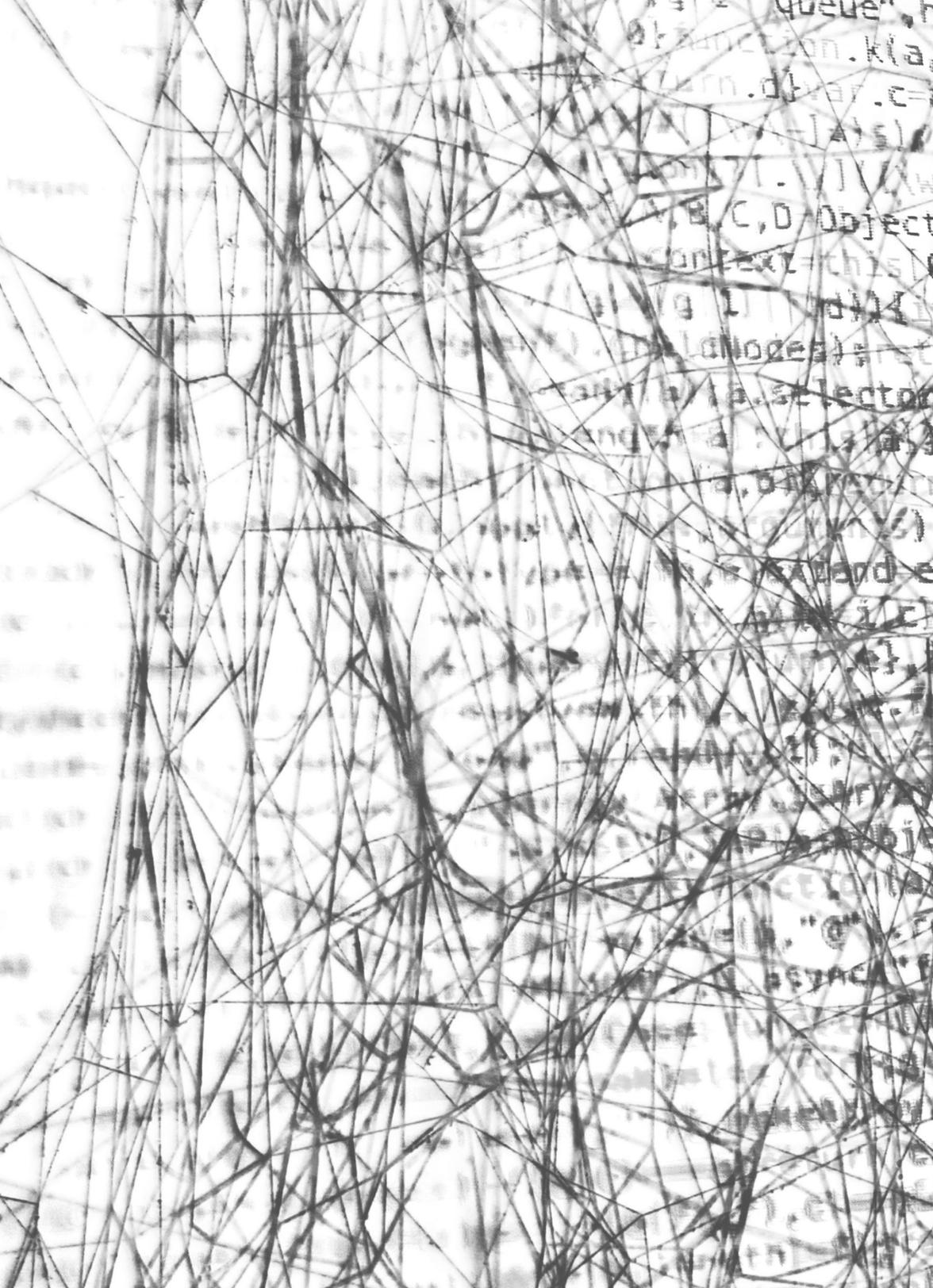


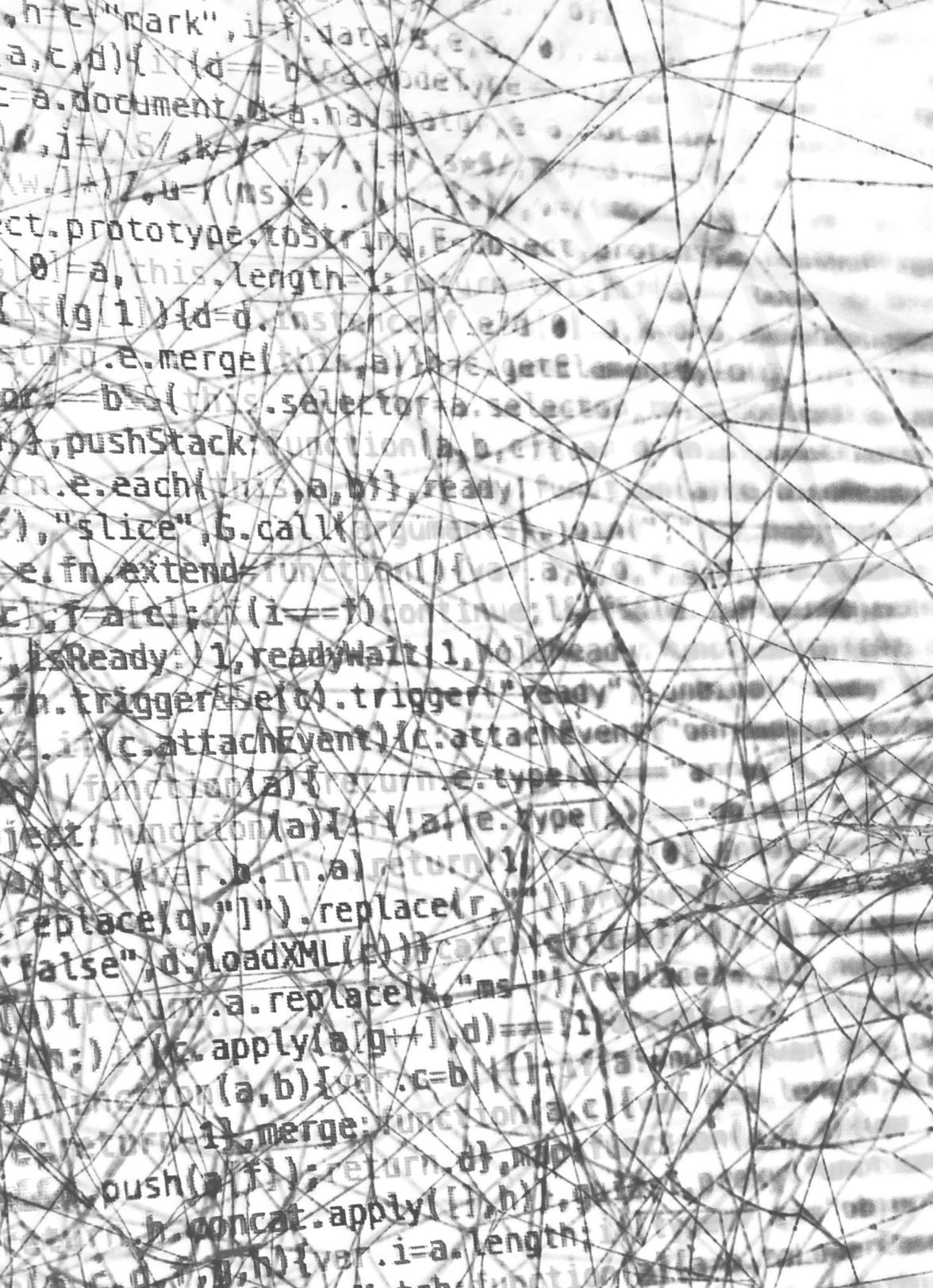


**12-13**  
**April**  
**2018**

**Hong Kong**  
**Baptist**  
**University**

**Platformization**  
**of Chinese Society**  
**An international**  
**workshop**





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## PROGRAMME

In her keynote for the 2016 Association of Internet Researchers (AIoR) conference in Berlin, media theorist José van Dijck discussed the social and political implications of the emerging economy of online platforms and mobile apps. She referred to this development as the platformization of society, which can be read as a sequel to what was coined as the “appliancization” by Jonathan Zittrain (2008). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as platforms for collaborative consumption such as Airbnb and Uber, are emerging as new institutions that often challenge older institutions and disrupt economic sectors like the news, hospitality, and transport industries. While online platforms are celebrated as vehicles of the “participatory society” and the “sharing economy”, these platforms often prove less progressive than they appear at first sight. Rather than simply stimulating citizen participation and entrepreneurialism, they enable the “datafication” and “commodification” of all social relations: collecting, algorithmically processing, circulating and selling user data (van Dijck & Poell 2013, 2016). Furthermore, platform corporations skillfully circumvent national labor laws and trade unions, intensifying labor precarization, and

undermining existing businesses and institutions, such as newspapers, hotels, and taxi companies, which operate within established regulatory frameworks (Scholz 2016).

