnicsek, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). In particular, with deeper penetration into a wide range of institutions and transactions, dominant platforms increasingly govern the personalised interactions among different groups of end users and complementors through algorithmic processing, circulation of data, and particular models of monetisation, thereby becoming central to people's both private and public life (Dijck et al., 2018; van Dijck et al., 2019). Notably, the ever-expanding platform power is laden with specific asymmetric structures carried over from the "old regime" of industrial capitalism, among which gender-based inequality is a critical kind.

Further, users' online activities and interactions as well as platform's cultural politics are increasingly governed by a dialectic relation between not only a platform's technical artefacts, commercial imperative, but also the discursive construction (Gillespie, 2010). The discursive layer of platforms often contributes to, and meanwhile naturalises, the strategies, corporate goals, and practices of the platform companies. Specifically, Tung-Hui Hu (2015) unfolds the discursive process of building cultural fantasies commonly around cloud computing platforms to promote user data feeding and thus to impose a culture of forced participation on users, which ultimately serves to lubricate the commercial mechanisms of platforms. The discursive analysis of cultural fantasies constructed around platforms and their close connections with the core technical mechanisms and commercial logics of platform inform my deconstruction of the patriarchal narrative of "platform-as-daddy" about Chinese platforms like Douyin.

This research, therefore, combines the theoretical approaches from both feminist political economy and platform studies to explicate how the structural inequality is being operationalised and sutured into the day-to-day actions on the platform

that wanghong reside on. It provides a holistic analysis of both the structural gender inequality in wanghong economy and a patriarchal cultural fantasy of “platform-as-daddy” that further perpetuates, normalises, and even glorifies platform’s dominance over its users. Specifically, I treat such discursive construction as reflexive of the social-economic inequality between the platform and individuals—females especially in the case of the wanghong economy—which is embedded at a deeper level, while rejecting a direct causal relation in between. In fact, it is most productive for me to approach the discursive construction and the structural, gender inequality at the industrial level the two types of distinctive yet dialectic and resonating manifestations of the patriarchal wanghong economy at different dimensions.

This research adopted a combined method of document analysis and online ethnography. Firstly, to reveal the specific structural gender-based inequality of the wanghong economy, I expand on Murdock’s (1982) approach of media industry analysis and look into the allocative control of key corporations within the wanghong economy. Allocative control consists of the power to define the overall goals and scope of the corporation and determine the general way it develops its productive resources, which is usually concentrated in the hands of the owners (Kotz, 1980; Murdock, 1982). In modern corporations, boards of directors become the new actors that exercise such allocative control and boards also serve as the critical junction at which the ownership can be turned into power and influence to shape the corporate policies, strategies, and practices (Jia, 2018; Murdock, 1982). Therefore, I take the *board of directors* of leading companies in the wanghong economy as a primary subject of analysis to reveal the structural, gender-based inequality in the distribution of allocative power. I conducted analysis of different types of corporate documents of nine leading Chinese internet companies/platforms (Alibaba, Tencent, JD, Pinduoduo, Weibo, Huya, Douyu, Douyin, and Kuaishou) and five top wanghong incubators (Ruhnn, Tisu, Chenfan, Qianxun, and MeiOne) in China, which together have laid down the early structure and set the prototypes for different wanghong value chains, especially the e-commerce wanghong sector. Documents analysed include audited corporate annual reports, prospectus, corporate announcements and press releases, published contracts and agreements, and corporate official websites. They were further supplemented by third-party industrial reports produced by research agencies and organisations like the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), and professional and official databases and aggregators such as the National Enterprise Credit Information and Publicity System (see Appendix 1 for a full document list). The political economy informed document analysis, therefore, allows us to look beyond the intentional actions of

female participants in the wanghong economy and further highlight the limits of choices that they face in such an asymmetric power structure.

Secondly, this structural analysis is further supplemented by an eight-month non-participant observation on one of the most popular short video and livestreaming platforms, Douyin (twin platform of TikTok also owned by ByteDance), from June 2020 to January 2021. Systematic observation in online ethnography allows researchers to approach the internet as a site where culture, discourse, and community are formed (Androutsopoulos, 2008). Livestreaming and short-video sessions on Douyin are taken as the units of analysis and they are presented to the researcher in a random way based on the information flow displayed at the researcher's homepage and livestreaming page in the mobile app Douyin. The researcher identified and took notes about the themes and discourses that were of relevance to the discursive construction around the platform as a paternal figure during the observation and each session observed was assigned with a code. The researcher's observation lasted 20 to 60 minutes each time and over 70 relevant livestreaming and short-video sessions were identified. The researcher then applied critical discourse analysis to uncover the power asymmetry between the platform and streamers and key elements in the platform-as-daddy narrative. Critical discourse analysis works as an effective method to reveal the underlying power structure of semiotic production, given that language use is always simultaneously constitutive of users' social identity, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 1993). The deconstruction of platform-as-daddy narrative thus helps reveal how the asymmetrical power distribution between the platform and users, especially female wanghong, is overlapped with patriarchal order as well as how wanghong's social class status has contributed to their own active participation in building this narrative.

There are potential biases existing in the online ethnography regarding the specific streamers that were observed. Douyin developed sophisticated algorithms for precise content recommendation in its information flow based on users' personal browsing and activity history. As a result, it was possible that the streamers appeared in the information flow on the researcher's home page had become increasingly homogeneous in terms of the content and streamers' demographics as this research progressed, although measures of non-interaction with the streamers, such as not following, liking, commenting, or tipping, were taken to minimise such potential algorithmic biases.

