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**Master's Thesis of Yichi Zhang**

**The Softcore Pornography  
and National Censorship on  
China's Digital Platform**

중국 디지털 플랫폼의 소프트 코어 포르노와  
국가 검열

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# **The Softcore Pornography and National Censorship on China's Digital Platform**

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# Abstract

With the outbreak of Covid-19, young people in China are also facing a prolonged policy of interpersonal isolation. Against this backdrop, some merchants have begun to offer "virtual lover" role-playing services in their online stores to satisfy the need and desire for interpersonal interaction during times of social disruption. However, during the transaction, such services bring not only the satisfaction of emotional needs but also erotic performances. Taking erotic capital, gender performance, and affective/emotional labor as the theoretical framework, this paper explores how contemporary young people seek the dual satisfaction of intimacy and erotic fantasies on the Internet through in-depth interviews with the digital labor represented by virtual lovers. At the same time, the paper examines how virtual lovers mobilize their agency to negotiate and interact with state censorship by eliminating potentially censored parts of traditional hardcore pornography and utilizing a soft self-branding approach dedicated to nourishing sexual fantasies. In addition to this, in the seemingly more secure and liberal Internet sex industry, how, on the one hand, female sexual performers are drawn into the field for profit by being given the illusion of control over their own bodies, and on the other hand, how they are alienated and ruthlessly deprived of surplus value in their work. By examining these issues, based on young people's purchase of sexual services on the Internet, this paper attempts to present a sexual landscape with Chinese characteristics.

**Keywords:** Digital Anthropology, Sexuality in China, Softcore Pornography, Emotional/Affective Labor, Erotic Capital

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research Background

Emerging communication technologies have radically changed the clear division between private life and the public sphere. In contrast to other content, the digital pornographic product is perhaps the clearest demonstration of this interaction between the division and convergence of reality and fantasy (Hirdman 2007) by bringing desires that were originally in the private realm into the arena of public consumption, thus serving as a "central node" linking political economy and culture in contemporary information technology (Saunders 2019, 242). Even under China's strict Internet censorship, the visibility of sexuality continues to increase, which McNair (1996) refers to as the tendency of "pornographication" in the development of mainstream culture. This not only shows the changing of public sexual ideology from conservative to liberal but also is undoubtedly a process of rational choice of capital (Maddison, 2009).

The development of Web 2.0 technologies has broken the once one-way information transfer process from pornography uploading to viewing, allowing more amateur actors to participate in the practice of the online sex industry, who in turn adjust to the instant feedback to create more personalized and customized content to meet the different sexual preferences of their audiences. However, due to the regulatory policies, erotic services and content are often displayed in a more subtle manner, which is combined with other subjects and dedicated to arousing the sexual fantasies of the viewers. Furthermore, China's internet is not a closed geographical region; rather, due to the influence of global culture, it has fluid and unstable boundaries. As a result, its content also incorporates popular and subcultural elements from other countries.

The e-sports industry saw unprecedented growth in China around 2015, which also bred the emergence of the live-streaming industry. Several established studies have demonstrated how cam-girls in China use their creative strategies to invest and perform their femininity in the workplace (Cunningham, Craig, & Lv, 2019; Lovell, 2000; Zou, 2018). They engage viewers by showing sexually suggestive actions during their working process, such as sexy Korean girl groups dancing and

revealing just the right amount of skin without crossing the boundaries of censorship in order to fight against official regulations within the limits of the platform (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019; Zou, 2018).

In addition, the strategies of Internet pornography to stimulate sexual fantasies are increasingly localizing subcultural elements to bring together groups with similar niche tastes and fetishes (Hakim, 2010). For example, some females in China have pornified Japanese ACG (animation, cartoon, and game) culture by cosplaying in revealing costumes as characters from animations and posting photos on non-state-controlled platforms, such as Twitter, for money. These people are called "welfare princesses" (Fu Li Ji 福利姬), "Ji" being a punning word in this context, on the one hand from the Japanese word "姫" (ひめ) which means princess, and a homonym for prostitute in the Chinese context, on the other. According to search engines, the term first appeared in around 2018 on Bilibili, a video website whose audience is mainly Japanese pop culture fans. Since the audience is relatively small and the site is not strictly regulated for videos, some females uploaded nearly nude videos in the "dance section" to gain popularity. For the male audience, the naked pictures posted on social media are free "welfare" to satisfy their sexual needs, while the owners of the pictures are presented as great, voluntarily offering their bodies as "princesses" on the surface but degraded as reviled and stigmatized prostitutes in the shadows. However, despite the highly sexualized connotations, it is true that their costumes are derived from replicas of anime characters, and some "welfare princesses" can even be seen on Chinese social media as million-follower influencers, while trading nude photos on Twitter for compensation. Others also regularly appear in public as "cosers" and are followed by large numbers of fans through their participation in anime exhibitions. These phenomena demonstrate how difficult it is for Chinese officials to define the scope of soft pornography, and how erotic elements are subtly cloaked in subculture to avoid regulation and blockage, thus proliferating on China's online platforms.

Covid-19 has been accompanied by prolonged political enclosures and interpersonal isolation in the last few years. Although in contemporary days, dating via the Internet has been viewed as a liquefied relationship that can be withdrawn

at any time, replacing the monogamous, unbreakable, once-and-for-all lifelong bond of the past (Bauman 2003, VII). However, the arrival of the pandemic has made online hookups, which were once the exclusive property of a small group of young people, seemingly the only option available, spilling over to a wider audience, and has undoubtedly provided a new real-world context for academic research on Internet intimacy and digital pornography. The subject of my research flourished during such an epidemic when a number of merchants began offering paid role-playing services as virtual lovers (Xu Ni Lian Ren 虚拟恋人) on Chinese e-commerce platforms during a period of forced social disruption.

By placing an order in a virtual store, consumers are added to a friend by a designated staff member who takes on the role of a boy/girlfriend and provides chat services. Specific services include text or voice chatting to help provide emotional support and relieve stress in the buyer's life; creating a realistic dating situation by using intimate nicknames to wake up or put the buyers to bed; or acting as a playmate for those who do not want to fight alone while playing mobile games. According to a news report, stores offering virtual lovers' services commonly emerged in the second half of 2020, confirming the desire of the adolescent for human contact during the quarantine.<sup>①</sup>

However, taking the role of boyfriend or girlfriend implies the use of intimate names and ambiguous words, which makes some practitioners feel uncomfortable and therefore prefer to refer to themselves as "pei liao" (companion to chat), meaning someone who accompanies others to a conversation. The term can be traced back to the 1990s when Chinese state-owned enterprises were reformed, and women were disproportionately laid off after the dismantling of the unit system. Local grassroots organizations provided simple psychological training to these women so that they could accompany others to chat and help them relieve stress in such a turbulent time, thus enabling laid-off women to re-enter the workforce. However, due to the low public acceptance of psychotherapy and the stigmatization of women's companionship at the time, this service was often perceived as being

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<sup>①</sup> “半月谈 | 找个虚拟恋人，谈场半小时的恋爱?” December 8, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1685487350602296977&wfr=spider&for=pc> (accessed on Month date, 2023)



related to prostitution and was even used as a cover-up tactic by some commercial sex businesses (Yang, 2013).

This situation is also present in the current virtual lovers' services. Several scholars have conducted research on the emotional consumption and virtual intimacy forming associated with virtual lovers (Shi, 2019; Tan & Xu, 2020; Xu, 2021; Zhao & Gan, 2022). Both existing academic papers and news reports acknowledge the possibility that during the service, some virtual lovers entice clients to place orders in exchange for monetary rewards by adopting implicit or marginal sex transactions such as text or voice sex. However, due to the constraints of the Chinese academic field, most of them only mention the existence of erotic transactions instead of continuing to address this phenomenon. Some scholars have also offered a few words of critique on erotic interactions, stigmatizing the behavior by invoking the standardized ideology of the party-state. Consider it a legal and moral violation that corrupts adolescents without questioning how these moral injunctions about sex are constructed and repeatedly practiced in everyday life. No prior research has discussed and studied in greater depth how online pornography is possible and purchased despite the explicit prohibition, or how these pornographic transactions can remove the hardcore component and manifest themselves in a soft form. This study aims to fill the gaps and clarify the mechanisms behind online erotic trade, which is often described in a critical manner rather than further examined in existing research.

## **1.2. Research Questions and Research Goals**

This study intends to explore how digital laborers, represented by virtual lovers, use their agency to negotiate and interact with state censorship in order to transform hardcore pornography into a subtle and softcore form thereby attracting customers with the same needs for transactions.

I am equally intrigued by the performance strategies they used in the working process. In addition, is this service limited to heterosexual scripts? Given that the work of my research subjects includes the role-play of “lovers” as opposed to purely commercial sex, does the performance aspect of the work or the absorption of negative emotions from others affect their real lives and personal relationships in

backstage? Due to the natural gender asymmetries in the sexual labor market and the double standards on sexual morality between men and women, I am particularly interested in the interactions between female service providers and male purchasers. Are these women, seemingly based on voluntary and non-traditional contractual systems, able to use their bodily and erotic capital to enter and leave the labor market with complete freedom? While previous scholars have tended to focus only on a particular type of sex worker (Ding, 2016; Huang & Pan, 2003; Pan, 2000; Zheng, 2006), I introduce the Internet as a variable to explore how physical sexual needs are complemented by sexual fantasies generated by mimetic intimacies through the role-playing of lovers, thus satisfying the needs of the service purchaser. And how, in some cases, soft online erotic performances can transform into traditional offline prostitution, further blurring the line between virtuality and reality. By discussing and answering these questions, this study intends to show how the desire for intimacy and the satisfaction of sexual fantasies among young people in the Chinese context is shaped by the contrast between macro and micro forces, thus creating a sexual landscape with Chinese characteristics.

### **1.3. Mapping the Field**

This study has been approved by the IRB review of Seoul National University (SNU 23-04-053). All interviewees were informed about the identity of the researcher and the intention of this study and signed a consent form prior to being interviewed. This study was conducted through in-depth interviews. All interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, except for one focus group interview that included three interviewees. The total number of interviewees was 15, between the ages of 19 and 25, and the interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour and a half. Although there were younger part-time performers on the platform of my research, I consciously screened out this group of people due to the concern about child pornography. Since the field site of this study is located in a virtual store on WeChat, a real-time communication application in China, and all services of the "virtual lovers" are provided through text, voice, or video chat via the WeChat

platform, I used the voice call function of WeChat to interview the informants and record the conversations after obtaining their consent, and then transcribed and coded the data after the interview.