To mitigate the negative consequences of these developments, van Dijck in her keynote called upon governments and other regulatory bodies to more actively intervene in the emerging platform society and not leave this development to the dynamic of the market. While this call for more regulation is particular welcome in the US, it appears rather problematic in the Chinese context. We are currently witnessing an equally fast, if not faster, process of platformization of Chinese society. When one walks through the city of Beijing today, one is time and again confronted with transport services, delivering food and goods to apartment buildings, people constantly checking their *weixin*, posting messages on *Weibo*, reading music reviews on *Douban*, ordering a taxi through taxi *Didi*, and are shopping for luxury goods online. Due to rapid platformization, Chinese society has experienced crucial changes over the past five years, not only in urban areas, but also in the countryside.

Yet, in the light of omnipresent government regulation and intervention, the platformization of Chinese society presents us with a very different set of problems and questions than in the West. In the same way, we need to critically interrogate the seemingly “natural” connection between the platform society and “global capitalism”, which has been theorized through the notion of “platform capitalism” (Srnicsek 2016). Again China presents an odd case, as it is hard to read China as a capitalist society (Nonini 2008). The aim of this workshop is to critically engage with the platformization of Chinese society, using China as a method (cf. Chen 2010) to interrogate, complicate, and complement current research on the global rise of the platform society.

To question van Dijck’s call for more regulation, as well as the assumed causal relationship between platformization and capitalism, this workshop aims to empirically scrutinize different platforms that are currently very popular in China. Inspired by a series of articles and a forthcoming book by van Dijck, Poell and De Waal, the workshop sets out to explore the particular mechanisms that online platforms introduce in Chinese society. To grasp the complexity and the logic

of Chinese platformization, it is pivotal to analyze the specific character of the main Chinese platforms, as well as the specific political and cultural configuration in which they operate. The Chinese process of platformization appears to differ on at least three crucial dimensions with developments in the US and Europe. First, there are vital differences in the *political economy* of platforms: the ownership structure and business models of Chinese platforms are different from those in the US. This also has implications for the ownership of data, raising issues of surveillance, control and marketing of data (Deibert 2013; Dyer-Witheford 2014; Fuchs 2017). Second, vital differences need to be taken into account in terms of the *architectures and affordances* of platforms: user and programming interfaces (and its semiotics), algorithms (what is made visible and invisible), and infrastructures (how are third parties plugged into the platform ecosystem) (Helmond 2015; Hookway 2014; Plantin et al. 2016; McVeigh-Schultz and Baym 2015). Finally, Chinese online platforms appear to be characterized by particular types of user practices and cultures, which differ from those in other parts of the worlds (Poell, de Kloet & Zeng 2014; Qiu 2016). Given that the societal impact of new technolo-

gies is for an important part shaped by how these technologies are integrated in social practice, these differences greatly matter. Of course, the question is how “particular” or “universal” Chinese platform user practices are. The exploration of these three dimensions will help to gain insight in the specific character of the platformization of Chinese society.

The papers in this workshop explore these issues by focusing on specific types of platforms, including platforms for: social networking (*Weixin*, *Weibo*, *Lesdo* & *Rela*), food delivery (*Ele.me* & *Meituan Dianping*), dating (*Momom*, *Tantan* & *Blued*), transport (*Didi Chuxing*), video streaming (*iQiyi*), and e-commerce (*Alibaba*). The workshop is focused on bringing the case studies in conversation with each other and interrogating the how particular platforms contribute to the transformation of societal relations along the three dimensions sketched above.