## Introducing the gendered wanghong economy and patriarchal platforms behind

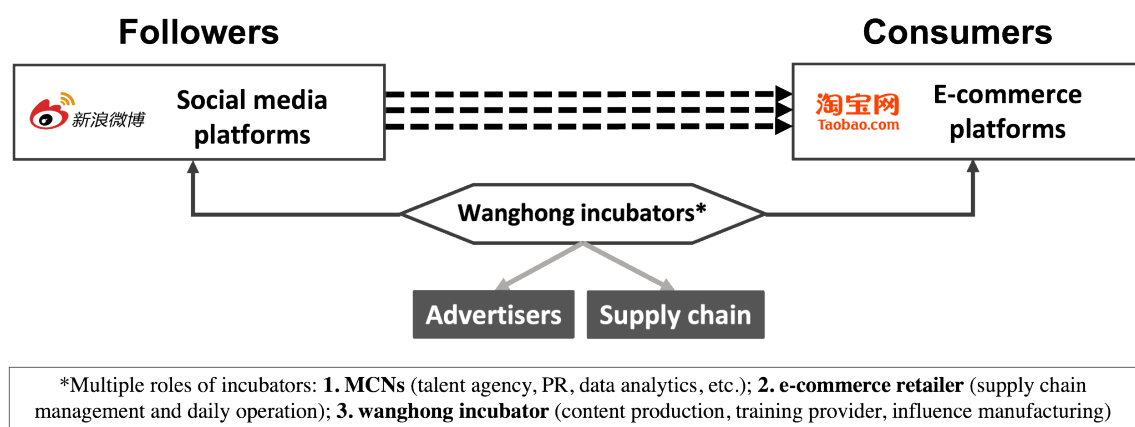
### Evolving e-commerce wanghong value chains: GDP contributed by women

The e-commerce wanghong sector specifically targets female participants since day one and the Chinese e-commerce wanghong value chains have evolved from what I refer as 1.0 model (transplatform) to 2.0 model (all-in-one), in which Alibaba, among other e-commerce players, has played a critical role for both stages of the e-commerce wanghong value chains. Firstly, it is noteworthy that Alibaba's user structure and revenue sources have always depended on women. For instance, Alibaba's founder Jack Ma claimed that women take up 70% of the buyers and over 50% of the sellers on Alibaba, and female apparel has always been one of the most important pillars for Taobao's success (Alibaba, 2020; Meng & Huang, 2017). Further, Alibaba aims to foster the economic models around wanghong as a vital part of Alibaba's implementation of its "social commerce" strategy, that is, to create personalised engaging shopping experience for its consumers through highly relevant content production and social engagement on social media (Alibaba, 2016; Han, 2020a). In fact, the term "wanghong economy" firstly appeared in a press release about Alibaba's Wanghong Economy Media Seminar held in the summer of 2015, which aimed to stimulate growth from a particular sector of Taobao stores, wanghong stores—launched and operated by wanghong incubators in the name of exclusively *female* wanghong back then with millions of *female* followers on Weibo (Han, 2020a).

Moreover, Alibaba also promotes the early integration between e-commerce business, social media, and wanghong since the mid 2010s by stepping into strategic alliances with leading social media platforms, such as Weibo, Douyin, and Bilibili, to better connect with the wanghong boasted by these platforms. Alibaba also became a major investor behind the earliest and leading wanghong incubators, such as Ruhnn, to further boost the value chain of e-commerce wanghong (Han, 2020a; Ruhnn, 2017b). The e-commerce wanghong value chain 1.0 is defined by a transplatform ecosystem consisting of three stages (Table 1 and Chart 1): "incubation", "store launch", and "transformation" (Han, 2020a, 2020b; Ruhnn, 2017b, 2017a), which successfully transform popularity on social media platforms to e-commerce transactions on platforms like Taobao.

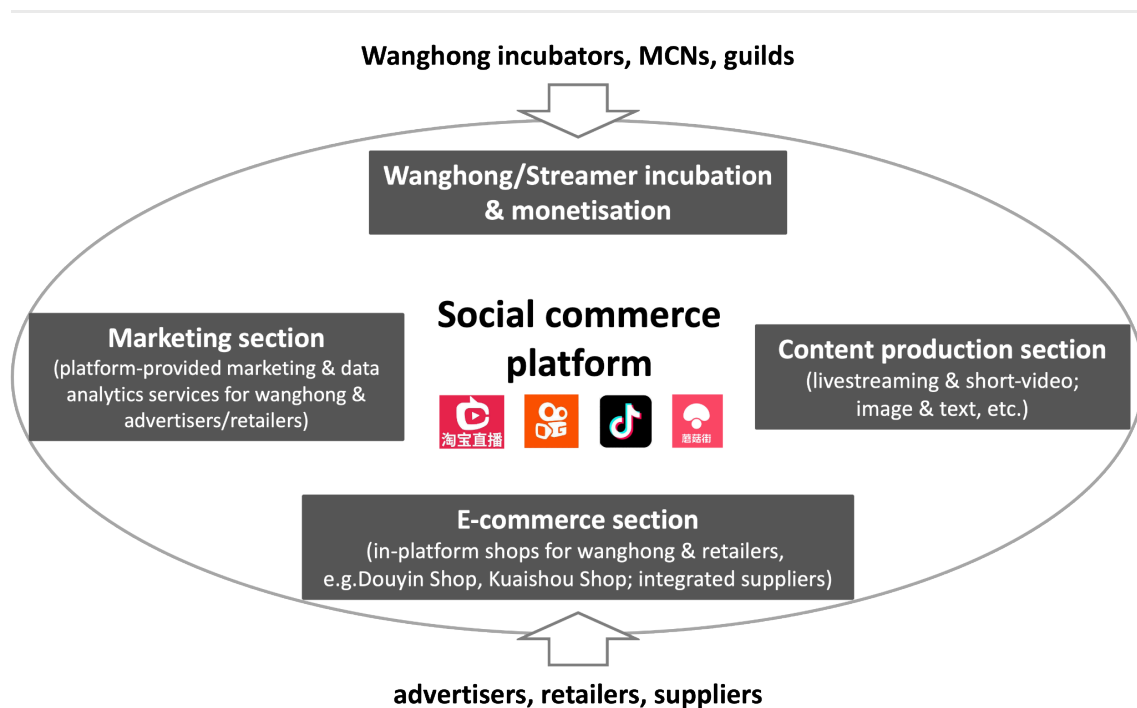
**TABLE 1:** Key stages in e-commerce wanghong value chain 1.0