Due to concerns about erotic transactions, the state blocks the keyword of "virtual lover" on Chinese e-commerce platforms such as Taobao, which made it difficult to locate the field sites at the beginning of this study. It was not until a male friend of mine told me that he received occasional advertisements for such services on a dating app that could be considered as Chinese version of Tinder. These platforms use alternative terms such as "tree hole", "worry relief", "chatting to put people to sleep", and "companionship".<sup>②</sup> These words demonstrate the original purpose of the virtual dating service: to provide emotional companionship and relief from negative emotions by interacting with a "lover" and talking about feelings that cannot be shared in real life. At the same time, these keywords are (at least on the surface) completely distant from pornography and thus will not be blocked.

This experience of mapping the platform was also confirmed in my subsequent interviews with my informants, with many male respondents suggesting that they had learned about the platform through advertisements placed by the platform while using dating apps or by seeing soft recruiting ads with seductive selfies posted by female workers of this platform. In contrast, however, female informants tended to report that their access to the platform was often based on a more secretive introduction from a "strong tie". Existing asymmetries and biases are deeply embedded in the algorithms of the data and further shape people's decisions and perceptions in repeated searches (Vlasceanu & Amodio, 2022), whether it is a manual platform solicitation strategy or an artificial intelligence analysis. When the gender of the social app is set to "male", users are disproportionately shown more photos of women with revealing clothes. Even if the owners of these images do not upload the images with the intention of seducing others, their photos are unknowingly promoted to male users. While both genders

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<sup>②</sup> The Chinese translation is : 树洞, 解忧, 哄睡, 陪伴

have equal access to the social platform as content creators, the platform's behavior essentially promotes female users as a commodity to solicit male customers.

Like my interviewees, knowing these keywords provided me with a ticket to the exotic world, except that the process of passing through this “rite of passage” from novice to “insider” was surprisingly easy. While pornography and prostitution have been explicitly prohibited in official discourse since the founding of New China, for local governments, sexual services have been used as a tacit means of hospitality to promote economic development (Zheng, 2006), and also in the Internet era, restrictions on pornography are limited to specific keywords and explicit nudity, yet when such content is slightly packaged, it can be re-presented in a soft way to be enjoyed at the table. WeChat is one of the largest social platforms in the world, with over 2 billion people using it worldwide by March 4, 2023.<sup>③</sup> In addition to its real-time communication capabilities, it also combines money transactions, Instagram-like photo sharing and commenting, and replaces email for workplace communication. Although I assumed that due to the sensitivity of the topic, this research would need to be based on mobile apps that are more difficult to access, however, even on the most heavily used and probably most strictly censored platform in China, when I typed the keyword as “Tree Hollow”, it was easy to find e-shops offering such services, which is also the way I was able to locate my research platform “Tree Hollow Y”.

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<sup>③</sup> “微信在全球的地位和影响力有多大” March, 2023, <http://www.jxjx371.com/a/lianhao/20230304/3026.html>

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Hardcore, Softcore, and Sexual Fantasy

Pornography has led to a reconfiguration of venues of sexual acts, deploying intimacy, which had been confined to private settings, to a broader spectrum of media for pleasure, to the point where it has gradually developed into part of the social structure (Giddens, 1992). It also “exposes or indicates intimate sexual acts for public display and private consumption” (Hirdman 2007, 159). Pornography studies in the 1980s and 1990s were grounded by feminist opponents of pornography, with a central idea of pornography as a product of patriarchy and content that emphasized male objectification and violence against women (Bracewell, 2016; Williams, 2008). Hegemonic ideology is displayed through the domination of the female body. The dominance of traditional hardcore pornography with its strong gendered nature has been consolidated with the boom of Internet video technology, where the identity of the gazer is unevenly tilted towards the male. Women are seen as passive receivers of sexuality and dominated others, while men appear as active aggressors and predators.

Linda Williams (1989) in her groundbreaking book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* states “However much hard core may claim to be a material and visible thing, it is still fundamentally a discourse, a way of speaking about sex.” (p.229) The grasp of power over the articulation of this discourse is unquestionably tilted in favor of men and is equally dominated by men in the audience. Although there are a variety of themes in hardcore productions, they still follow a rigid heteronormative script that becomes scripted and homogenized through constant practice and reproduction. By emphasizing the nudity of the female body and the satisfaction of male sexuality, it appealed to the masses and continues to dominate the market today. Female pornography actresses, play the role of highly objectified vessels of male desire in such scenes, and no one pays attention to what is beyond their bodies. Ueno (2010) argues that it is not the women themselves, but the symbol of “women” that makes men respond, and that women are highly substitutable as sexualized symbols.

Hardcore begins with the arousal of sexual desire by men and ends with a mechanized cycle of sexual gratification, presenting a homogeneous "linear" (Maddison, 2009; Williams, 1989) trend in the process of continuous practice and reproduction. This straightforward, scripted sexuality forms a solid system of power and structure that has become what Foucault (1978) calls an "apparatus" of sexuality in contemporary times.

Yet in contrast to its distinctive and controversial predecessor, softcore does not contain straightforward injections or ejaculate but is more of a "coitus interruptus" (Williams 2005, 269). It is implicit and unrevealing, ending abruptly at what is unspokenly called "the place where it should begin", with just the right amount of blank that goes far beyond the boundaries of the text and is used to stimulate the audience's endless fantasies. This erotic aesthetic in line with introverted East Asian culture can be traced back to Dorothy KO's (2005) depiction of the seventeenth-century Chinese obsession with female foot-binding, the core of which is the unspeakable "concealment" of seduction. Secondly, the full integration of softcore with non-standardized subcultures such as Japanese ACG (animation, cartoon, and game) culture has resulted in dazzling alternative porn (Paasonen, 2010) in which women dress up as characters from Japanese anime through costumes and makeup, while imitating the exaggerated suggestive expressions of anime characters that do not exist in reality. This has broken the boundary between the virtual "second dimension" and the reality (third dimension), forming a space in between, and attracting countless viewers with "orientalist" (Said, 1978) fantasies.

At the same time, on mainstream pornographic websites, people who engage in this practice are often so-called Euro-American women, thus conflating a race from the West that is familiar to Euro-American audiences with a culture from the far East that is full of fantasies to stimulate the desire of the viewer. Moreover, softcore can also be integrated into other film and television themes to form new genres, such as erotic thrillers (Martin, 2007; Williams, 2005). Together, these complex practices contribute to the difficulty of defining softcore and its elusive nature. This "diversity, idiosyncrasy, and fragility" help it almost completely circumvent the possibility of censorship restrictions (Andrews 2006, 2). The emergence of pornographic fashion has also brought pornographic codes into mainstream culture, as public media interview porn stars, or independent workers selling pornographic images on

platforms such as Onlyfans or Twitter become highly sought-after influencers. It is what Hirdman (2007) said “when a pornographic visual style becomes more integrated in culture overall, borders between pornography and non-pornography become blurred” (p.161). Even under the world's most restrictive Great Wall of the Internet in China, it remains pervasive and flourishing, allowing amateur digital labor eager to profit from it to flock to the industry.

Not surprisingly, hardcore has often been criticized for its "absolute explicitness" (Barker, 2014). In contrast, the softcore product is more like a blank canvas for readers to draw and reproduce desirable orientations and fetishes rather than a designated text that arouses desire, thus appealing to a broader audience. Therefore, the study of softcore is often associated with sexual fantasy.

Sexual fantasies have a "polymorphous and productive nature" (Karaian 2022, 1) and interact with the real world in complex ways, which are seen as subjective, dynamic acts of the actor that stimulate sexual pleasure (Ing, 2020), as a "desire to desire"(Cowie 1992, 141). For Freud, sexual fantasy is an important human mental product that brings both pleasure and unfulfilled pain, and not only compensates for the individual's private desires in childhood but is also one of the reasons why people become separate individuals distinct from others. For Giddens (1992), sexual identity and the articulation of desire form the core of the self-narrative in contemporary times.

There is no universal sexual fantasy for all people, for some, sexual motivation may come from external adornments such as "skin display, sheerness, and clothing tightness " (Grammer, Renninger, & Fischer, 2004); For others, the suggestiveness of the posture influences "cognitive objectification" more than the degree of skin display (Bernard, et al., 2019); Finally, arousal may also come from inanimate objects completely unrelated to the human body itself, i.e. specific garments, such as fetishes for leather, lace, and other elements (Ventriglio et al., 2019).

Virtual lovers, as my research subjects, are living practitioners rather than static texts, often creating diverse personas or using various strategies to meet different preferences when dealing with their customers. Despite the potential for offline sex trading, in most cases, the service is operated without substantive

physical contact. What lovers create here for their male clients is the ability to provoke fantasy. They do not play the real self as an individual in reality, but rather a "Jungian archetype", an elaborate "collective consciousness" or a type of person representing a certain characteristic (Flowers 1998, 90). For example, when dealing with clients with pedophilic tendencies, virtual lovers often send pictures of themselves in JK uniforms<sup>④</sup> or talk to them in a juvenile, tinny, or sometimes slurred voice.<sup>⑤</sup> When dealing with customers who have the exact opposite preference, such as oedipal, virtual lovers adopt a lower voice to present a caring big sister image and sophisticated femininity. In addition, virtual lovers also follow their clients' social platforms during non-working hours and use this as a topic for unpaid chats with their clients in order to cultivate a "customized intimacy". These strategies allow them (or at least they think they can) to become agents of their own physical and sexual capital, consciously earning monetary rewards for manipulating and satisfying the sexual desires of heterosexual men.