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## ORGANIZERS

Yiu Fai Chow, Jeroen de Kloet, Thomas Poell and Guohua Zeng

Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University

Amsterdam Centre for Globalisation Studies (ACGS), University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

The Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)

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# PROGRAMME SCHEDULE

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12 APRIL 2018 (THURSDAY)  
FSC501, HO SIN HANG CAMPUS

9:00 – 9:30            **RECEPTION**

9:30 – 10:30        **OPENING ADDRESS**  
**Jeroen de Kloet and Thomas Poell**  
The Platformization of Chinese Society

10:30 – 11:00       **COFFEE**

11:00 – 12:45       **SESSION ONE**  
**Gabriele de Seta** - The Infrastructuralization of Chinese  
Digital Platforms: The Case Study of *WeChat*  
*Discussant:* Guohua Zeng

**Kecheng Fang** - Information Platforms for Whom?:  
Reproducing Inequality on China's Public Social Media  
*Discussant:* Yiu Fai Chow

**Michael Keane** - China's Emerging Platform Capitalists  
in the Asia Pacific  
*Discussant:* Thomas Poell

12:45 – 14:00       **LUNCH**

14:00 – 15:10       **SESSION TWO**  
**Julie Yujie Chen and Jack Linchuan Qiu** - Digital Utility:  
*Didi*, Ride-hailing Labor, and the Transformation of Urban  
Transport in China  
*Discussant:* Jeroen de Kloet

**Ping Sun** - Your Ordering, Their Laboring: The Algorithmic  
Gaze and Logic on Delivery Workers in Chinese On-demand  
Economy  
*Discussant:* Shuaishuai Wang

15:10 – 15:30

COFFEE

15:30 – 17:15

**SESSION THREE**

**Jing Wang** - From Platform to Re-platformization: Digital Finance and Corporative Convergence within and beyond *Alibaba*

*Discussant:* Shuwen Qu

**Lin Zhang** - Platform Capitalism as Global Assemblages: The Case of *Alibaba*

*Discussant:* Lik Sam Chan

**Gladys Pak Lei Chong** - *China is Leading Again?*

Securitization of Everyday Life through Alipay's Social Credit System—Sesame Credit

*Discussant:* Wilfred Yang Wang

19:00

DINNER

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13 APRIL 2018 (FRIDAY)  
FSC501, HO SIN HANG CAMPUS

9:30 – 10:00

RECEPTION

10:00 – 11:10

**SESSION FOUR**

**Shuaishuai Wang** - A Charm to Sell? Platformed Labor and Affective Value on Chinese Gay Dating Apps

*Discussant:* Jia Tan

**Lik Sam Chan** - Revealing Relational Potentials: The Logic of Dating Apps in Neoliberal China

*Discussant:* Kecheng Fang

11:10 – 11:30

COFFEE

**11:30 – 12:40**

**SESSION FIVE**

**Yini Wang** - Like a “Frog in a Well”? An Ethnographic Study of Rural Chinese Women’s Social Media Practices through the *WeChat* Platform

*Discussant:* Jing Wang

**Jia Tan** - Gendering the Platforms: New Women’s Video Culture via Social Media

*Discussant:* Yiu Fai Chow

**12:40 – 14:00**

**LUNCH**

**14:00 – 15:10**

**SESSION SIX**

**Wilfred Wang Yang** - Netflix’s Dilemma: The Political Economy of China’s Video Streaming Services and its Implications for Platform Economy Debates

*Discussant:* Michael Keane

**Guohua Zeng** - Buying as Social Resistance and Self Caretaking: Affective Shopping, Platformization, and Consumptive Politics in China

*Discussant:* Julie Yujie Chen

**15:10 – 15:30**

**COFFEE**

**15:30 – 16:40**

**SESSION SEVEN**

**Yu Xiang and Lei Hao** - Virtual Gifting on China’s Living Streaming Platforms: Hijacking the Online Gift Economy

*Discussant:* Lin Zhang

**Shuwen Qu** - “Independence” at Whose Wills? China’s Indie Musicians and Digital Music Platforms

*Discussant:* Gladys Pak Lei Chong

**16:40 – 17:20**

**Jack Qiu** - Wrap up

**17:20 – 17:30**

**GROUP PHOTO**

**19:00**

**DINNER**

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# ABSTRACTS

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## SESSION ONE

### The Infrastructuralization of Chinese Digital Platforms: The Case Study of *WeChat*

**Jean-Christophe Plantin**

London School of Economics and Political Science, the United Kingdom

**Gabriele de Seta**

Academia Sinica, Taiwan

If current research in media and communication studies describe key Western internet companies (e.g. Google or Facebook) as digital platforms, these actors increasingly rely on infrastructural properties to expand and maintain their market power. In this article, we describe this evolution in the context of the Chinese internet, and present *WeChat* as a similar case study of a digital media service owing its success first to its platformization, then to the infrastructuralization of its platform model. However, we analyze in a second time how the growing infrastructural role of *WeChat* is shaped by (and shapes) the peculiar regulatory environment of the People's Republic of China, by characterising the hypercentralized platform ecosystem of *WeChat* and its fast infrastructuralization through the example of *WeChat*

Pay. This analysis allows us to conclude with the provocative argument that, while the regulation of Western platform companies as utilities remain at the stage of debate, such enforcement of platform nationalization has already been effectively pioneered in China, where authorities control and oversee the infrastructural ambitions of platforms.