STAGE	INCUBATION	STORE LAUNCH	TRANSFORMATION
	Wanghong incubators gather followers for wanghong through 1) various trainings and courses offered to wanghong candidates; and 2) Content production by a professional crew to build an appealing “persona” for wanghong	Incubators launch wanghong’s Taobao stores based on the profiling of established follower bases informed by data analytics and incubators manage the supply chains and e-commerce operation	New wanghong launch product campaigns on social media platforms and direct followers to their Taobao stores, transforming them into consumers
Host platform	Social media platform	E-commerce platform	Social media platform—e-commerce platform

**FIGURE 1:** E-commerce wanghong value chain 1.0: transplatform ecosystem (between 2015-2019)

Further, as short video and livestreaming platforms have acquired rapid growth in China recently, they soon become the new sites to incubate, maintain, and monetise the e-commerce wanghong’s popularity. Alibaba takes the lead again by launching a livestreaming section within its Taobao mobile app as early as 2016 to generate real-time orders through embedded links of different products during livestreaming sessions as another ambitious move to boost its e-commerce wanghong value chains (Alibaba, 2019). This e-commerce livestreaming function was further developed and eventually launched as an independent platform, Taobao Livestream, in 2019 (Alibaba, 2019). The launch and success of Taobao Livestream underlines the fact that Alibaba has built a relatively closed, social commerce value chain (2.0) on their own platforms like Taobao and Taobao Livestream. In this model, Alibaba can incubate wanghong and star streamers independently without necessarily relying on social media platforms for traffic exportation (Figure 2). Secondly, this model 2.0 of e-commerce wanghong value chains has been feverishly followed by not only other major e-commerce platforms quickly, such as JD and Pinduoduo (the second and third largest e-commerce platforms respectively that

are invested in by Tencent), but also leading social media platforms like Douyin, Kuaishou, and even WeChat, although very cautiously.



**FIGURE 2:** E-commerce wanghong value chain 2.0: all-in-one ecosystem (since 2019)

Now, the monetisation models of the wanghong economy diverge in two directions: “conventional” monetisation such as virtual gifts, tips, and subscriptions on the one hand, and e-commerce sales on the other. Meanwhile, there is a discernible converging trend of the two monetisation models, given that more and more wanghong now have adopted e-commerce as an essential means to liquidate their popularity across various media platforms. For example, Kuaishou, a very popular short video and livestreaming platform that targets users in the fourth and fifth tier cities and rural regions stepped into e-commerce business in 2018 while Huya, Douyu—the two earliest and most established Chinese gameplay livestreaming platforms that boast a large number of the most influential wanghong streamers—and Douyin, all launched their own e-commerce livestreaming business in 2020 (Douyu, 2019; Gao, 2020; Huya, 2020; Kuaishou, 2020). In 2020, the number of users in e-commerce livestreaming exceeded the number of viewers of conventional gameplay streaming for the first time, and it further rose to 384 million in 2021, constituting 38% of the total Chinese online population (CNNIC, 2020, 2021). Ultimately, the adoption of e-commerce business as a key monetisation strategy for major platforms is consequently accompanied by a sweeping commercialisation of content on these platforms, aggressive promotion of con-



sumerism, and a broader convergence between social media platforms, e-commerce business, and wanghong at the industrial level, even forging a new type of “social commerce platforms”, on which one can no longer draw a clear line between commercial and non-commercial content and activities.

To a large degree, the wanghong economy has become an extended terrain of the broader e-commerce business ecosystems that seek to boost sales through interactions and experienced affection between wanghong and their followers. With the newly constructed value chains of the e-commerce wanghong, the wanghong economy has expanded its breadth into an encompassing business ecosystem that includes an array of participants, from major platforms, wanghong and wanghong incubators, suppliers, distribution networks, advertisers and retailers, etc. The wanghong economy further clings into state’s new “dual circulation strategy” for national economy in the post-pandemic era, which emphasises that China should rely on a robust cycle of domestic demand and innovation as the main driver of the economy while maintaining foreign markets and investors as a second engine of growth. This becomes vital to maintain a healthy and stable national economy at times when Covid-19 has accentuated the risks and vulnerabilities inherent in deep trade integration as well as the risks from the intensified Sino-US confrontation (Tang, 2020). Against such a policy background, the state and local governments progressively encourage the further growth and expansion of the wanghong economy, especially the e-commerce wanghong livestreaming, as a new economic growth pole. For instance, in July 2020, China’s Ministry of Human Resource and Social Security recognised e-commerce streamers as one of its nine new accredited occupations (Li, 2021). In 2020 alone, there were at least 15 provinces and cities announcing various policy support for the e-commerce livestreaming sector (iResearch, 2020). Women in particular are encouraged to participate, given that working as an e-commerce streamer offers a more flexible schedule, which is easier for them to “balance” between work and domestic duties.

While the e-commerce wanghong has embraced a rapid expansion with the support from governments and big platform companies, this sector has also become more “gendered” in terms of both consumption and labour participation. In the earlier discussion, China’s e-commerce business highly depends on women-led consumption and female labour participation on platforms like Taobao. It is noteworthy that in the 1.0 transplatform e-commerce wanghong value chains, content production and discursive construction of wanghong’s persona on social media often follow a typical neoliberal feminist narrative about wanghong to target female users: a young, chic, self-made female entrepreneur who has achieved financial in-

dependence and who lives an upper-class lifestyle by working hard. Wanghong stores they launched, without surprises, therefore sell products targeting female consumers, such as female apparel, beauty products, and maternal and infant products (Han, 2020a). According to e-commerce wanghong incubation leader Ruhnn, 76% of the followers of their wanghong are women, which is approximately 150 million (Ruhnn, 2020a).