## 2.2. Sexual Capital and Gender Performance

Hakim (2010) critiques the narrow male perspective in the studies of scholars such as Bourdieu. Proposed the existence of a fourth kind of capital, erotic capital. However, unlike Bourdieu's conception, Hakim argues that erotic capital exists independently of social class status and is not involved in the process of capital interconversion. According to Hakim, male sociologists have previously ignored the existence of erotic capital because the demand for sex is far greater among men than women, with women occupying a scarce resource in this market, causing panic among men who have always grasped the power. Thus, in the labor or marriage market, slut-shaming is often associated with women's moral turpitude when they profit from their appearance, and the use of sexual attraction is severely suppressed

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<sup>④</sup> JK is a Japanese buzzword meaning female high school student (じょしこうこうせい). It takes the J and K in the kana of jyoshikoukousei, and the JK uniform is the uniform of high school female students.

<sup>⑤</sup> This voice is known as the Loli sound or clip sound in Chinese Internet buzzwords. Loli is an abbreviation for Lolita, which comes from the novel "Lolita" written by American author Vladimirovich Nabokov. This image flourished in the Japanese subculture and referred to the younger, cute, elementary to junior high school-aged girls, and is a representative image of Japanese "moe" culture.



by men. Hakim argues that women can fully mobilize their erotic capital to break through patriarchal prohibitions on women's morality and dominate interpersonal relationships by exercising their sexual attractiveness. Specifically, women can increase their attractiveness by investing more in their appearance, or by consciously training themselves to behave more in line with social norms and the image of the ideal woman, and by sexual negotiation in the marriage market in exchange for economic and social resources from men.

Hakim's research has been widely debated in academia, with some scholars arguing that her research undermines the field that feminism has held firmly by reducing women to the realm of sexual value, further undermining gender equality as a complicity of patriarchy (Green, 2013). In Suzuki and Ueno's conversation (2021), the former argues that for women, rather than calling eroticism "capital" from the perspective of a vested interest, it is more of a "debt". The latter argues that this theory cannot stand on a sociological level because erotic capital is not held privately, it fades with age, and it can only be assessed unilaterally by the male observer, with women playing the role of mere "erotic commodities" in the market (p. 3-8).

However, what this article wants to emphasize here is not the never-ending grand narrative about the female body by culturally conservative and culturally progressive figures in the feminist field, but rather to suggest that although the term is not being directly employed, it is well documented in the academy that women's beauty is linked to their income advantage in the job market. In practice, women who have "awakened" are often consciously using this advantage. For example, Hamermesh (2011) combines research on beauty and economic income to develop the concept of "pulchronics," suggesting that women with attractive appearances earn far more over their lifetimes than counterparts with mediocre appearances. Ashley Mears (2014) similarly links the constructs of physical attractiveness and the value of appearance to aesthetic power and examines the investment in appearance in relation to its economic returns. Wesely (2003) explores strippers' desire to remove real physical features, such as body hair, and make themselves look like fantasy Barbie dolls through cosmetic surgery for profit. Or Bordo's (1993) direct association between women's weight and self-regulation, thus suggesting that strategic management of body size can demonstrate the social and economic status of individuals.

As Simone de Beauvoir states, the process of becoming a woman is not innate but learned. Gender is not a stable and unchanging fact but is established in repeated practices. As the foundational idea and keyword in the field of gender studies, which is referred to as "gender performance" (Butler, 1993) or "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Feminists similarly agree with this distinction, viewing sex as the biological identity of a person and gender as a cultural product that reflects different sociocultural practices. Gender performance includes not only the control of behavior but also the regulation and management of emotions. Successful performers are often praised for their femininity in the normative society. However, in real life, many people have already internalized the rules of action given to different genders, for example, in this study, women are expected to be in a submissive service position to meet the needs of consumers. However, one can also break the established stereotypes and change the performance strategy to launch a disruptive attack on the gender binary, thus causing "gender trouble" (Butler, 1990). That is, suffer complaints from unsatisfied customers or be fired from the platform in turn.

It is not the intention of this paper to deny that there are many women today who are consciously mobilizing their physical capital and using their agency to engage in the online porn industry. All practitioners have entered the field after having fully consented. For my informants, the field in which they work is not the traditional sex industry, and there is no legally valid unequal contract (Takeyama, 2020). However, it would be naive and dangerous to imagine them as being able to profit from manipulating their (mainly heterosexual male) clients while having one hundred percent control over their own bodies. The use of femininity has a double consequence. Since women are forced to occupy more positions in the service or sex industry, the interaction between the sexes is based on natural gender inequalities. For both the provider and the purchaser, the mere fact of where the interaction takes place determines that the two are always at opposite ends of the scale of power inequality. In this context, the definition of sexual consent is an ambiguous and problematic issue, as women's sexual performances are often manipulated by the more powerful client rather than by their own authentic and active will and cannot be withdrawn while the service is in progress.

In some cases, even women who do not want to perform erotically end up

having to give in to the demands of their clients for a variety of reasons. Although the virtual lover platform ostensibly claims to be a "green platform" that does not include any erotic-related services, all interviewees admitted that requests for sex could account for more than half of their orders and that they were at risk of receiving unprepared verbal harassment or naked genital images. Virtual lovers' practice of gender and erotic attraction on the one hand can make them a highly desirable object to attract male customers. On the other hand, they are increasingly alienated by the constraints of their femininity, being degraded as mere sex symbols, while their intellectual and physical work is uniformly regarded as exclusively feminine, unprofessional, and unsystematically trained emotional work that offers care and healing. On a broader level, this phenomenon spills over into other areas of the labor market, through sexualized clothing, elaborate appearances, and cordial gestures that reinforce public stereotypes of what is generally perceived as exclusively female work, such as teachers, waitresses, or nurses. By requiring dress codes to control and regulate women in the workplace (Sanders, 2005), investment in femininity becomes a double-edged sword, the beginning and end of a vicious cycle in the gendered labor market.

### **2.3. Emotional and Affective Work**

Over the past forty years since the publication of *The Managed Heart* (Hochschild, 2021), the scholarly debate on the affective turn in the third sector has never ceased, and this perception has become a "social fact" and a fundamental research tool that has been established in contemporary sociological research on emotions and labor. In the post-industrial society, the rapid growth of the tertiary sector has replaced the dominance of the traditional manufacturing industry, in which women are more disproportionately involved in front-line service.

In this context, Hochschild, drawing on Marx and Mills, conducted an empirical study of Delta Airlines flight attendants, arguing that in the 1970s, emotions originally confined to the private sphere were rapidly marketed and pushed into the public sphere as commodities by the flood of capital, thus requiring a reconsideration of the complex emotional system of "private and public face"

(p.9). At the same time, she extends Freud's "signal function" of anxiety to a broader field, which for flight attendants is "mustered cheer when they were depressed, suppressing fear at danger, and meeting rudeness with good humor" (p.199). Having a smile on their face that "looks real" brings a pleasant and smooth experience to the passengers, thus demonstrating their professionalism. Emotional modification is not just a private act but is guided by more macroscopic rules that transform the individual to meet the desired expectations of the appropriate social role. And as she argues in her book, "it is not simply emotion which has a signal function for us... but emotion management itself" (p. 202). Thus, in some occupations, employees need to provide emotional support to their customers which is different from traditional mental and physical work.

She further builds on Erving Goffman and Constantin Stanislavski's concept by suggesting two forms of acting in emotional work, namely surface acting and deep acting, the former being more of a pretentious and superficial physical expression that maintains an external appearance by suppressing one's real emotions. This performance practice has negative attributes and may even spill over into the private sphere after the work, causing emotive dissonance and making it impossible to escape from "artificial elation" (p. 7). The latter is what she calls the "natural result of working on feeling", which is "a real feeling that has been self-induced" (p. 35), where the actor embodied the content of the performance to achieve the desired organizational or social setting through internal change.

The other line of research begins with Michael Hardt, and although it differs from Hochschild's research, both have the same research goals and social context, with the former being one of the theoretical sources for the latter. Therefore, there is a lot of overlap and confusion. Hardt introduced the concept of affective labor based on post-capitalist, immaterial labor, and biopower theory (Hardt, 1999). In this article, he argues that in the post-capitalist period, with the paradigm upgrade in the economy and industry, the production process has shifted towards services and information technology and has taken a "dominant position" in the global capitalist economy (p. 90). Since no actual material is produced for consumption, he describes this labor as "immaterial labor" (p. 94), and affective work is part of it. This argument is further elaborated in *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and

*Commonwealth* (2009), co-authored with Antonio Negri. The core of the argument goes beyond the subject of the worker's emotions as an object of operation to the idea that the process is autonomous and dynamic, emancipatory, produced and reproduced in the actor's practice, and not simply the product of social and organizational commercial values.

Digital labor on the Internet inherits the performance strategies intrinsic to the aforementioned service industries, while also displaying new dynamics as its working field is separated from the traditional offline industry. In the case of virtual lover services, the signature that they sell is "mimetic intimacy". In an atomized era where strong emotional ties have broken down, people gain emotional value and spiritual satisfaction by engaging in dialogue with a lover who is not overly intimate — because they have no real-life contact — and not overly distant — because the person listening to the troubles is a loyal paid staff member who provides emotional value unconditionally.

However, during the interaction, the degree of embodiment and recognition of this job varies for different people, while their internal judgment criteria also change depending on the contextual setting, making it difficult to separate the emotional and affective for analysis. For some interviewees, they believe that this role-play requires more energy, emotional value, and careful choice of words in order to become a qualified lover, so they prefer to call themselves "companions to chat" rather than virtual lovers. They work with an instrumental and rational attitude, knowing their true needs while playing "heartfelt care", clearly cutting the work-life sphere and holding a disdainful and contemptuous attitude towards male clients who show their lust. For others, they come to the platform with the idea of "helping others to help themselves", and in the process of providing services, they also gain self-emotional satisfaction and a great sense of accomplishment.

Jenkins introduced the concept of "affective economy", which means a strategy that converts consumer emotions and interests into economic rewards. The professionalism of a virtual lover and the development of consumer loyalty does not come from a completely positive, flight attendant-like smile. Overly performative enthusiasm and caring can distance the desired lovers, so a normal or jokey real-life dialogue may be more appropriate for the workplace. In other cases,

in order to satisfy the sexual fetishes of customers, sometimes the opposite dynamic occurs, for example, when dealing with customers with BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission) preferences, virtual lovers will verbally abuse and humiliate them as requested, thus presenting a kind of negative content that would never be seen in the traditional service industry.