### Information Platforms for Whom?: Reproducing Inequality on China's Public Social Media

**Kecheng Fang**

University of Pennsylvania, the United States of America

Social media platforms are expected to create a more egalitarian and democratic communication environment. However, this study on *Weibo* and *WeChat* public account reveals that these two dominant public social media platforms in China have significant limitations in empowering the voiceless, and may increase the power disparity and even create new inequalities online. Following van Dijck's (2013) six-component framework in studying social media platforms, I

analyze their technology, usage/user, content, ownership, governance, and business models, with a focus on how they shape the information power on the platforms. Three key characteristics are discussed: the privileges given to certain users in promoting their visibility, the hierarchical message structure that favors certain users, and the censorship and prioritization of certain content based on business and political ties. I conclude this article with discussions on implications for our understanding of “platform capitalism” in China and the platform society with Chinese characteristics.

## China’s Emerging Platform Capitalists in the Asia Pacific

**Michael Keane**

Curtin University, Western Australia

**Brian Yecies**

University of Wollongong, Australia

**Haiqing Yu**

University of New South Wales, Australia

**Elaine Zhao**

University of New South Wales, Australia

**Susan Leong**

Curtin University, Australia

**Huan Wu**

Curtin University, Australia

This presentation examines Chinese digital platforms’ outward-bound

strategy, with a focus on their territorial reach into the Asia-Pacific. The presentation will illustrate how Chinese digital platforms are expanding, drawing particularly on digital media industry acquisitions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore. The authors argue for a reconceptualization of the concept of “platform”, that is, the platform constitutes two levels of structural organization: virtual and infrastructural.

The *virtual layer* is generally associated with the frenzy of online traffic, with online contention, user-generated content, video sharing, QR codes and instant messaging, while the *infrastructural layer* is required to distribute products and services, to facilitate data storage (the cloud), and to facilitate the supply chain (e.g. the Internet of Things). The paper thus interrogates Srnicek’s notion of “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2017). The rationale for “platform capitalism”, or in a political economy sense, “digital capitalism” (Hong 2017) is both economic and cultural, although we are cognizant of applying the latter term capitalism directly to China.

The paper asks: how, and with what effect, Chinese digital platforms are

operating in the Asia Pacific, compared to more global “liberal” platforms. Noting the activities of the BAT (*Baidu*, *Alibaba* and *Tencent*, and their subsidiaries such as *You Tudou*, *WeChat* etc.), we look at how virtual and infrastructural layers combine, showing which Chinese platforms and services are taking root in these regional territories, and conversely, which ones are struggling.

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## SESSION TWO

### Digital Utility: *Didi*, Ride-hailing Labor, and the Transformation of Urban Transport in China

**Julie Yujie Chen**

University of Leicester, the United Kingdom

**Jack Linchuan Qiu**

The Chinese University of Hong Kong,  
Hong Kong

This article develops the idea of digital utility through a study on *Didi Chuxing* and the platformization of transport service in urban China. Examining *Didi*'s business model, its relations with different levels of

government, and the transformations in the driver's work process, the article demonstrates how the platformization of transport is emblematic of a private internet company becoming a digital utility. This is a process that digitally mediates service-delivery while reworking infrastructures and redefining access to public and private services. We argue, platform companies' capacity to straddle the public and the private, their aspiration to be “ecosystem-builder”, and their heavy reliance on constant intensive labor from users (particularly drivers in the case of *Didi*) to produce data are the reasons why they can become digital utilities and also why they may dig their own graves. For good or for bad, morphing into utilities is a common undertaking by *Didi* and similar global tech companies, so the idea of digital utility offers a conceptual anchor for further discussions on issues of digital justice and sustainability in the platform society.