Further, the structural dependence on women as labour is amplified in recent years, especially with the fast-growing e-commerce livestreaming sector. For instance, over 80% of streamers are women on Taobao Livestream (Xu, 2019). Women also constitute the majority for the e-commerce livestreaming industry in general, which account for 78.2% of the e-commerce streamers, according to BOSS, a leading recruiting platform in China (Shen, 2020). Meanwhile, women are also actively involved as a vital force in the production and distribution networks at downstream of the e-commerce wanghong value chains as entrepreneurs and workers in Taobao villages, which are the rural and semi-rural e-commerce hubs built up with various supports from both Alibaba and local governments to encourage residents and farmers to engage with e-commerce business (H. Yu & Cui, 2019).

Due to the predominance of women in labour participation and consumption, the wanghong economy, therefore, tends to be projected as a new kind of platform economy that is by and for the women. For example, leading e-commerce platforms like Alibaba and JD have developed diverse and adapted neoliberal feminist narratives to legitimise, highlight, and further encourage women's participation in the e-commerce wanghong sector to sustain their business growth. In addition to the aforementioned "spendthrift wives" discourses, Alibaba and JD in recent years also shift to emphasise the "self-pleasing" consumption for professional females. JD and Alibaba-owned Tmall, for instance, release annual reports for women's consumption respectively since 2017, featuring cliches such as "girl power" and "female independence" (JD Research Institute, 2017; Tmall, 2018). These reports anchor women's self-care and independence to the consumption of particular categories of products, such as books, cars, comfortable rimless underwear, boxing gloves, jogging sneakers, and portable alarm systems for professional women who need to go on regular business trips (which, ironically, are mainly used to prevent potential sexual crimes from males) (JD Research Institute, 2017; Tmall, 2018, 2019).

Besides the discursive construction around women as consumers, Alibaba has also projected itself as a liberating force which brings abundant job opportunities for

female entrepreneurs, especially for women from semi-rural and rural China—which only have limited access to higher education and career options—through a series of corporate-led events and initiatives. For instance, Alibaba has been organising the “Global Conference on Women and Entrepreneurship” every two years since 2015 as a significant discursive site to construct the company’s pro-women corporate image and to show its support and gratitude for female users and participants on Alibaba’s various platforms (BBLook, 2019). Yet, many of its circulating discourses are contradictory and controversial. In the most recent conference held in Hangzhou in 2019, Jack Ma gave a speech to highlight the active involvement of female streamers in its prospering e-commerce livestreaming business and he also highlighted the importance and contribution of female employees in the Alibaba Group, praising female workers for their qualities such as being “caring” and “tolerant”. Ma further expressed his concerns about the dropping ratio of female employees in the company in recent years in the speech while sharing his wish of “being a woman in my next life and raising a bunch of babies” (BBLook, 2019).

### **Platforms behind: decisions made by men**

Essentially, Jack Ma’s speech mirrors the ongoing contradictory in the wanghong economy: women’s participation is demanded and encouraged—and demanded and encouraged only—in the way that both Chinese women’s productive capacity (as e-commerce retailers, wanghong, workers in the family workshops and factories in Taobao villages, supporting staff and other types of employees, etc.) and reproductive capacity (as consumers) are best exploited by major platform companies as well as the state that increasingly relies on maintaining a high domestic consumer demand. In sharp contrast, women’s participation and involvement at higher management level of both corporations and the state are restricted. Behind the women-liberating image of the wanghong economy, one should not be surprised to learn that major entities and platform companies that have together made the backbone of—and which also have extracted most value from—this industry remains extremely patriarchal in terms of ownership structure and senior management.

The ratio of female participation in the boards of directors in major wanghong economy players—including e-commerce platforms, social media and livestreaming platforms, and leading wanghong incubators and agencies—is remarkably low (Table 2), especially considering the large number of female wanghong they have mobilised as labourers as well as the female consumers their businesses specifically target. For instance, six out of 20 members in the board of directors of Aliba-

ba are female and from this perspective, Alibaba indeed provides more opportunities for women than it claims, compared with its counterparts, since there is zero female members in the boards of directors for the leading e-commerce platform Pinduoduo and two most popular short-video and livestreaming platforms Kuaishou and Douyin (Alibaba, 2021; ByteDance, 2021; Douyu, 2020; Kuaishou Technology, 2020 & 2021; Pinduoduo, 2021). Meanwhile, Weibo has two female directors while all other companies left only have one female member in their boards respectively (Douyu, 2021; Huya, 2021; JD, 2021; Tencent, 2021; Weibo Corporation, 2021). When it comes to wanghong incubators, the situation is slightly brighter. All five selected incubators are industrial leaders in the e-commerce wanghong: Ruhnn, Tisu, and Chenfan are the earliest e-commerce wanghong incubators which started to incubate wanghong between 2015-2016 and which still boasts the most successful e-commerce wanghong today; while the other two, Qianxun and MeiOne, boast the top two most successful e-commerce streamers on Taobao Livestream respectively: Viya (before her tax evasion scandal in 2021) and Li Jiaqi. Among these players, only one company, Chenfan, is dominated by women at senior management level as this company was established by two female co-founders (Chenfan, 2021). The rest of them show an absolute male dominance at corporate management level, while most of their incubated wanghong are, however, women, according to the full and/or selected list of wanghong published on their official websites (Chenfan, 2021; Qianxun, 2022; Ruhnn, 2022; Tisu, 2022).