Although “emotional and affective labor are, of course, neither new nor limited to digitalized work” (Moore 2019, 125), these elaborate services can only be delivered through the medium of the Internet rather than through real physical contact, so there is a tendency for "the presence of labor but the absence of the body". Emotional work was thus brought in as a new variable, and the only thing that connected this split was a modified, sometimes more exaggerated, and forcibly mobilized response, just as visitors to Disney felt a festive frenzy when they entered and were emotionally rendered by the staff. Customers pay for admission to a wonderland to find the ideal partner, rather than being interested in the real personality behind the romance text. But no matter how varied the presentation or the real inner thoughts of the performers, they always have to suppress their true selves in the process to avoid confusion, and their central task is always to provide healing and satisfaction - both psychological and physical, so the above theoretical retracing of both emotion and affective is still applicable to this study.

# **Chapter 3. Local Knowledge: Sexuality After the Founding of PRC and The Censorship System**

## **3.1. Sexuality After the Founding of PRC**

Sexuality in the Chinese context has always existed as a "marginal yet mundane" (Huang, 2020) status in the seam between the public sphere and government officials. On the one hand, sex has been invisible in the public as a subset of the private sphere for a long time, and on the other hand, sex also contains political nature (Millett, 1978), constantly wrapped up in social agendas and official ideologies, as an untouchable and forbidden domain to be revisited and imagined over and over again.

Until now, the study of sexuality in China has been unbalanced between Eastern and Western academics, with local scholars facing more difficulties in their research activities in an increasingly restricted discursive environment under the current regime, and with most of the research taking China as a field site coming from overseas scholars who are not directly controlled by the party state. Sexuality is both a negative imaginary of bourgeois decadence in the "East" and a complementary material used by the "West" in the construction of "the distant other", with complex geopolitical and intellectual power (Huang, 2020). By placing sex in the broader context of China, this sector aims to present a more comprehensive sexual landscape for readers, and in turn, how contemporary youth are interested in erotic interactions on Internet platforms.

At the beginning of the founding of New China in 1949, under the leadership of the Communist Party, Beijing completed the political agenda of closing brothels and eradicating prostitution within just 12 hours. The Maoist era that precludes this is generally considered an era of extreme de-sexualization and abstinence, with biological needs being linked to the decadence of capitalism (Ho et al., 2018). The state firmly infiltrated regulatory power over individuals through the urban unit system and the rural people's communes, and marriage was based on feudal customary systems of introduction or the instrumental rather than emotional basis for individuals to change their class-related origins for upward mobility (Yan,

2003), which also led to the retention of the value of sex as merely a reproductive function and the consequent population expansion. Asceticism was consciously integrated into popular theatrical themes vertically indoctrinated to the bottom of society (Pan & Huang, 2013). The 1972 edition of the dictionary even purified the language by removing the words related to prostitution (ibid.), turning sex into the unspeakable, the undoable, and the invisible taboo through the admonition of power. The ideal image of women in this period was that of "iron women" who, like men, were fully committed to the socialist revolution. Women wore corsets and cut their hair short due to the shame of their biological manifestations, and any transgressive thoughts and actions regarding sexuality at the personal level escalated to the level of threats to socialism.

The reform and opening up brought about new changes in sexuality, however, the sexual revolution did not emerge as an independent reform as the Western counterpart, but rather from the changes in the "primary life cycle" as Pan (2006) described, brought by the market economy. Sexuality, as a part of "all relationships in the primary and basic life of human beings", was caught in the torrent of times and changed simultaneously. The disintegration of the unit system led to the relaxation of state control over the individual and the beginning of the mobility of individuals. The opening up of the ideological sphere led to the replacement of a revolutionary-based socialist sense of power with a "universal human nature" that encompassed a wide range of individuals based on consumption and desire, and China entered an era of what Rofel calls "desiring China" (Rofel, 2007). The word desire distills the long-suppressed inner needs of the Chinese people and the human nature of the dual pursuit of material satisfaction. Similarly, Rofel argues that "Desire is a key cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a postsocialist world" (p.3). Similarly, the consumption of television has allowed the new medium to supplement the traditional party-state-controlled paper media, showing films and videos about liberal marriage and representing the possibility of a private viewing of pornographic DVDs from abroad. The spread of contraceptive technology and the advent of the one-child policy have also allowed sex to be practiced not directly in relation to reproduction, but as a possibility for pleasure (Pan, 2006).



The Chinese state and citizens have become active practitioners and creators of neoliberalism. In addition, the reform and opening up brought about more immediate economic development and the pursuit of material consumption. The influx of migrant workers and transnational businessmen has led to a resurgence of prostitution in urban areas. Although the commercial sex trade is still regulated by measures such as "cracking down on pornography and illegal activities," the rapidly rising demand for sexual purchases can no longer be eradicated as it was under the previous generation of leaders (Burger, 2012). In Chinese official discourse, the sex trade is seen as a Western hedonistic corruption of the people's spirit and a violation of women's human rights. The state, in a position of superiority, indiscriminately places sex workers in a vulnerable and victimized position, awaiting rehabilitation, correction, and even permanent residence (Zheng, 2019). This move not only denies women's ownership and dominance over their bodies but also attempts to conceal the deficiencies of underemployment and the resulting family and social upheaval in a failed socialist turn. Nonetheless, there is a complex and contradictory split between the official, who sets the regulations, and the grassroots, who actually implement the policies. Sex, power, and economy are closely entwined in local private networks, with sex bribes opening the window for investment, and the high shadow income from the sex industry not only flowing into the pockets of grassroots cadres as capital for political power but also leading to the economic boom of the region. This is the reason why local authorities tolerate and even implicitly encourage the existence of the sex trade in a soft manner, with operators who have sufficiently bribed the police being secretly informed before raids (Zheng 2009, 71), and sex workers arrested for inadequate offerings often being released after being fined (Jeffreys 2004, 107). Similarly, in the case of the Internet sex trade, virtual store operators are not involved in complex political promotions, and their purpose is more simply focused on profit. Thus, when stores are not censored and shut down or operators arrested for encouraging sex trafficking, managers have always given tacit approval or encouragement to their employees to engage in soft-core pornography as long as they have the means to evade law enforcement scrutiny.

If the 80s and 90s were the phases that swept away the haze of asceticism of the previous generation, then sex has truly opened up its booming phase after entering the 21st century. Its repeated mention in the public media began with the internationally funded local control and management of AIDS in China (Huang, 2020). However, the publicization of sexuality was still at the biomedical level of disenchantment rather than recognizing it as a legitimate psychological desire. Research on sexuality on the cultural level still lagged behind social development, and the popularization of the concept of AIDS brought about a countervailing force in the public consciousness: the association of STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) with individual moral decay, poverty, prostitution, and perceived abnormal homosexuality. Since 2010, the political, economic, and academic environment of sexuality has changed significantly due to the open environment both at home and abroad, the efforts of diverse agencies such as grassroots feminist organizations, and the development of Internet technology (*ibid.*), as well as the public perception of sexuality has become more normalized and what used to be considered non-mainstream, i.e., non-heterosexual, or extramarital behavior has become visible. The process of viewing pornography online and subsequently practicing it offline has evolved as part of the biological learning process in public life courses. Emotional ties that were once considered unbreakable have loosened and love has also become a liquidized, portable, and discardable commodity in consumerism (Bauman, 2003).

Even if some young people turn to dating apps to find love, it does not mean that love that occurs online is any less real, and even those who meet online need to invest a great deal of time in managing their relationships and end up with offline face-to-face human contact. As mentioned earlier, during the prolonged containment of the epidemic, people were forced to cut off all opportunities to interact with others in their daily lives. The extended periods of solitude they were forced to choose, and the visualized "risk society" provided a new context for past research on China's sexual revolution, with virtual communication becoming the only option for a long period of time. In this context, the "fast-food-like" transaction not only helps the buyer to purchase sexual satisfaction quickly whenever needed, but also the companionship and care that traditional

pornographic images and movies do not have, and it is in this context that virtual lovers have ushered in the explosion phase of their business.

### **3.2. Sexual Surveillance on the Internet**

On the one hand, albeit belatedly, contemporary China appears to be undergoing a modernized sexual revolution, while on the other hand, this process is seen as a violent clash of civilizations, which in turn may undermine socialist moral norms that have raised concerns of authority (Sigley, 2006). As depicted above, the surveillance and control of sexuality by the party state have always existed, but in the past, it could be seen as an invisible biopower, which became more visual and quantifiable as an algorithm after entering the digital era. With the rise of the E-Sports industry in China in 2015, many amateur gamers began to join the live streaming platforms, leading to the explosion of the live streaming industry and the creation of an insulting term — "female live streamer" (女主播 Nv Zhu Bo). Female live streamers were often perceived as interacting with viewers through explicit performances and sexual innuendo, thereby profiting from the Internet gift economy. Douyu, one of the largest live-streaming platforms at the time, had one of its signature features, the "Douyu three sluts", which were three female cam-girls who were known for their deviant behavior.

The publication of policies often lags behind social developments, and in 2017, "a set of new rules and regulations called shen he tong ze (general rules on censorship) was passed" (Ho et al., 515), which included bans on online pornography and non-marital and none-heterosexual sex. Although controlled by the policies, the sex industry, whether online or offline, is an arena that witnessed competition between the public and the authorities. In the process of law enforcement, there is also chaos in law enforcement because the regulatory authority for pornography is granted to multiple departments.

In the offline regime, sex is not only a way for local officials to entertain and attract investment, but also a way to profit from bribery in the implementation of "fight against pornography" policies (Sigley, 2006). The "Great Fire Wall" filters IPs outside of national jurisdiction, and different live-streaming platforms have

introduced detailed rules regarding clothing styles, language use, and other issues. The "Yingke" video platform even employs more than 1,000 content verifiers to review its live-streaming content 24/7, with labor costs reaching ¥60 million (Jin, 2020).

However, while such surveillance has always existed, as is familiar, there are a variety of contradictions in the actual implementation of the policy. Although prostitution is considered an illegal activity in China, commercial sex has always existed as a readily available product as long as men have wanted it, from cheaply timed street massage parlors to more upscale private clubs with models or third-tier actors providing long-term companionship. According to the data statistics for a provincial capital in eastern China from 2016 - 2021.<sup>⑥</sup> The probability of male visits to prostitutes in China is actually much higher than the public imagination, with as many as 130,000 cases being publicized by the state alone. Those acts that go unreported and uncaught or occur in the shadows for online pornography consumption are even more difficult to measure.