### Your Ordering, Their Laboring: The Algorithmic Gaze and Logic on Delivery Workers in Chinese On-demand Economy

**Ping Sun**

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China

Algorithms play an increasingly critical role in platform economy. Through a three-cornered approach which includes ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and participant observations, this article explores how the logic of governance is constructed and deployed through algorithms by the online food ordering platform and how this algorithmic management legitimizes inequality and power relations among platform players, customers, and digital laborers in China. It is found that delivery workers who have been described as “entrepreneurial individuals” are actually subject to stringent algorithmic control and management, while background algorithms which is claimed to be impartial and value free results in a mechanism of platform capitalism which prioritize the intentions of companies as well as their customers. Digital performances of algorithmic laborers become meaningful when fundamentally situated within algorithmic management of platformization, marginalization, categorization, and obfuscation.

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### SESSION THREE

## From Platform to Re-platformization: Digital Finance and Corporative Convergence within and beyond *Alibaba*

**Jing Wang**

Rutgers University,  
the United States of America

**Mai Anh Doan**

Waikato Management School,  
University of Waikato, New Zealand

Data-driven technologies and platform economies have been widely employed by Chinese companies in a variety of business sectors. In the past decade, these digital applications have profoundly restructured the economic development and power relations in Chinese society. This paper examines how the promotions of the data-centric communication technologies in China's financial sector engender and enlarge *Alibaba's* digital financial platforms – Ant Financial – the largest digital financial company in China. Drawing on convergence theories in political economy, this paper considers Ant Financial as a product of data-centric corporative convergence in which process digital technologies

have extracted users data from *Alibaba's* e-commerce and digital payment platforms and utilized these data for *Alibaba's* growth in financial businesses. The consolidation of multiple platforms, or what we call “re-platformization” has transformed Chinese financial industries, challenged policy and regulatory regimes, and reshaped the cultures of finance in China. Furthermore, the re-platformizing paradigm embodies the digital-technology-driven logic committed by the state in resource allocation and policy-making. The government’s supportive tendency is a vital condition for the rise of Chinese digital financial platforms such as *Baidu Finance*, *Ant Financial*, *Tencent Finance*, and *Jingdong Finance*.

## Platform Capitalism as Global Assemblages: The Case of *Alibaba*

**Lin Zhang**

University of New Hampshire,  
the United States of America

This article takes an assemblage approach to platform capitalism. By tracing the formation of the Chinese e-commerce giant *Alibaba* as a monopoly and the resistance to

its domination since the late 1990s, it makes interventions into both the field of platform studies and Chinese media and communication studies. It draws from the former’s analytical attention to the technical/non-human element of platforms and the latter’s emphasis on the cultural and social specificities of media and technologies without essentializing either culture or technology. It argues that platform capitalism is constituted by heterogeneous assemblages of the human and non-human, historical and emerging, global and local. In doing so, it tells the story about not only how China’s constructing platform capitalism, but also how the Chinese nation, as an assemblage itself, is being remade and problematized through platformization as a process that is simultaneously global and locally specific.

## *China is leading again?* Securitization of Everyday Life through *Alipay's* Social Credit System—*Sesame Credit*

**Gladys Pak Lei Chong**

Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong

This paper examines how the practices of government evolve under the “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2016)

through a case study of *Alipay's* social credit system Sesame Credit. Concerns about dataveillance (van Dijck 2014) have grown exponentially as societies across the world emphasizes how technology restructures political economy and transforms our everyday life. Data-veillance surveys, controls and regulates individuals' day-to-day activities, not only knowing what individuals do and who they are (cf. Andrejevic 2007) but more significantly, what they will be and will do. China's phenomenal technology growth is often superseded by a set of celebratory discourses on convenience, creativity/innovation, cost-effective, efficiency, and above all, security. With its unique and massive database of consumer, *Alipay's* Sesame credit evaluates user based on five factors: credit history, behaviour and preference, fulfilment capacity, identity characteristics, and social relationship. Operated like a loyalty-rewards programme, it is fully voluntary. The higher the score, the more trustworthy this user is, the more benefits s/he can enjoy. Drawing on a combination of ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews with more than 30 young Chinese in Beijing, this paper examines how this payment platform shapes youth's perception of security, risk and dataveillance.