**TABLE 2:** Participation of women in major corporations in the wanghong economy in 2021

CATEGORY	PLATFORM/ COMPANY	FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE BOARDS OF DIRECTORS (%)	FEMALE WANGHONG INCUBATED (%)
Major internet companies and e-commerce platforms	Alibaba	31.8%	/
	Tencent <sup>1</sup>	11%	/
	JD	10%	/
	Pinduoduo	0%	/
	Weibo	22.2%	
Short video and livestreaming platforms	Huya	9%	/
	Douyu	9%	/
	Douyin (ByteDance)	0%	/

1. As of January 2022, Tencent holds 57.0% of Huya's shares and 37.2% of Douyu's shares and Tencent is the biggest shareholder of both livestreaming platforms. Tencent is also the second largest shareholder of Pinduoduo (16.5%) and was the second largest shareholder of JD until December 2021.

CATEGORY	PLATFORM/ COMPANY	FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE BOARDS OF DIRECTORS (%)	FEMALE WANGHONG INCUBATED (%)
	Kuaishou	0%	/
	Taobao Livestream (Alibaba)	31.8%	/
Leading e-commerce wanghong incubators	Ruhnn	8.3%	94.6%
	Qianxun	0%	81.8%
	MeiOne	10%	Not disclosed
	Tisu	0%	95.7%
	Chenfan	60%	100%

*Sources: Author's compilation of data extracted from corporate annual reports, corporate Registration Statements prepared for the Securities and Exchange Commission in US stock market and/or Hong Kong stock market, enterprise announcements and official websites, data aggregator Tianyancha.com, and National Enterprise Credit Information and Publicity System of the People's Republic of China.*

While Table 2 certainly only provides an incomplete portrayal of the wanghong economy due to the very limited access to data and information of smaller, private entities, it undoubtedly signals a severe, structural gender hierarchy. Remarkably, in modern corporations, boards of directors play the critical hubs that insert allocative control over the company's business strategies, financial policy, and daily operations (Jia & Winseck, 2018; Murdock, 1982). Such allocative control works as a form of structural power, given that the decisions made by the boards of directors establish long-term operating policies of the companies and allocate various key resources (e.g. capital, technology, people, knowledge, etc.) that would eventually affect the e-commerce wanghong these companies have entered. This reveals that the unequal distribution of decision-making power, and wealth consequently, in the wanghong economy is closely intertwined with gender, ultimately making major platforms the new patriarchal actors. Such structurally embedded gender inequality of the wanghong economy and the power hierarchy between participants and the patriarchal platforms is rendered explicit in the discursive construction around the term “baba” as to refer to popular short video and livestreaming platform Douyin.

## Platform as New “Daddy”

Different from its English counterpart “daddy” that often bears explicit sexual meaning in gender politics, the general meaning of the term baba in Chinese cul-

ture is essentially about power. In contemporary Chinese popular and digital culture, *baba* can be used to refer to any individual that enjoys a superior status over others, no matter whether such superiority is derived from wealth, high ranking, talent, skill, or intelligence—although the first two elements, especially wealth, tend to be the major source. This term is often used in daily jokes, punchlines in various stage performances from stand-up comedies to traditional Chinese comic dialogues, or flowing comments (“danmu”) in a livestreaming session, for instance, to show admiration towards a skilled videogame player. And the term “*baba*”, therefore, has been extremely naturalised in different Chinese communicative contexts. This might explain why there is hardly any literature so far examining the rich cultural meanings this term boasts, especially in the digital era.

Calling a person that they barely know in real life “daddy” probably seems unorthodox for readers not familiar with local culture. Yet, as a cultural norm, Chinese tend to use a kinship term to address people they encounter and/or know as a way to be polite and friendly for interpersonal communications—even though they are not actually related to each other. Prior to Douyin, the figure that is called *baba* by a large number of Chinese internet users is Jack Ma (“MA Yun *baba*”). The single text found that examines the cultural phenomenon of referring to Ma as daddy contends that it reveals the overlapping of patriarchal worship and power worship as a long, embedded social tradition in Chinese society since the feudalist age, and it further argues that when *baba* is used in the context of internet culture to address Ma, the worship of Ma’s personal achievement—namely his accumulated wealth and his power over one of China’s largest platform companies Alibaba—has taken the leading role (Pan & Yang, 2018). Likewise, another common use of *baba* is Jinzhu (“master of gold”) *baba*: “wealthy master daddy”. Wanghong and streamers on various platforms and even conventional celebrities in entertainment industries commonly use this term to address sponsors and advertisers that financially support their content production/the TV shows. It can be observed from both MA Yun *baba* and Jinzhu *baba*, the term “*baba*” carries an overt underpinning of neoliberalism that explicitly promotes wealth accumulation, market dominance, and even money worship. Such neoliberal underpinning is further hybridised with patriarchal worship by attributing wealth, power, and superiority to male figures, instead of females, through the term “*baba*”.

It has become even more intriguing when streamers and users have attributed the role of “daddy” to their host platforms. While some platforms and apps will strategically build up a gender for themselves as part of their platform’s “personality” to better approach their target user groups as a marketing tactic, users addressing

the platform as daddy is fundamentally different. While the “platform-as-daddy” narrative appears on different platforms, it is particularly prevalent on Douyin (streamers on Taobao Livestream, on the other hand, tend to stick to “MA Yun ba-ba” since Jack Ma is a walking icon for Alibaba and Taobao). Analyses below primarily focus on Douyin and discuss two themes that constitute the platform-as-daddy narrative.