Often, for Chinese censorship, the government is more concerned with the legitimacy of its authority, while taking a "selective surveillance" of other aspects, such as pornographic content. Criticism of the state and government on social media platforms that threatens the "harmonious society" is more likely to be censored out of fear of mass protests. Given the huge profits that can be generated by the sex trade and its potential to drive economic development at the grassroots level, the erotic trade has been conducted in an unspoken manner and is closely intertwined with the government. Although local authorities sometimes conduct periodic sweeps of prostitution, brothel operators are often informed by bribed internal police officers before raids are conducted, and even after the raids, these places could quickly reopen (Burger, 2012). In the case of Internet pornography, for scenes that are not overly explicit in terms of nudity or sexual intercourse, few significant official efforts are expended to block and remove such information. This leads to the fact that whether it is offline prostitution or online pornography

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<sup>⑥</sup> 已婚男人的嫖娼率，竟然比单身男高... March, 2022, [https://www.sohu.com/a/526601182\\_121119109](https://www.sohu.com/a/526601182_121119109)

trading, there is always room for it to continue to thrive with some cover-up and soft strategies.

For online regimes, pornography can often take a more subtle form while being presented to the viewer, turning it into a soft-core subject to avoid scrutiny. Examples include changes to search terms, shifting positions to Twitter where private nude images are sold without censorship, or setting up servers for pornographic networks in non-mainland areas. Fixed network algorithms are also unable to define suggestive expressions and poses. Once "jargon" is learned, a ticket to "wonderland" is given, ensuring unhindered access to pornographic content, and attracting a wider range of participants in erotic practices and commercial sex trafficking across regions.

During my research on virtual dating platforms, I found that some video creators and journalists have already reported finding virtual lover services through alternative terms such as "Tree Hollow" as mentioned above and that some of these reports have received a high number of views. It is therefore reasonable to assume that both the platforms and the state censors are aware of the real content hidden behind these terms. Although easily visible, these services separate themselves from the public with a chain that does not threaten the values of "civility and harmony" promoted by the state, and because of this, despite being monitored by the Great Firewall, the public is still able to rely on existing searching technologies and find, without too much effort, sexual content that has been stripped of its absolute "hardcore" aspects.

From another perspective, however, as Foucault (1978) argues, power, on the one hand, produces repression and, on the other hand, is a mechanism for the production of pleasure, suggesting the possibility of forbidden pleasure in the repression of sex. The public can sometimes produce unexpected pleasures in the process of resisting censorship and contesting authority. Rather than direct viewing of hardcore pornography, censorship has also been internalized by practitioners, resulting in a new set of "tastes" that conform to the "rules", which not only demonstrates what Bourdieu calls socio-economic status but also a reflection of China's unique context.

In contemporary times, Internet pornography viewers seem to be attracted more by subtle sexual performances that sneak through the filter of censorship. For example, while some women may choose to wear slightly revealing clothing when recording TikTok videos, they strategically cover their chests with their hands during the dance to create the intention of fearing nakedness. Or they use more subtle expressions and body movement cues, such as reducing the amplitude of the dance while slightly twisting their bodies and imitating orgasmic expressions through disoriented eyes. These behaviors are known as "edge-ball play" (Ca Bian Qiu 擦边球) and are often more popular than hardcore pornography such as sexual intercourse or masturbation, making it a huge market for people to become practitioners and consumers of softcore pornography.

## Chapter 4. The Most Familiar Stranger

### 4.1. Platform as Stage Setting

The term "affordance" was first introduced by the American psychologist Gibson (1986). It refers to the possibility that the specific behavior of the animal is enabled by environmental attributes and the complementarity between the two. This term was later introduced into the field of communication and has been widely used in the discussion of the functions of emerging media and their interaction with the practitioners and has now become one of the central concepts in media studies (Wellman et al., 2003). An understanding of affordance can help us better grasp how virtual lovers provide text, voice, and video pornography to purchasers through layers of elusive and covert methods. And how the platform itself, which is witnessing all this activity, on the one hand, boasts of its legality in its regulations, staff management process, and scrolling banners in its interface, prohibiting any illegal activity related to pornography, but at the same time tacitly allows and even promotes it due to its own technical and artificial settings.

I have briefly described the work of virtual lovers in Chapter One. My research platform Y is a virtual store located in WeChat, the most used real-time communication application in China. Due to legal concerns about erotic transactions, Chinese platforms such as Taobao have blocked terms such as "virtual lover". Instead, such services are searched for by entering metaphoric terms such as "Tree Hollow". This term is used to denote a utopian place where people can escape from real life and share their secrets and private matters, which is also how I searched for platform Y.



**Figure 1.** Countless "Tree Hollow" stores on the WeChat platform

When customers type "Tree Hollow" into WeChat's search box, an endless list of virtual stores with this keyword pops up. They work in much the same way: after clicking the "Start Chat" button, you can see the "virtual lovers" who are currently online and waiting to be ordered. Despite the high mobility of the staff, the number of virtual lovers working part-time on my research platform is generally stable at around 200 and is managed in groups of 50 by a person who is part of the platform's executive management.

The biggest competitive advantage of their platform, as many of the interviewees repeatedly mentioned to me, is that it is "cheap", and is located on a communication software that is accessible to everyone with almost no barriers to entry means that those who know the jargon are issued an invitation to the other world and have unimpeded access to an endless number of similar platforms. The easily affordable prices are attractive even to those not intensely looking for erotic



services or those who enter the territory out of curiosity, and consumers are more likely to try it at a low cost and then move on to the more expensive hidden services.

Virtual lovers are divided into four categories namely "normal", "gold", "king" and "god/goddess". For most of the highly mobile and precarious staff at the "normal" level, the price of text chat is 5RMB per 30 minutes and voice service is 25RMB per 30 minutes, while there are relatively high-cost packages available for daily and monthly subscriptions. According to the interviewees, the platform's commission is 60%, which means that for most of the average level workers, they can earn only 2RMB for a half hour of text chat. Even so, with the platform's rules on weekly turnover and the number of orders taken, those who do not achieve the minimum requirement will be immediately dismissed, making it seem like an idealistic hope to reject the lowest-paying text service and only consider the higher-paying voice service.

According to the interviewees, during the period of the pandemic, they were able to earn a maximum turnover of around 400RMB per week, however, after the end of the lockdown in early 2023, their income dropped off a cliff. It is already ideal to earn 150RMB a week without engaging in erotic services. (And those who provide pornographic performances can often easily earn more than 10,000 RMB a month.) However, the part-time working culture is not popular with most Chinese college students. Even when there is some offline work available, the typical hourly rate is often less than 20RMB with the time commitment of commuting also needs to be taken into account. In contrast, online work not only provides flexible time options but also more substantial income, with many interviewees stating that they will keep earning pocket money in this way even after they start working after graduation.

There are two options for placing an order, the first is to select a specific person while browsing the Virtual Lovers page, and the second is to place a random order and add notes to the order to indicate one's preference. In this case, those virtual lovers who are waiting for orders online will grab the orders if they meet the requirements. This will be explained further in the section on how soft-core services are practiced.



**Figure 2.** Virtual lovers waiting to take orders online (All of these photos are "fake photos")

In short, when an order is accepted, after a brief wait a virtual lover begins a one-on-one, private, exclusive chat journey by adding the purchaser's WeChat. This makes the virtual dating service different from erotic live-streaming activities, where a cam-girl is often in front of countless viewers, and where the conversation with each fan is heard by those watching the live-stream, lacking the "monogamous" sense of possession of the virtual dating experience — The illusion that the person on the other side of the screen belongs only to you during the time when the purchaser places the order. In addition, for cam-girls, their actions and words are in a public forum, with constant monitoring from the platform or automatic AI recognition of prohibited words. However, since the registration of a WeChat account requires real-name authentication and the account is owned by the individual, it completely eliminates the jurisdiction of the chat content from the store management.

Although the only services posted by the virtual store are voice and text chat, as a real-time communication software, WeChat also has the ability of video chat, providing a technical possibility for those who want to go further with video sex. In addition, after adding a friend to a customer, both parties can see each other's uploaded text and photo content that they use to share their lives through the Instagram-like "Friend Circle" (Peng You Quan 朋友圈). Thus, adding a friend opens not only a simple conversation but also a door into each other's lives — whether or not that life is intentionally groomed. Unlike cam-girls, who deliberately show their front-stage selves, the process of viewing each other's friend circle can be seen as an invasion of private territory. At the same time, it makes the person behind the screen more fleshed out — for the most part, she is a living, breathing college girl with life and worries, and her chastity and ignorance also provide a more alluring veil for sexual fantasies.

While the platform has attracted a wide range of customers with its elaborate "small profits but quick turnover", it also shifts more pressure on these young students, who have not experienced real social and corporate life, to take on the burden of supplying surplus work.

Of course, there are other platforms that charge more for virtual dating services, and the price tag is positively correlated with the level of sexual performance. Services that are explicitly erotic, such as stipe chat, are often set up in places that are more inaccessible to the general public. Some mobile apps set their servers in foreign regions and can only be displayed by switching regions in the Apple Store. This setup not only avoids censorship by state law but also screens out non-Apple users, ensuring a so-called "high-quality customer base" with the aim of generating greater monetary investment from people with higher income symbols. Tree Hollow Y, by contrast, is limited by its own platform settings, which leads to a weaker and softer level of sexualization, as well as the ability to recruit relatively cheap non-professional sex workers. That is, the group of college students or who have just graduated.

## **4.2. Between Morality and Profit**

Freud (1961/1923), in his psychoanalytic theory of the human psyche, divided the complete personality structure into three parts, namely, Id, ego, and super-ego, which are in a dynamic activity of mutual conflict and coordination, and collectively describe the process of one's mental activity. For him, Id is a chaotic unconscious world filled with primitive instincts and desires unacceptable by ethics and law, a scenario in which the purpose of human beings is to pursue pleasure and satisfaction as primitive creatures without fear or favor at any cost. In contrast, the super-ego exhibits a social and moral dimension, representing an idealized image and an ethical and moral model of society, pursuing collective values and noble acts of personal sacrifice. Ego lies between the two and is pulled by both Id and super-ego, on the one hand, ego needs to reconcile personal desires to achieve the satisfaction of interests, and on the other hand, it is guided by laws and social norms to help individuals realize their idealized selves within the moral code.

