



Peripherals

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Navigating the precarious career of Chinese content creators: In the case of “Thurman 猫一杯”

Nuo Chen¹

Abstract

Content-creating platforms have been a part of netizens' lives for quite some time, starting with the introduction of YouTube and evolving into the rise of short video platforms. Being a content creator has become a viable profession, offering opportunities for those skilled at capturing audience attention to achieve both visibility and financial success. However, navigating the digital environment is far from straightforward. Cancel culture persists, adding a complex layer of precarity to the careers of content creators. Beyond the unstable working conditions shaped by platform practices like content moderation and recommendation algorithms, government policies significantly influence content-creating platforms in China (Li and Ng, 2024), such as Red and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). By examining the rise and fall of “Thurman 猫一杯”, a former cross-platform content creator on Chinese social media, this essay explores the interplay between creativity, platform dependency, and economic instability, while situating creators as both entrepreneurs and platform laborers in an increasingly precarious digital ecosystem.

1. Student (MA), University of Amsterdam. Email: zoey.nuochen@gmail.com

1 Introduction

According to Poell, Nieborg, and Van Dijck (2019), “Platformization is a process akin to industrialization or electrification, referring to a multifaceted transformation of globalized societies”. The rise of different kinds of platforms brought every social actant’s distance closer, which includes but is not restricted to economic ties and self-identification. However, different from traditional contract workers who work under certain working contracts that protect the safety of both employees and employers, the careers of content creators on social media platforms are rather more similar to the careers of entrepreneurs (Lin and De Kloet 2019). Platform visibility in China is mediated by the state’s socioeconomic and political agenda, with the Chinese government’s “Internet+” and “Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation” initiatives, promoting digital entrepreneurship and social stability (Lin and De Kloet 2019). Despite the freedom and supportive attitude from the government that content creators on social media gain, the contents they create are constrained by platforms, government, and society, hence the content creator career is becoming increasingly precarious, and unpredictable. While this state-platform relationship enables rural and marginalized creators to enter the digital economy, it simultaneously subjects them to strict censorship and algorithmic gatekeeping to maintain ideological conformity (Lin and De Kloet 2019). In the meantime, China operates a state-controlled, corporately run ecosystem of platforms revolving around their big three companies Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (BAT).

The national authorities of entertainment industries in China also play an important role in moderating the diverse content on social media platforms to fit into the general socialist ideology of the Chinese government. According to a guideline released by the China Association of Performing Art (CAPA), it is stated in Article 2, “Love the motherland, support the Party’s principles and policies, consciously abide by the laws and regulations of the country, abide by the relevant regulations of the cultural and performing industries, and consciously accept the supervision of the relevant government departments and social supervision” (文旅之声 2021). It shows the determination to restrict the direction of entertainment content that should follow the general ideology of the mainstream political environment, restricting the ideology that is other than or against the “mainstream” ideology, and prompting the idea of patriotism. According to Li and Ng (2024), the specific regulatory environment in China on social media platforms indicates the crucial role that platforms are playing, it serves as space both where canceling occurs and, via governance practices, as important actors that can significantly shape the directions and outcomes of particular cancel events.

This essay investigates the precarity of platform labor in the influencer economy, examining how digital platforms shape the careers of content creators. In this essay, I will specifically discuss the cross-platform content creator culture in China, which is also known as “网红(wang hong)” culture or cyber-celebrity culture, using the case of the Chinese influencer “Thurman 猫一杯”, it explores the tensions between creativity, platform dependency, and economic instability. By studying Thurman’s rise and fall, the essay contextualizes the ambiguous role of creators as both entrepreneurs and (free) platform labor within a precarious digital ecosystem. My research question is: **How does the influencer economy in China, shaped by digital platforms and government regulation, create precarity for content creators?**

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This essay looks into the precarious career of Chinese content creators within the theoretical context of platform labor and digital capitalism. Building on Van Doorn (2022) concept of platform labor, which emphasizes the entangled nature of entrepreneurship and precarious work within digital platforms. In this case, content creators such as “Thurman 猫一杯”

simultaneously act as entrepreneurs and laborers. Content creators use platforms to attract followers, translating digital traffic and public attention into economic capital through advertising and brand collaborations. Yet, their (Thurman's) digital property is controlled by platforms, leaving them vulnerable to policy violations and account suspensions. This dual identity complicates their agency, positioning them as both beneficiaries and subjects of digital capitalism's structural inequities.