### **Theme I. “fair” platform, “reliable” algorithms, and the logic of popularity**

The first element that stands out is that most wanghong streamers keep emphasising that following a platform’s algorithms is the only way to get recommended by Dou baba to a larger user pool, where a wanghong will obtain most exposure. Essentially as data infrastructure that relies on the extensive datafication of users’ traces, platforms like Douyin sophisticatedly mobilise participants to input substantial labour, time, and data on the platform through the design of their algorithms. Rules are numerous and they are a combination of the published rules by the platform and the conclusions that streamers derived from their own practices. Either way, they tend to be very specific and extremely labour intensive, and they do not necessarily guarantee any financial returns for the streamers, especially for rookies. For example, livestreaming sessions need to be a minimum of two-hour long and streamers need to livestream on at least two to three days a week (while most streamers I encountered actually claimed that they livestream for four to six hours or even longer on a daily basis). Streamers also need to upload information and provide verification of their identity as required by the platform. As well, it is taken as an informal rule that streamers should log on to the platform every day and interact with their followers through either the “like” button or comments to maintain a high level of activity records, so their accounts can be “seen” by the platform as a precondition to be allocated into a larger user pool for more visibility. Such mechanisms directly connect streamers’ behaviours with the popularity of their accounts, on which their income depends, and streamers must obey without much flexibility.

Further, streamers are often very aware of this power asymmetry yet rarely see it as problematic. Instead, they tend to perceive platforms as fair and platforms’ algorithms as reliable. For example, many streamers with a follower base from a few hundreds to over a million mentioned that “Dou baba is fair” (DY4, DY7, and DY19<sup>2</sup>) and “algorithms do not cheat/lie” (DY7, DY19, DY23, DY27) when talking about how

2. All streamers’ accounts have been anonymised and livestreaming sessions were assigned with codes.



to be a successful streamer. This perceived objectivity and non-bias about Douyin is closely associated with Douyin's algorithm design for content recommendation, which is featured by a decentralisation claimed and perceived. On Douyin, platform's recommendation for content is not only based on the accounts' historical activities and user base but also depends on various metrics produced by viewers within a certain period of time, such as the number of "likes" received, how many viewers have finished watching the whole video, and how many virtual gifts/sales were achieved during a livestreaming session, etc., to decide if the content will be recommended to a larger user pool. In this way, even content produced by starters also has a chance to become viral across the platform. This is very different from its competitors such as Kuaishou, which usually prioritises the content produced by the accounts with a larger user base. Such algorithmic design is deemed to be more "democratising" by streamers on Douyin, even though it still serves as a key vehicle to advance the platform's business goal of maximising users' and streamers' participation and contribution. As a result, streamers believe that as long as users work dedicatedly to play up to Douyin's requirements, eventually "Dou baba will see your efforts" (DY4, DY7, DY19, DY23, DY27).

## **Theme II. personal financial success and the messianic platform**

The second theme identified with the platform-as-daddy narrative is that Dou Baba is often glorified as the ultimate saviour for streamers' life, financially-wise. Very different from many earlier generations of wanghong who started as amateurs from producing various content to share their interests or talents, streamers on Douyin tend to be very honest and straightforward about their imperative to join the platform to make money, especially after the e-commerce livestreaming function was perfected within the app, such as the platform launching the function of Douyin Shop (????) and shopping cart function. Many of the streamers observed are from the fourth and fifth tier cities or semi-rural and rural areas of China. This is especially true given that more local governments provide support to the e-commerce wanghong value chains as an important way to raise local income and create more jobs as mentioned earlier. As a result, many young people—both females and males—who used to work/would have worked in a factory or a restaurant now are presented with streamer/wanghong as a new career option. It is common that streamers consider livestreaming/video production a rather appealing career choice, given the flexible working schedule, relatively cosy working environment (most streamers can work from home), and the attempting, possible financial return, although they also admit that livestreaming for long hours every day and to maintain and manage their relationship with followers are extremely exhausting.

In contrast to streamers' alternative, conventional employers, Dou baba tends to enjoy the image of a shelter for streamers as well as a liberating figure, even providing opportunities of class mobility for streamers with potential, huge financial return for streamers. Most streamers observed explicitly expressed their gratitude for Dou baba, especially the relatively successful ones with more followers. For example, in DY23, a young woman in her late 20s on Douyin who has gathered more than 150,000 followers in the summer of 2020, stated that "the one that I thank most is Dou Baba because it offers all the opportunities to make me successful". While also recognising their long working hours every day and the intensive labour and efforts input to create content, streamers tend to give a lot of the credit to the platform for their achievements, because without Dou baba, they would not even have the opportunity to work hard at a job like this.

### **From platform to daddy**

Bringing the two themes together, the cultural fantasy casted over Douyin's dominance over its users is clear here: the powerful platform evolves from a company into a perceived paternal figure, who provides a shelter, sets up fair and reliable rules, and creates equal opportunities for all of its dependents—the streamers—to compete, grow, and thrive. Such a narrative serves a couple of purposes. First and foremost, it has mystified the fundamentally unequal power distribution between the platform and users with a neoliberal underpinning joined by a patriarchal order perpetuated in this platform-as-daddy narrative. When streamers believe that as long as they work hard to "please" the platform by following its algorithms and platform policies, they will eventually become more visible and popular, it also means that streamers will equally believe that if they do not succeed on the platform, the responsibilities will fall on their own parts. In this way, this narrative obscures the asymmetric power relation between platform and users—that is, the platforms have the overwhelming power in setting the rules while the users only have the "right" to opt-out if they do not consent with the platform's decisions—and it again has recasted this structural inequality as users' own personal issues and choices. This further resonates and also reinforces the broader neoliberal ethos, which perceive individuals as autonomous subjects without addressing the structural constraints imposed on the parameter of their choices. By shifting the responsibilities that should have been borne by both the platforms and regulators to individual streamers and users, this narrative further entices users to accept such a status quo and further to "voluntarily" sink deeper and to play along with the algorithms. Therefore, users are likely to lubricate the platform's imperatives for commodification and datafication, instead of shaping the platform mechanisms towards users' own preference and interest.