Virtual lovers face the same complex planning process in their actions. All informants acknowledge that they enter the platform for some kind of reward, and the vast majority desire timely monetary gratification, especially for those involved in erotic performance services, who are more inclined to directly commodify and self-objectify (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) their bodies and sexual performances in the act of price tagging. At the same time, however, as owners of the body, the use of erotic capital is subject to moral censure and restraint (Hakim, 2010; Mears, 2015). Nevertheless, the accusation of prostitution from a moral perspective is usually quite vague, and often, the act has simply declared a violation of morality, and is difficult to give a specific explanation for the reason (Lovering, 2021).

Based on the unbalanced expectations of male and female chastity in patriarchal societies, females are more likely to experience moral panic in the performance of their work and therefore tend to act more cautiously than males, taking into account the potential social exclusion and stigmatization charges. Some females even made harsher accusations and denunciations than their male counterparts for those engaging in online prostitution, in order to separate themselves from the sex industry and to show their innocence and the "cleanliness" of the sources of their income. At the same time, some informants denied at the beginning of the interview that they were involved in video or text sex work, only admitting to having done so after the conversation had deepened. More people chose to say "I know someone..." or "I have

a friend who..." The third-person perspective can "allow people to safely talk about others when in reality they were describing their own beliefs and practices" (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 98). When people talk about others, they are also engaging in self-disclosure. Even for some female respondents who were willing to share their experiences, they tended to be more careful with their words than males, adopting alternative slang and creative expressions to denote certain behaviors. These complex activities together form the process by which online erotic performers (especially women) construct super-egos that conform to ideal social norms.

In contemporary times, it is clear that the Internet has led to increased access to sexuality (Cooper et al., 2003) and has become dominant in the distribution of sexual products. For consumers of pornography, even with the existence of censorship, people can easily access a nearly endless supply of sex-related content online for free (Albright, 2008; Lin, 2018; Ruberg, 2016, Sigley & Jeffreys, 1999), and the internet is used by people for a variety of sexual purposes, which Nixon and Dusterhöft (2018) refer to this phenomenon as sexual colonization of the Internet. This has also had a countervailing effect on some amateur DIY Internet pornography practitioners: the anonymity of the Internet and the uncountable amount of pornography have, to some extent, combined to ensure the safety and reputation of performers. This has given some people the illusion that even if they post their nude bodies, it will be submerged in the mass of pornography and therefore will never be recognized and discovered, therefore, helping them to escape the risk of surveillance (Smith, 2018). Electronic communication technologies have similarly redefined the scope and boundaries of sexual services, with people now able to enter and exit the industry at will in comparison to working in traditional commercial sex trafficking venues; safer by avoiding STDs (Sexually Transmitted Diseases) and potential exposure to physical threats or human trafficking through cell phone screens rather than physical contact (Marcotte & Garcia, 2018); with elements of sexualization and emphasis on the importance of appearance in the workplace, erotic perspectives spill over in everyday life into the non-erotic realm of the public sector (Cobble, 2010)...

Collectively, these phenomena have led to a growing number of people who are less morally sensitive to the online sex industry and choose to engage in it, with some respondents describing their choices without demonstrating the psychological struggle between morality and profit. It is undeniable that some virtual lovers have

a strong attitude toward erotic transactions, showing contempt for those who choose to use their bodies in exchange for monetary reward. However, it is important to clarify that moral boundaries are not fixed in practice but may be fluid and may decrease over time as the work progresses. Baumeister (2000) introduced the concept of "erotic plasticity" to suggest that women's sexuality receives more situational pressure from culture and society than men. For example, in intimate relationships, women are likely to respond passively to male sexual invitations based on pressure and expectations, even in situations where they are not sexually aroused. For this study, even those who do not want to engage in erotic practices may be forced to do so by repeated paternalistic persuasion from clients or by pressure from peer performance, making choices that are contrary to their will or detrimental to their interests.

*"He said to me, are you stupid, how much money can you earn a day by chatting with people, after doing this, you can earn as much as you want, do you know how your colleagues get so much weekly turnover?... I'm doing this for your own good, you know..."*

By quoting the client's discourse, one female interviewee described how she made up her mind to start phone sex services. This paternalistic and seductive discourse, which occupies the position of a senior in life experience, creates the illusion of "for their own good". Soft discourse is more effective than strong intimidation and explicit teasing, allowing naive young girls to willingly submit to the illusion of self-chosen freedom, reshaping their own erotic standards in the process, and succumbing to the "situational pressures" (Baumeister, 2000) of patriarchy and the neoliberal market.

*"He also showed me a lot of his chat records with others and even screenshots of others naked... In fact, it is quite common to do this... Sometimes I really do not want to do it, so I will change the topic, but sometimes I really cannot change the topic, and if I do not do it, the order will be canceled..."*

The duality of the Internet can have the opposite effect, as many interviewees mentioned that chat logs, video screenshots, or voice recordings can be easily stored

and circulated among others without the person's awareness. These texts become, on the one hand, permanent evidence of the person's past behavior or a constant threat of being forced to engage in more deviant behavior, and on the other hand, they are used as a bargaining chip against others who have not yet engaged in pornographic performances, serving as a catalyst for vicious competition among employees. While the online pornography industry is not subject to the human trafficking or physical harm that may be found in the traditional sex industry, people's choice to participate in this activity appears to be based on voluntarism: whether to turn on the camera, connect to the phone, and take off their clothes is in their own hands. As Bauman (2008) argues about virtual relationships: "One decisive advantage of electronic relation (is), you can always press delete" (p. xii). However, from the moment one chooses to give up part of the use value of one's body to the platform and the customer, it is already decided that the individual loses complete control over themselves and begins to be manipulated by the consciousness and lust of others. Despite the absence of the strict hierarchy and binding contracts of traditional offline services, freedom in the electronic economy is only a luxury and illusion, as in Zou's (2018) study of Chinese live-streamers, digital labors always "feel the urge to stay longer in order to get more rewards and to attract more viewers" (p.814). For virtual lovers, the complex forces of pressure from the patriarchal discourse of service purchasers and the behavior of colleagues that no longer hide in the shadows combine to promote individuals to join the same queue, leading to a tilting of the scales in the direction of interest.

As noted above, not all actors within the platform chose to join the process of exchanging erotic performances for timely monetary rewards. For others, the compensation for work comes in the form of non-material, delayed gratification that satisfies personal ambitions for the future, demonstrating what Duffy (2016) calls the qualities of aspirational labor. For example, several interviewees coincidentally mentioned the term "gaining experience", and one single male interviewee indicated that playing the role of "boyfriend" allowed him to learn how to interact and talk to girls in order to gain an advantage in future dating market. Another female radio anchor who was about to switch jobs shared the same opinion, using emotional counseling as her "second shift" in the private sector and as a practice and supplement to her regular job during the transition to the next better job. However,

although the nature of her work on both radio stations and virtual lover platforms is not fundamentally different, the former workplace values the systematic broadcasting and hosting training she has received in the past, as well as her professional qualifications. She is also respected as a professional woman for the intellectual and physical work she puts into it. On the virtual lover platform, however, she often faces harassment from male customers and is not allowed to use aggressive language when dealing with these situations but has to politely refuse with the cordial and warm words prescribed by the platform. The low barrier of entry to the platform as the subject of my study means that almost anyone with "entrepreneurial subjectivity" (Rand, 2019) can register as a virtual lover to provide emotional support and companionship to others after a simple test. This indirectly dilutes the irreplaceable position of those with professional skills and cultural capital in the workplace, transforming their intellectual effort into "women's work" that relies solely on sexualized appearance and emotional support (Sanders, 2005; Lukács, 2020).

Finally, although virtual lover could be considered as a job, not everyone wants to develop it as a real career. Like other internet platforms, digital laborers on the platform I studied exhibit a high degree of mobility. College students or recent graduates make up the majority of the workforce, and many join the industry out of curiosity or their own desire for emotional ties. They are driven more by their own personal satisfaction or "willing to kill time" than by the pursuit of monetary benefits. However, as Terranova (2000) discusses in relation to digital workers' free cultural production in emerging media, capital gain may not be the only pull in their work; free labor is motivated by personal value choices or "acting out a desire for affective and cultural production that is nonetheless real just because it is socially shaped" (p.36-37). This optimistic aim of self-fulfillment does not save the participants from the alienating surplus value deprivation, and the results of their cultural production in the platform "are pleurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited" (p.37).

In this sector, I describe how practitioners supposedly strike a delicate balance between their so-called moral standards and the pursuit of profit, as well as the variability and fluidity of moral boundaries. It should not be forgotten, however, that without the platforms' artificial affordance and administrators' tacit approval,



pornography could never be sugar-coated and survive on China's most used and perhaps most heavily censored communication software. In the next section, I will turn my attention back to the micro actions of virtual lovers to provide the reader with a perspective on how virtual lovers are self-branding through personal page modifications to build a desirable image to attract customers' attention.

### **4.3. Beyond an Ideal Self**

The management of personal social media can be seen as a process of polishing the ideal self. For some, carefully edited posts on social media contain strong performative elements that can be strategically used to conceal a less-than-ideal real life and construct an ideal identity (Wang, 2016). The posted text and image represent the user's tastes and become a process of self-branding as a commodity (Bauman, 2007). At the same time, "taste, in this context, is not subtle and hidden, in the Bourdieusian sense; rather, taste is actively articulated by drawing on a common repertoire of visual styles and textual vocabularies identifiable to a taste community" (Baker & Walsh 2018, 4565).