Despite different levels of control and moderation of social media platforms, Gillespie's insights into platforms as "custodians of the internet" (Gillespie 2018) highlight their role as gatekeepers that shape and control user-generated content through content moderation, algorithmic visibility, and policy enforcement. Social media platforms have enabled the emergence of large volumes of previously unpredicted user-generated content, among which every form of illegal and inappropriate content could exist. How platforms intervene, manage, and present the content they host has become "essential, constitutional, definitional" (Gillespie 2018). While the model of content moderation remains problematic due to the biased composition of the moderation labor force, in Gillespie's book, he points out a lot of issues that are embedded in the moderation labor, which are described as "fundamentally conservative and inflexible" (Gillespie 2018). In China, the dynamics of platform labor are further compounded by the regulatory framework of state capitalism. As Lin and De Kloet (2019) argue, platform visibility in China is mediated by the state's socioeconomic and political agendas, where platforms like Douyin and Red are tightly interwoven with government initiatives such as "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation." While these initiatives promote digital entrepreneurship and inclusion, they also subject creators to heightened censorship and ideological conformity, which in the end might leave the content creator in a situation where they might be easily canceled, and lose everything that they have been working for.

The essay also incorporates Van Dijck (2021) framework and the metaphor of a tree as the platform ecosystem on platformization to analyze the Chinese ecosystem's corporately run, state-regulated platforms. Unlike Western platform models dominated by corporate surveillance and libertarian capitalism, China's digital environment exemplifies state surveillance and techno-nationalism around the BBAT (Baidu, Byte-Dance, Alibaba, and Tencent). Increasingly, the ideological clash between state powers manifests itself as a techno-corporate clash. Such clashes reveal that rather than operating as distinct platform ecosystems, they are intertwined at various levels. The entanglement between American, Chinese, and European interests in the global governance of digital innovation is a driver of mounting tensions between continental superpowers and their allies 2021.

Thurman 猫一杯's downfall as a content creator is contextualized within these theoretical frameworks. Her rise exemplifies the entrepreneurial potential facilitated by platformization, while her fall underscores the precariousness amplified by regulatory controls and cultural governance. Drawing on Li and Ng (2024) exploration of cancel culture in China, the essay examines how platforms function as spaces where creators are not only celebrated but also disciplined and censored, reflecting the intertwined power of corporate and state apparatuses.

Finally, the essay situates its analysis within the broader discourse on the culture industry, referencing the Frankfurt School's critique of mass media as a site of commodification and ideological control (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944). This perspective allows for a deeper interrogation of how Chinese content creators, operating under the dual pressures of market forces and state regulation, navigate the contradictions of creative autonomy and labor precarity in the platform economy. By putting together these theoretical insights, the essay provides a nuanced framework for understanding the interplay of creativity, dependency, and regulation in the careers of Chinese content creators.

1.2 Methodology

This essay adopted the usage of content analysis and discourse analysis. By analyzing both firsthand resources such as the original content from “Thurman猫一杯”, videos and comments that discuss the unfair situation put on Thurman 猫一杯, news articles that report on this issue, and un-banned content on international platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. By analyzing closely the discourse revolve the cancellation of Thurman 猫一杯, this essay developed a nuanced understanding of how this is happening, what is general public’s attitude on her being canceled, and how Thurman herself as a former full-time content creator finds herself another way out under the circumstance of being canceled. Moreover, an OSINV (Open source investigation) method of investigating people is also adopted in this essay, and the process is ethical.

2 The case of “Thurman 猫一杯”

“Thurman猫一杯” was considered a macro-influencer, with 19 million followers on DouYin, 7 million followers on Red, 4 million followers on Bilibili, 6 Million followers on Kuaishou, and 1.2 million followers on Weibo (环球网 2024). Her content mainly focused on telling funny stories that happened to her and stories about her family members using heavy beauty filters and exaggerated performances. According to herself, she graduated from Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne (ECSCP), a fashion institute in Paris, and worked as a designer in Yves Saint Laurant, and this information is considered fake according to Chinese netizen’s investigation. Due to her experience in Paris, and herself as a Cantonese person, her videos often incorporate different languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, and French. The clashing of different cultures made her distinguishable among the content creators, audiences might find interest in her due to both their relatability and curiosity in another culture. With her experience in fashion, she also established her clothing brand, OMETOO. I was also one of her followers on RED, personally, I felt deeply attracted to her content as there are a lot of common languages among people who have international backgrounds in China, especially in her case, she has an international background in Paris, which make it even more relatable.