Secondly, platform's dominance is further legitimised and glorified by this narrative with a pinch of perceived "humanity": the platform is strict yet not ruthless or unreasonable; instead, there is perceived objectivity and non-bias about platform's algorithms. The platform is also liberating because it offers an alternative lifestyle, especially for people from less developed areas. Dou baba provides shelter so streamers do not have to work twelve hours a day in a factory like Foxconn; Dou baba also offers a reliable venue for them to become well-known as *he* will guarantee popularity and traffic as rewards to people who obey the rules and meet the targets set by daddy. A word that is repeatedly mentioned by different streamers is "cherish"—streamers should all cherish the opportunities offered by the platform—and this reveals a deeper dependence of streamers on the platform at not only financial but also sentimental level. Dou baba who sets the rules and goals and then provides opportunities and resources for streamers to be successful indeed clings into the traditional father figure, especially in Chinese society: all that streamers need to do is to obey and work hard towards father's expectation in exchange for financial support and returns. The subordinated status of streamers therefore is legitimised and further naturalised under this daddy-child power dynamic constructed in the platform-as-daddy discourses.

Additionally, such a patriarchal, cultural fantasy about platforms further reveals class as another critical dimension of the wanghong economy, interwoven with gender in the process of streamers constructing this cultural fantasy: streamers who expressed the most gratitude for platforms like Douyin tend to come from semi-rural and rural areas and belong to the social groups that have the least access to resources like capital, education, and social networking, etc. What is more, there are also male streamers who join this narrative building. It is noteworthy that these male participants share more commonalities in terms of their social and economic status with female streamers than the distinctions based on gender. This, to a certain degree, reminds us about the fact that not all men are necessarily the beneficiaries in a patriarchal structure; they can also be marginalised and depend on the wealthy, powerful "daddy" at the top of the power hierarchy. This intersectionality of gender and class again reflects the social divide as a result of the neoliberal reform in the post-socialist China. It also signifies a reality that private platform companies like Douyin (ByteDance) and Alibaba are perceived as part of the solutions to mitigate such social-economic divide, which adds another layer to the legitimisation process of platform's penetration to wider social facets.

Lastly, it is notable that it tends to be the streamers who are actively participating into building and perpetuating the cultural fantasy around the platform as a pater-

nal figure. Remarkably, in the given, contemporary narrative underpinned by patriarchy in Chinese popular culture, people using the term *baba* in a non-kinship communicative context essentially suggests that people actually voluntarily downgrade themselves to a lower ranking. When Chinese netizens refer to Jack Ma as Ma Yun *baba*, they are likely to use this term *baba* as a token for an inexplicit self-depreciation—although usually in a rather playful way—to channel out or even dissolve part of their embedded dissatisfaction and frustration towards the larger, unequal social-economic structures that are dominated by powerful entities and the elite. Similarly, I take streamers' practice of joining their voices to the platform-as-daddy narrative building as a way of their own to make sense of their daily interactions with the dominant host platform and their subordinated status. Also, this narrative mostly occurred when streamers shared their experiences of achieving financial success on the platform with audiences who want to become streamers as well. Such platform-as-daddy theme hybridised with streamers' own personal stories, therefore, are often used as the “selling points” to attract and retain more followers. Consequently, potential commercial drives behind such a narration should not be overlooked. This said, the sentiments and gratitude that many streamers have revealed seem rather genuine and, from their own perspective, platforms and internet companies like Douyin, Kuaishou, Alibaba, etc., and the wanghong economy as a whole, indeed provide participants with the opportunities that they would not have otherwise. As reminded by feminist political scholar Ellen Riordan (2002, p. 12): “understanding women’s wants, desires, and needs is crucial” because even though “in the end these feelings may be driven by capitalism and informed by cultural practices”, it is still critical for us to enquire into what it means if “groups of women have no understanding of their relationship to, participation in, and exploitation by capitalism”.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided a combination of both structural analysis and discourse analysis of the embedded gender hierarchy within China's rapidly rising and evolving wanghong economy, especially the prospering e-commerce wanghong sector that has decisively tilted the overall trajectory of the economic activities centred around wanghong. Underneath the sugarcoating of “women liberation and empowerment”, wanghong economy's prosperity largely relies on the explicit targeting on women's both productive capacity and reproductive capacity underpinned by neoliberal feminism and consumerism. Furthermore, on closer examination, key value chains in the wangong economy are constructed by the platforms and companies that are dominated by male decision-makers at the senior management

level, which have turned the major internet companies into the new patriarchal actors who possess allocative control over significant resources to shape the developing patterns of wanghong economy and the broader Chinese digital economies in which they also play a substantial role; whereas the major female participants, as labour force, consumers, and platform users for wanghong economy, have little access to influencing its business models and industrial practices. Such analysis at the industrial level thus has redirected our attention from the cultural politics around individual wanghong to the underlying socio-economic structure at a deeper level of the wanghong economy—and the Chinese society that wanghong economy is situated within. Moreover, through an integral approach, this paper further connects the political-economic structure of the wanghong economy with wanghong's day-to-day encounters with dominant platforms like Douyin. The cultural fantasy that frames Douyin as a strict yet fair paternal figure is informed by the streamers' experiences with platform's datafication practices. It reflects how the structural, gender-based inequality is manifested in, and also resonates with, the platform's cultural politics, especially with the imposed algorithmic control over its users from the host platform. And this cultural fantasy in turn has further legitimised and even glorified the platform's dominance.

Ultimately, this research goes beyond how platform and platform technologies have laid down “new” forms of hierarchies. Instead, it looks into how platforms have laid down such “new” hierarchies at the intersectionality with the existing, “older” power asymmetries and how platform technologies, value chains and ideologies are modified by local histories, social-economic developments, and the contemporary gender and class subjectivities of Chinese people. As the analyses have showed, lying at the very heart of the wanghong economy in China is a complex of multiple asymmetric power structures deeply intertwined and allied with each other: the reviving patriarchy, dividing social classes since the neoliberal reform, and the algorithm-(re)configured relation between the dominant, profit-driven platforms and their users/labourers—all further fueled by the prevailing, largely state-led consumerism. Such asymmetric power structures within the wanghong economy are mutually constitutive and thus extremely difficult to break free from.