As mentioned above, at Tree Hollow Y, there are two ways to place an order: a designated order and a random order. For random orders, the customer does not assign a fixed staff member to provide the service, in which case the order is automatically posted to the group chat where the virtual lovers are located, and people have to compete for the order, which means that staff members are always ready to fight, staring at their cell phone screens endlessly, and accepting orders before their colleagues, implying an unpredictable investment of time and energy. At the same time, random orders are often accompanied by some specific notes indicating customer preferences and requirements, and only those who confirm that they can meet these requirements are qualified to take orders, otherwise, they face the risk of being returned or being complained about.

In contrast, a carefully sculpted personal page can catch the eye of the viewer and attract them to purchase a "designated order" in the quickest possible time. This virtual self-construction is not only important in the middle of self-disclosure but is also the only window that allows customers to see whether their services contain a

sexual element. Specifically, the profile is divided into three main elements: in terms of textual information, it includes a nickname, a personal signature, and a list of self-set keywords and prices for services. The image profile includes a headshot as well as scrolling selfie images. The profile also includes an audio clip ranging from 10 to 30 seconds. Similar to the process of watching cam-girls on live-streaming platforms, the picture on their profile page is often a screenshot focusing on the face and sometimes a slightly naked upper body. If browsing live-streaming platforms is like a window-shopping session where women are examined through an erotic gaze, then virtual lover platforms take this objectification process to the next level. Unlike the transaction process on live streaming platforms, which seems to rely on a gifting economy, the exchange of money for services in the virtual lover service is more explicit. It strictly charges based on time and the specific content of the services provided.



**Figure 3.** Profile page of a virtual lover

Foucault's discussion of the "technologies of the self" (1988) illuminates how the individual constructs the self as the subject of his or her own actions. Unlike the

content posted on social media, the people who assume the identity of the "judge" that defines the ideal image in the process of self-presentation do not seem to be the virtual lovers themselves, but rather the men outside the cage, who are in the position of spectators and visitors. For my female respondents, the content posted was primarily designed to meet the expectations of heterosexual men. At the same time, unlike traditional social media, where people aspire to show off money, status, and lifestyle content, the images posted by virtual lovers on their profiles are highly homogeneous, reflecting erotic perspectives and highly sexualized gender performances.

Sometimes, the strategy of self-branding may even contradict the aesthetic trends in mainstream media. For example, during what informants described as more "sexually active nighttime", a large number of the women at the top of the sales charts include the keywords "slightly chubby" and "fleshy" in their personal descriptions, unlike the majority of women in China today who seek to be extremely skinny. It is easy to understand that such descriptions highlight women's physical characteristics and body curves, and although this self-representation is probably not real, the overly frequent occurrence of the keywords represents a common aesthetic orientation among male customers, and the emphasis on their own voluptuousness is a strategic way for women to stimulate their customers' sexual fantasies. The understanding of this psychology corroborates Ashley Mears' (2011) study of two different types of practitioners in the modeling industry, where the high-end fashion industry tends to seek asexualized, avant-garde shapes and extreme thinness in models that may hardly be considered "beautiful" in the eyes of the public. Their value comes from the scarcity that deviates from traditional aesthetics. In contrast, the models that appear in shopping catalogs are more likely to conform to the aesthetic of society at large: they are white blondes with voluptuous, sexy bodies, more like the beautiful women you meet on the street and have the chance to successfully pick up. The aesthetically appealing body is constantly altered and shaped by the different contexts in which it is viewed, just as gender performances are always part of a specific cultural context and norm (Zhang & Hjorth, 2019), yet the power to objectify and commodify the female body has always been in the hands of men.

In addition, some workers include a description of their skills on their personal

pages, such as tarot cards or mobile game-playing skills. In addition, some workers choose to include descriptions of their personal skills in their self-introductions, such as tarot card reading or mobile game companionship. These "soft skills" (Moss & Tilly, 1996) could complement erotic capital, including attributes like appearance and voice. They serve as a lubricant to foster positive relationships with customers. I refer to this phenomenon as the "relative conservation of bodily capital." One interviewee mentioned that her voice was not attractive, so she had to stay up all night to make up for the lack of income by providing text services to reach her turnover. Another female interviewee works as a dubber and can easily imitate different styles of voices, so she can get a steady stream of orders with her attractive voice alone. The top-ranking male on the platform was a certified "Taoist priest" who offers fortune-telling services to customers. Having special skills or putting extra effort into the work can still create a distinctive persona, thus earning a significant income without having to engage in erotic performances. However, for those who have convinced themselves to cross the "moral line" and aspire to profit from sexual performances, their actions often go through a complex packaging process, following certain unspoken rules to avoid possible censorship, which will be expanded on in the following section.

#### **4.4. Play Softcore in a Hard Way**

During my research, when I asked all the respondents how I could find the workers who were engaged in erotic performances, one of the answers I received repeatedly was "You can easily guess". Although presented in an ethereal and covert manner, the sexual transaction is not untraceable; on the contrary, the search for erotic services follows a highly scripted process, and all the customer needs to do is put his head down and follow the trail of breadcrumbs to the candy house with ease. In the last sector, I explained how the profile can be used by virtual lovers to present a sexualized image and self-branding, and that for both the provider and the buyer, the profile is the only interface before they become familiar with each other, and the clues to show that they are engaged in pornographic services are often embedded in these texts. The majority of people take a novel approach to nickname selection,

rather than a simple referent, they creatively replace some of the words in the name with sexually relevant homonyms. For example, in ancient Chinese myths related to the Mid-Autumn Festival, "yu tu" (玉兔 jade hare) is the rabbit of the fairy who lives on the moon, while "yu" in the Chinese context can refer to both "jade" and "lust". The performers use similar strategies to give their nicknames a suggestive soft erotic perspective, to highlight the possibility of receiving orders for erotic performances and to attract buyers with the same needs. Of course, there are also more explicit expressions, such as "Free video with \$168 reward" or "Free leg photos with order" in their profiles. The consequence of such a move, however, is that the performer is unobtrusively placed under the gaze of other colleagues for scrutiny.

As mentioned in the previous section, for the platform itself, the only two options for its official offerings are text and voice services. However, WeChat, as an instant communication application, naturally has the affordance of video calling, and thus many virtual lovers also include "video surprises" and other seductive terms that stimulate sexual fantasies in their profiles. However, as discussed above, most of the people working on the platform are part-time female students rather than professional sex workers, and even when they make video calls, for fear of being recorded or screenshotted, for most of them, it is often just an "edge-ball play" in which they dress in a revealing way without showing the key parts rather than a naked masturbation show.

*When asked why they were not afraid of being screened in revealing clothes, one interviewee replied, "It's not the same, you can say it's the freedom to dress in revealing clothes... Isn't that what they all promote now? But exposing... For example, the bottom of the body is completely different... There will be the possibility of being screenshot, in fact, I have seen several of my colleagues (screenshots) ... "*

Here, the informant offers a commercial feminist perspective, actively representing "freedom to dress" as a politically correct issue and using it as a rhetoric to avoid the moral condemnation that might arise if the photos were distributed.



**Figure 4.** The banner states: “green chat”, refusing vulgarity.

Although the platform has placed a banner on its page stating that it abides by the law and rejects pornographic content, it is difficult to rule out the suspicion that such behavior is performative and aims at avoiding state censorship. If operators really want to ensure the "clean" content of the platform, they should set up supervision and education methods for staff, or use the account issued by the platform to unify the management of staff. However, in practice, there is no management to monitor the staff's words and actions, and the staff use their own accounts and have great freedom in their behavior.

*"They want us to retain customers and get them to renew our subscriptions, but they do not tell us how we can do it, so is not that just asking us to engage in sexual performances?"*

In addition to this, the managers of the platform will use some vague words to encourage people to actively retain repeat customers. And according to the platform's rules, after payment, customers have five minutes to return their orders if they are not satisfied with the performance of their virtual lovers. This process also allows for the cost-free screening of females unwilling to perform erotic services. Some performers choose to receive transfers from customers privately in order not to have more than half of their salary deducted by the platform, but the platform regularly uses "mystery shoppers" to prevent this from happening. Once such behavior is discovered, the virtual lovers who have harmed the platform's revenue will be immediately dismissed. However, the platform itself does not have any monitoring

measures for the sex trade unless it is reported by the customer. Given that those women who adamantly refuse to provide erotic services will turn down such orders from the beginning, those who suffer from being reported are often the ones who fail to satisfy their customers in the process of providing erotic services. Also, the organization offers incentives in the form of cash for outstanding staff, while those who do not complete a fixed amount are punished with activities that the interviewees call "homework," i.e., soft taglines on different social media platforms promoting "Tree Hollow Y". Often, these taglines include revealing selfies or seductive words. Through such rules, platforms further extend the exploitation of surplus value for workers beyond the platform and their working hours

Of course, erotic services are not limited to specified orders, nor are they confined to heterosexual scripts. Due to the stigmatized and marginalized status attached to them in China (Sigley & Jeffreys, 1999), homosexuals are thought to be more likely to seek sexual relations via the Internet (Albright, 2008). Particularly in patriarchal societies, heterosexual men, out of fear of losing their subjectivity by becoming sexual objects (Ueno, 2010), may commonly resort to homophobic behavior in order to establish their masculinity (C. J. Pascoe, 2013). When looking for erotic services, they tend to face more obstacles and social exclusion than their heterosexual counterparts, turning their attention to random orders. For example, some customers add rainbow emoji to the notes of random orders to indicate their sexual orientation and needs. Although these symbols are directly linked to sexual purchases, the platforms do not regulate and restrict these orders because these online phrases are not included in the official discourse and do not carry the risk of censorship. At the same time, soft online pornography can also be transformed into offline commercial sex trading activities under certain circumstances. For example, some orders will be noted with the name of a city, and people near that location who are willing to engage in sex will take the order to extend the transaction to real-world physical interactions. Both of these processes show that staff members' behavior is tacitly approved, even though their bodies appear to be monitored by managers.

Bernstein (2007) uses the term "bounded authenticity" to describe how the act of providing the girlfriend experience for the upper class involves both erotic content and real emotional interaction. Cybersex is a negotiated zone in the middle of the neoliberal marketplace and the imaginary world of fantasy projection for an

unfamiliar yet intimate person under the two-way interactive function of Web 2.0. Service seller also needs to consciously add their real identities and life experiences in the process of gender performance to promote the trust of the audience (Butler, 1993) or consciously embellish their backstage selves in the "Friend Circle" of WeChat. Posting carefully edited clips or photos of their lives, while observing the content posted by their guests and looking for topics to discuss, gives them the illusion of being unique and cared for, thus presenting an "illusion of an intimate sharing" (Abidin, 2015).