Her career as a content creator is successful, from a monetization perspective, she moved beyond merely being a content creator, collaborating with different brands, attending platform events, and establishing her clothing brand. Her fan base shared an interesting phenomenon, despite being supportive of her content, they tend to mention Thurman a lot under other content creators’ content, especially when there is a guinea pig doing something funny, her followers would mention Thurman in the comment section, and jokingly tell others that they have found Thurman in the wild (figure 1). This kind of joke continues, and it will also extend to other pet animals, not limited to guinea pigs, and as a response, Thurman would make videos out of it to “complain” about this phenomenon. This not only helped this phenomenon to grow, which further increased her exposure to non-followers noticing her but also shortened the distance between herself as an influencer and the audience.



Figure 1: Thurman and her guinea pig

Additionally, she also interacts with similar content creators whose focus is also international Chinese audiences, such as “徐五八”, a Dutch-Chinese influencer on Red and Wechat shorts (figure 2), as Thurman focuses on telling stories about Chinese lifestyle and French lifestyle, 徐五八 focuses on “abstract” acting, a new niche of social media culture that is rising on Chinese social media, according to Beijing News, “Abstraction is an internet term for entertaining the crowd by flirting with one’s own words” (新京报 2024). It usually happens in the form of blogging, and the point is to release some irrelevant and crazy mental status, it is a representation of the contemporary mental status of the young people in China. Due to the research on abstraction being very limited, little source is found on this topic, so this essay will not extend to this topic. Collaboration with similar content creators, also led to further discussion on her romantic relationship, which also further increased her popularity.



Figure 2: Thurman and 徐五八 in Paris

However, Thurman's influencer career saw a sudden shift when she posted a video of her finding a Chinese primary school student, QingLang's winter homework in a bathroom in Paris during the Chinese New Year, the homework is untouched, left blank, Thurman even bought a pencil and tried to finish the homework for him.

The video soon went viral, based on the fact that she has a "helpful" fan base, her followers blew up the comment section of other creators to look for QingLang and tried to help the student get his homework back. Under the comment section of the original video, there is even

someone who claimed to be QingLang's uncle to claim the homework to be his nephew's. With the popularity of this video continuing to grow, even official news channels started to report on this incident and it also hopped on the trendy topic list on multiple social media platforms. Therefore, Thurman posted another video to clarify that the owner of the homework is already found, please do not look for QingLang anymore. However, to stop this trend, the whole situation became uncontrollable, and netizens started to investigate the authenticity of this story as it took up a great amount of digital public space to look for QingLang. Ultimately, authority and netizens both figured out that the whole thing is fictional, it is completely made up by Thurman and her colleagues to attract traffic. Soon after the truth was revealed, Thurman posted an apology video, without exaggerating beauty filter and acting, she apologized sincerely for this story she made and apologized for taking up the public spaces. However the apology, her social media accounts across all platforms were banned from posting, replying, and commenting, and in the end, her accounts across all domestic platforms were completely banned, including her personal clothing brand OMETO. Additionally, other creators who used to collaborate with her mostly removed the collaboration videos with her immediately after Thurman got canceled.



Figure 3: The video where Thurman found the homework of a primary school student in Paris

3 Discussion

3.1 Creativity, Platform Moderation, and Regulation

The career trajectory of “Thurman 猫一杯” illustrates the precarious balance that Chinese content creators must navigate when attracting traffic and popularity. Thurman’s initial success highlights how creativity and platformization offer opportunities for financial gain and cultural visibility. Her unique storytelling, infused with international elements and humor, attracted millions of followers across various platforms, effectively showcasing her entrepreneurial potential. This entrepreneurialism, however, is inherently tied to platform dependency. Thurman’s monetization strategies—from brand collaborations to launching her own clothing line—are emblematic of how Chinese influencers leverage platforms to convert visibility into revenue. Yet, these platforms are not neutral intermediaries but active gatekeepers, exerting control over content, visibility, and monetization channels. As Gillespie (2018) points out, platforms shape what content is seen and how creators’ work is valued through algorithmic and policy enforcement. In Thurman’s case, the revelation that her viral story was fabricated underscores the fragility of this dependency. Once the narrative unraveled, platforms immediately enacted

punitive measures, demonstrating their authority to dismantle a creator's career with little recourse.