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## Appendix: list of documents consulted

CATEGORY	COMPANY/ INSTITUTION	DOCUMENT/DATABASE	LANGUAGE	DATE PUBLISHED	DATE RETRIEVED
Corporate document	Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.	Registration Statement	English	09/22/ 2014	17/10/ 2020
		Annual and Transition Report 2015	English	06/25/ 2015	17/10/ 2020

CATEGORY	COMPANY/ INSTITUTION	DOCUMENT/DATABASE	LANGUAGE	DATE PUBLISHED	DATE RETRIEVED
		Annual and Transition Report 2016	English	05/24/ 2016	17/10/ 2020
		Annual and Transition Report 2017	English	06/15/ 2017	17/10/ 2020
		Annual and Transition Report 2018	English	07/27/ 2018	17/10/ 2020
		Annual and Transition Report 2019	English	06/05/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		Annual and Transition Report 2020	English	07/09/ 2020	17/10/ 2020
		2018 Tmall Female Power Trending Report	Chinese	02/03/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		2019 Tmall Female Consumption Report	Chinese	08/03/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
	Tencent Holdings Limited	2019 Annual Report	English	24/03/ 2021	21/06/ 2021
		2020 Annual Report	English	18/03/ 2020	17/10/ 2020
	JD .Com, Inc.	2015 Annual Report	English	19/04/ 2016	17/10/ 2020
		2016 Annual Report	English	01/05/ 2017	17/10/ 2020
		2017 Annual Report	English	27/04/ 2018	17/10/ 2020
		2018 Annual Report	English	15/04/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		2019 Annual Report	English	15/04/ 2020	17/10/ 2020
		2020 Annual Report	English	16/04/ 2021	21/06/ 2021
		2017 JD Female Consumption Report	Chinese	30/11/ 2017	17/10/ 2020
		Spending to Show Your Beauty: 2018 JD Female Consumption Trending Analysis	Chinese	21/09/ 2018	17/10/ 2020
		2020 JD Female Consumption Trending Report	Chinese	06/03/ 2020	17/10/ 2020
	Pinduoduo Inc.	Registration Statement	English	07/02/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		Pinduoduo Inc. 2018 Annual Report	English	24/04/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		Pinduoduo Inc. 2019 Annual Report	English	25/04/ 2020	18/10/ 2020
		Pinduoduo Inc. 2020 Annual Report	English	30/04/ 2021	21/06/ 2021

CATEGORY	COMPANY/ INSTITUTION	DOCUMENT/DATABASE	LANGUAGE	DATE PUBLISHED	DATE RETRIEVED
				2021	2021
	ByteDance	corporate webpage "Leadership"	English	n.d.	19/06/ 2020
	Weibo Corporation	2014 Annual Report	English	28/04/ 2015	17/10/ 2020
		2015 Annual Report	English	29/04/ 2016	17/10/ 2020
		2016 Annual Report	English	28/04/ 2017	17/10/ 2020
		2017 Annual Report	English	26/04/ 2018	17/10/ 2020
		2018 Annual Report	English	30/04/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		2019 Annual Report	English	29/04/ 2020	17/10/ 2020
		2020 Annual Report	English	22/04/ 2021	01/05/ 2021
	Ali WB Investment, Sina Corporation, and Weibo Corporation	Amended and Restated Shareholders' Agreement	English	14/03/ 2014	17/10/ 2020
	Douyu International Holdings Limited	Registration Statement	English	22/04/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		DouYu 2019 Annual Report	English	28/04/ 2020	17/10/ 2020
		DouYu 2020 Annual Report	English	30/04/ 2021	21/06/ 2021
	Kuaishou Technology	Post Hearing Information Pack	English	05/02/ 2021	21/06/ 2021
		2020 Annual Report	English	28/04/ 2021	21/06/ 2021
	Huya	Registration Statement	English	10/11/ 2020	23/12/ 2020
		2018 Annual Report	English	26/04/ 2019	17/10/ 2020
		2019 Annual Report	English	27/04/ 2020	17/10/ 2020
		2020 Annual Report	English	27/04/ 2021	21/06/ 2021
	Ruhnn Holding Limited	2017 Semi-Annual Report	Chinese	29/08/ 2017	01/02/ 2019
		Registration Statement	English	01/04/ 2019	2019/ 6/18
		2019 Annual Report	English	08/14/ 2020	27/2/2022

CATEGORY	COMPANY/ INSTITUTION	DOCUMENT/DATABASE	LANGUAGE	DATE PUBLISHED	DATE RETRIEVED
		corporate webpage "Wanghong resources"	Chinese	n.d.	14/03/2022
	Qianxun	corporate webpage "Streamers of Qianxun"	Chinese	n.d.	14/03/2022
	Tisu	corporate webpage "Introduction of our star wanghong"	Chinese	n.d.	14/03/2022
	Chenfan	corporate webpage "Knowing our wanghong"	Chinese	n.d.	21/06/2021
Database	The State Administration for Market Regulation	National Enterprise Credit Information and Publicity System of People's Republic of China	Chinese	n.d.	14/3/2022
	Tianyancha Corporate Data Aggregator	data entry for Tisu Cultural Communication Ltd., shareholders and senior management	Chinese	n.d.	14/3/2022
		data entry for Qianxun (Hangzhou) Cultural Communication Ltd., shareholders and senior management	Chinese	n.d.	14/3/2022
		data entry for Meiwan Internet Technology Ltd., shareholders and senior management	Chinese	n.d.	14/3/2022
		data entry for Chenfan E-commerce Ltd., shareholders and senior management	Chinese	n.d.	14/3/2022

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