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## SESSION FOUR

### A Charm to Sell? Platformed Labor and Affective Value on Chinese Gay Dating Apps

**Shuaishuai Wang**

University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Through a case study of Blued, China's largest gay dating app, this article investigates the user transformation from daters to a labor subject of live streamers on Blued. Drawing upon the author's two-year long observation on Blued live streaming and interview data with the founder of Blued and 10 gay live streamers, it is argued that Blued live streaming is designed to generate affects such as charm, fun, and curiosity to captivate users, inspiring them to become live streamers so as to produce more affects as such to attract virtual gifts from viewers. In this way, Blued becomes a productive agency that produces *platformed labor* rather than simply an intermediary that facilitates labor practices on digital platforms. Departing from the sexual gratification, affects produced by gay live streamers become a new site for monetization on Blued. Amusement, sexual fanta-

sies, and digital companionship are three overlapping affective modes in and through which the *platformed labor* of gay live streamers plays out as well as the affective value is realized. By introducing the affective value of gay live streaming, the article contributes to the ongoing discussion of platform capitalism in its affective aspect.

## Revealing Relational Potentials: The Logic of Dating Apps in Neoliberal China

**Lik Sam Chan**

University of Southern California,  
the United States of America

Mobile dating apps such as Momo and Tanta are increasingly popular in China. This paper presents a theoretical-driven, empirical-based analysis of dating apps. Following a phenomenological tradition, I argue that the essence of dating apps is nothing technological, but is about users' seeing each other as a relational potential, one that is waiting to be developed. The potential is situated in the virtual space created by dating apps. I explore the production of such space, based on Henri Lefebvre's triadic theory of social space. I argue that the app's actual usage, intended

uses, and users' interpretations all defy a singular relational goal. My empirical research indicates that app users despise other dating technologies such as marriage websites or matching by parents for their *mudixing*, which I translate as "purposefulness". Users also despise other app users who have *mudixing*. The ambiguous space produced by dating apps and resistance against *mudixing* is reflective of the motifs of neoliberalism in China.

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## SESSION FIVE

### Like a "Frog in a Well"? An Ethnographic Study of Rural Chinese Women's Social Media Practices through the WeChat Platform

**Yini Wang**

University of Newcastle, Australia

**Judith Sandner**

University of Newcastle, Australia

Current research focuses more on rural-to-urban migrant workers' ICTs use and social media use rather than those of rural women who remain in their place of origin. How social media

platforms such as *WeChat* play a role in rural women's lives in situ and what transformations may be made because of their online interactions, lacks a qualitative nuanced account. This paper begins by contextualizing a sample of rural women's platformized (Mackenzie 2018) interests within the broad scope of Chinese government *Internet Plus* developments. Using an ethnographic fieldwork methodology and a social constructionist theoretical framework, this study of rural Chinese women's daily experiences of using *WeChat* provides evidence of emotive communicating, knowledge-building and business acumen. It specifically explores the *WeChat* use of 25 rural women in *Hanpu* Town in the south-central China from February to July 2015. The discussion presented here explains how the women studied used (and likely continue to use) this particular platform, to make sense of their online activities in relation to their offline experiences, what transformations *WeChat* has brought about for them, and how these may align with broader Chinese cultural and social contexts.

### Gendering the Platforms: New Women's Video Culture via Social Media

**Jia Tan**

The Chinese University of Hong Kong,  
Hong Kong

Inspired by feminist scholarship on science and technology studies, this essay examines the gendering of platforms by specifically looking at two lesbian and bisexual women's social networking apps (*Lesdo* and *Rela*) and the new video culture generated via the apps. First, contextually, the apps' popularity was built upon the absence of representation of contemporary Chinese lesbians, and the fast-growing LGBT community organizing in China. Second, the Internet movies made by the two apps demonstrate what I called "presentism", a form of new sociality of women emphasizing on the connectivity via mobile technology, but also conditioned by the urban and consumerist environment. Third, the case of *Lesdo* and *Rela* exemplifies how the technology itself is not an object, but defined by social relations and at the same time shaping social relations. The social networking app functions are far more than simply promotion platforms of these lesbian-themed videos, they are sometimes key plot device, generating new understandings of sociality among women.