Adding another layer of complexity is the regulatory environment of Chinese platforms. The state's emphasis on ideological conformity means that creators must not only adhere to platform policies but also navigate government censorship and propaganda frameworks. Thurman's story intersects with these dynamics, as her fabricated tale drew significant public and governmental attention, culminating in a backlash that resulted in her deplatforming. According to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, "In order to thoroughly implement the spirit of the 19th CPC National Congress and the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee, effectively enhance the level of school education, continuously regulate out-of-school training (including online training and offline training), and effectively alleviate the excessive burden of homework on students at the stage of compulsory education and the burden of out-of-school training" (中共中央办公厅国务院办公厅 2021). Thurman's fictional story significantly obligated the government's tendency to cut the study burden for primary school students. The cancellation of her accounts across major platforms reflects how tightly corporate and state interests are interwoven in China's digital economy. In addition to the cancellation of Thurman, governmental officers in the educational department might also be affected as Thurman's incident again mentions the notorious past where school work functions as a burden for young students.

3.2 Cancel Culture and Public Sentiment

Cancel culture plays a pivotal role in shaping the precarity of digital labor in China. While the public's ability to critique and "cancel" creators can be seen as a form of collective accountability, it often devolves into disproportionate punishment. In Thurman's case, public outrage over her fabricated video triggered both mass denunciation and platform intervention. As Li and Ng (2024) argue, platforms function as spaces where creators are simultaneously celebrated and disciplined, as pointed out in ancient philosophy, "水能载舟,亦能覆舟 (water may keep the boat afloat but may also sink it; the people can support a regime or overturn it)" (小雨讲国学,). This duality was evident in Thurman's trajectory: her initial popularity was amplified by her fans' active engagement across platforms, but this same engagement turned against her when her content was exposed as deceptive. Moreover, the public response to Thurman's scandal underscores the performative nature of cancel culture. Netizens not only criticized her actions but also participated in amplifying the controversy, further entrenching her downfall. This phenomenon reflects the heightened stakes of visibility in the influencer economy, where public attention can be both a creator's greatest asset and the most significant liability.

3.3 Cultural and Structural

The "Thurman 猫一杯" case also reveals broader cultural and structural tensions within China's platform ecosystem. Van Dijck (2021) metaphor of the platform ecosystem as a tree—with intertwined roots of state and corporate power—is particularly applicable in the Chinese context. Platforms like Douyin and Red are not merely businesses but extensions of the Chinese socio-political agenda, exemplifying a model of techno-nationalism. This intertwining creates a precarious environment for creators, who must balance the demands of audience engagement, platform policies, and governmental regulations. Thurman's downfall illustrates how these pressures converge. Her fabricated narrative, while designed to maximize engagement, inadvertently violated the implicit norms of authenticity and accountability valued by both platforms and audiences. The subsequent punitive measures—account bans and de-platforming—highlight how platforms operate as arbiters of public discourse, enforcing both their corporate policies

and the ideological priorities of the state.

4 Conclusion

The rise and fall of “Thurman 猫一杯” encapsulate the precarious nature of platform labor in China. Her career illustrates the tensions between creativity, platform dependency, and regulatory control in the influencer economy. By situating Thurman’s experience within frameworks of platform labor and platformization, this essay reveals the structural inequities and cultural dynamics shaping Chinese content creators’ careers. Thurman’s case underscores the need for nuanced perspectives on digital labor in China. As the platform economy evolves, the challenges faced by creators like Thurman raise critical questions about the sustainability and fairness of digital work in a highly regulated and interconnected ecosystem. Her case highlights the pressing need for systemic changes that better protect creators from arbitrary disruptions, including clearer platform policies and more balanced regulatory frameworks.

5 Further Notes

After investigating Thurman’s case, I discovered that even though the state completely banned her Chinese social media platforms, she recently became active on overseas platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. With 384k followers on YouTube and 63k followers on Instagram, Thurman mainly posted her former content on YouTube to attract new followers and life updates on Instagram, with a consistent performing style. Not only Thurman but other Chinese influencers gave up on the Chinese social media platform and chose international social media platforms as their place to create content. There are also more and more “Western” content creators starting to create content on Chinese social media. I see this as a digital diaspora and could be used for further research.

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