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## SESSION SIX

### Netflix's Dilemma: The Political Economy of China's Video Streaming Services and its implications for Platform Economy Debates

**Wilfred Yang Wang**

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

**Ramon Lobato**

RMIT University, Australia

This article uses a comparison between *iQiyi* and Netflix – two ostensibly similar video platforms – to develop what we hope is a more general account of the relationship between platforms and their cultural, historical and political contexts. By examining the structural differences between *iQiyi* and Netflix the account has been centred around two interlocking propositions that we hope productively extend and challenge the conventional discourse of a global platform society: (1) that platform interfaces reflect underlying structures, and (2) that platforms are partners in as well as objects of regulation. The Chinese experience of platformization should be seen more positively as an opportunity for developing a transnational model of platform theory

Through discussing of the economic and regulatory aspects of China's online video sector, we intend to explore historical legacies and geographical specificities conditioning the operations, structures, governance of digital platforms and their relationships with dominant social and political institutions. Our approach here has not been only to offer a conventional post-colonial critique or to “de-westernize” platform studies. Rather, the aim of the article has been to draw out some of the macro-level legacies and logics that shape the micro-level structure and operations of platforms in general.

### Buying as Social Resistance and Self Caretaking: Affective Shopping, Platformization, and Consumptive Politics in China

**Guohua Zeng**

Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China

**Xinchuan Liu**

Peking University, China

This article aims to examine the rapidly emerging “affective shopping” phenomenon on the online shopping platforms in mainland China. Unlike previous shopping emphases either on low

price or luxurious brands, the “affective shopping” practice take shopping as an affective, self and family caretaking and intimate engagement with the “quality” everyday consumptive goods. It is an outcome of, as well as a drive for, the increasing platformization of online retailing in China. With this examination we hope to argue that “affective shopping” is a phenomenon, and a discursive practice, that can be seen as, at once, a proliferation of capitalist consumerism and a social and cultural resistance: it is shaped and promoted by the neo-liberal consumeristic capitalism; in the meantime, it can also be seen as a consumer-driven consumptive movement of resistance to the ubiquitous low-end, monotonous, and sometimes harmful products (e.g. “noxious” baby formula scandal in 2008) manufactured under the label of “world factory” or “Made in China”, and to the apparatuses that produce and reproduce those products and strategies.

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## **SESSION SEVEN**

### Virtual Gifting on China’s Living Streaming Platforms: Hijacking the Online Gift Economy

**Xiaoxing Zhang**

Simon Fraser University, Canada

**Yu Xiang**

University of Westminster, the United Kingdom

**Lei Hao**

University of London, the United Kingdom

Since the late 2000s, the rapid development of China’s live streaming platforms has presented a business model of content monetization that is fairly new to Western experiences and quite under-discussed in the field of communication studies. In regard to the long-lasting debates over the Internet and gift economy, this paper will focus on the “virtual gifting” feature of the live streaming platforms as an exploratory case study for future researches on the platformization of Chinese society. By juxtaposing the empowering potentials of virtual gifting against its current extensive usage for content monetization, the authors aim to further explore the unfolding dynamics between gift economy and commodity economy in the digital era. Based upon the empirical data collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews, this paper will firstly unveil two determining shifts in China’s live streaming industry that prioritize monetization and control over gift exchange and decentralization. Against the backdrop

of such structural changes, the authors will then explicate on the one hand how individually changes of identity, mindset and virtual intimacy manifest the impersonal functioning of virtual gifting, while on the other hand how collectively the degradation of streamers as disposable workforce demystifies the illusion of grassroots empowerment. In the end, the paper will conclude the discussion by re-emphasizing the significance, necessity and urgency of platform cooperativism.

## “Independence” at Whose Wills? - China’s Indie Musicians and Digital Music Platforms

**Shuwen Qu**

Jinan University, China

This paper looks into the issue of “indie music” production in China, and is interested to know how it is affected by the digital “platformization” of music industry. The author argues that the meaning of “independent music” in Chinese context, often short-named as *duli yinyue* or indie music, refers not so much as to alternative music genre or infrastructure like it does in the western context, but to the precar-

ious labor of “independent” musicians and the restructuring process of music industry. Since 2005 with the advancement of digital tools and social media, Internet democratizes the making of China’s indie music by leveling the ground for the less educated and the digital-have-less to participate and make music. However, this process is later obfuscated with the “materiality” of technology and online social media. In this process, the production of indie music has never been so celebrated and confused between two tensioned forces. One is the liberated expression from young amateur individuals, while the other is the platforms’ carving and capitalization of these voices and labors. Therefore, this paper looks into the principal, logic, mechanism and process involved in this relationship, and explores how musicians’ agencies are weakened in the upgraded “platformization” of music industry in China.