While cybersex itself has its limitations, the peek into the privacy and lives of others transforms the customer's fantasy from mere eroticism to a shapely entity with a personality and life of its own, albeit a highly modified one. For female virtual lovers, when asked by customers to send revealing photos, a tactic often employed is to go to the comments section of Taobao lingerie stores and secretly steal the images uploaded by other buyers. This strategy ensures that the photos are not identified by search engines when customers want to check if they are real and not from the internet, and consciously ensures that the photos appear more "amateurish" than carefully posed, thus bringing more authenticity. These actions have been pieced together in a conscious process by the practitioner to create a fully constructed image of the strategic use of one's sexuality for profit. When mentioning the possibility of being exposed for who they really are or the possibility of being threatened with these naked photos, my interviewees, however, expressed no worries about this. For them, these small resistance strategies, applied in the workplace, have helped them create a "collage" that resembles the virtual personas that appear in Internet games. Although the photos, personalities, and voices have been consciously cropped and collaged, the resulting "players" in this game have little connection to their real-life selves. This behavior is both a dynamic use of heterosexual male preference, and an isolation from one's real identity that shields virtual lovers from moral pressure and the fear of identity exposure, as Sanders (2005) examined with respect to sex workers, thus becoming someone's "second life" in the virtual world.



## Chapter 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Main Findings

"Desire is both of and beyond the everyday... (it) evokes a fantasy of escape and invokes a disciplinary norm to stay " (Allison, 2000). For those who have consumed erotic services on virtual dating platforms, the intimacy that has to be mixed with the interaction acts as an intermediate platform that constructs "bounded authenticity" (Bernstein, 2007) between the service provider and the purchaser. The Internet also offers new possibilities for the reinvention of eroticism and intimacy, defeating the one-way transmission process from hardcore pornography posting to viewing. Virtual lovers, as the practical subjects, consciously use a series of soft self-branding strategies, such as eroticizing their figures, using creative homophones as their working nicknames, and thus modifying their personal homepages, as a way to attract lonely tourists who linger at night to seek sexual encounters on virtual platforms. Viewing this content provides a window into the lives of those with voyeuristic desires, especially after the initial order is placed and friends are added, subsequent viewing of the content shared on the virtual lovers' Friend Circle creates the illusion of involvement in their lives. While there is a natural inequality between the supply and demand of the sexes in the sex market, the sex trade is not limited to heterosexual scripts, and China's still conservative public perception has led many homosexual and BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission) -interested users to turn to virtual platforms for inner relief. Since these are still "niche tastes" for the heterosexual norm in China, the use of terms such as rainbow symbols, or "up" or "bottom" to express homosexual orientation does not include in the keywords of official censorship. The combination of lucrative profits and a safety net that facilitates evasion of censorship encourages virtual store managers to turn a blind eye to, and even covertly encourage, such behavior. It is this tension between profit and morality in the process of policymaking and implementation that has led to a contradictory yet distinctly Chinese sexual landscape — despite strict regulations and censorship, these regulations exist only as a facade and cover for "socialist virtues". Whether it is offline commercial sex or online erotica, there is

always a way to survive and thrive as long as it is slightly softened and presented in a less explicit way. At the same time, for young Chinese who access and purchase erotic materials, a new aesthetic orientation is also embodied in the struggle against censorship: people are more attracted by soft pornographic content that stimulates sexual fantasies than hardcore and explicit sexual content. Browsing the soft erotic content that survives in the midst of censorship represents the pleasure wrapped in the taboo of fighting against official power, and this initiative is both politically and physically satisfying.

Instead of a rigid hardcore erotic script, the viewer's object of lust is a real and accessible woman who shares her life in a mundane way, blurring the nakedly monetary nature behind the exchange of sex. Conversely, for virtual lovers, the conscious observation of content posted on their clients' social media platforms and the conversation that begins with it creates a "customized" feeling for the client on the one hand and blurs the boundaries of working hours on the other, turning this action into invisible, unpaid emotional work. However, despite the fact that both sides abide by such a meticulous script for their actions, it seems that during the actual performance, people have reached a stage of "disenchantment" with virtual intimacy. Most of the service providers clearly knew that their ultimate goal was a monetary reward, either the performance of the girlfriend's role or the absorption of negative emotions did not affect their offline lives; they could easily detach from their Internet personas and return to their backstage lives, and more than one virtual lover reported that her boyfriend knew that she was doing such work and went through the process of "not understanding" to consent. This phenomenon is inextricably linked to the medium of the platform and the portrayal of the virtual persona. While carefully modifying the virtual personality in an effort to achieve "technologies of the self" (Foucault, 1988), the performers themselves ensure a separation between their real offline selves and the persona engaged in stigmatized erotic work online, thus achieving an inner emotional adjustment.

However, while the Internet medium provides a relatively safe and anonymous greenhouse for online sex workers, liberating them from the dangers of the traditional sex industry, such as STDs and human trafficking, it is quite dangerous and naive to assume that virtual lovers, especially women, have complete control over their own bodies or that their actions are all strategic

performances that profit from manipulating the lusts of stupid men. The double standard of sexual morality and the unequal proportion of laborers in the sexual labor market show that women are always the ones who are exploited more and are forced into the trade even when they do not want to sell their bodies. Their performances are sold to the market as sexualized products for the pleasure of their clients, while on the other hand, flowing to the platforms as primitive accumulation of capital. Not only do they have to suffer the squeeze of the weekly minimum turnover requirement but are also responsible for placing soft advertisements on different social platforms, becoming cogs in the conveyor belt of profitability of the platform. The aforementioned two sides, namely the clients and the platform manager, are both often occupied by men, and women as performers are caught in the middle of the non-negotiable deprivation of surplus value. In contemporary times, even eroticism and emotions can be outsourced on the market for sale, and the process of such commodification is often seen as a symbol of modernity.

In this process, virtual lovers are trapped in a dual dilemma of class and gender. When confronted with capital, as part of digital labor, they are objectified in the platform, as the gifts themselves to be given to consumers. Visualized performance rankings obscure exploitation, bypassing a purely contractual system as a way to encourage competition within the workforce and the additional unpaid work that arises from it, constituting a new form of capital control that is romanticized. When dealing with clients, the bait that entices virtual lovers into the mire is often presented in the form of "red envelopes" of gifts. However, as the recipients, their subjectivity vanishes along with the process of receiving the gift. What is given seems to be free, but in reality, it is not and instead ties the two parties together. The underlying principle implied in the gift also signals that women are expected to provide more "benefits" that are closely related to their own bodies in order to reach the threshold of reciprocity. In a seemingly safe virtual platform, the display of one's body also brings about an obligation from the future that needs to be repaid. Images and videos are permanently preserved as digital materials and circulated at a rapid rate without the awareness of those involved, and moral judgments continue to devalue the recipient of the gift even after they have withdrawn from the work of virtual lovers. As Mauss (1993) puts it, what is acquired now will always bind one to the obligation to reciprocate in the future,

and the seemingly pure gift of the present is destined to be priced by fate in the shadows.

## **5.2. Limitations and Prospects**

First, this study was entirely conducted through the voice chat function of WeChat. In the absence of video or real-life interviews in which the informants' facial or physical movements can be observed as a supplement, it is still worth considering the extent to which the information they provide demonstrates the "professionalism" they use in their work or how much of the information provided to me has been carefully mediated. Given the specificity of the topic of this research, and especially the sensitivity of the Chinese social and academic context, the conversations obtained during the interviews cannot be taken for granted as representing the full range of the interviewees' real thoughts. What is shown behind the text is sometimes an awkward laugh, sometimes a choice of alternative words. Perhaps these elements reveal better what is most hidden and obscure in sexuality studies, and what deserves the most attention.

Despite never having been exposed to anthropological or sociological knowledge, during the course of my research, several respondents suggested what could be called "participant observation", but I deeply regret that this research method could not be used in this study due to a number of practical constraints. Although many interviewees provided me with screenshots of the chatting records within the virtual lovers. If other researchers want to go deeper on similar topics in the future, participant observation and long hours of interaction with other co-workers can undoubtedly bring to the readers the unseen operations behind the scenes and the parts that cannot be vocalized. I believe it is also the first-hand experience of this unspeakable content that will help people see the process of producing soft pornography and contribute to this field of research.

Finally, as mentioned in this thesis, due to the limitations of the affordance of the research platform itself, the characteristics of my informants and their customers. This study did not touch on other types of Internet soft-porn services or on the more explicit process of how the online sex trade operates. Future studies

that add comparative studies between different platforms or professions might provide a more fleshed-out and detailed discussion of pornography on the entire Chinese Internet.

Nevertheless, despite the limitations, this research contributes to illuminating how contemporary youth are pursuing content beyond traditional hardcore pornography to satisfy their sexual fantasies and desire for intimacy.

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## Abstract

코로나19의 확산으로 중국의 젊은이들도 대인 격리 정책이 장기화되고 있습니다. 이러한 배경에서 일부 판매자는 사회적 혼란기에 대인 관계에 대한 필요와 욕구를 충족시키기 위해 온라인 스토어에서 '가상 연인' 롤플레이팅 서비스를 제공하기 시작했습니다. 그러나 거래 과정에서 이러한 서비스는 정서적 욕구 충족뿐만 아니라 에로틱 한 공연도 가져옵니다. 이 논문은 에로틱 자본, 젠더 성과, 정서/감정 노동을 이론적 틀로 삼아 가상 연인으로 대표되는 디지털 노동에 대한 심층 인터뷰를 통해 현대 젊은이들이 인터넷에서 어떻게 친밀감과 에로틱한 환상의 이중적 만족을 추구하는지 탐구합니다. 동시에 가상 연인들이 기존의 하드코어 포르노에서 검열될 수 있는 부분을 제거하고 성적 환상을 키우는 데 전념하는 부드러운 셀프 브랜딩 접근 방식을 활용하여 국가 검열과 협상하고 상호 작용하기 위해 에이전시를 동원하는 방법을 조사합니다. 이 외에도 겉보기에는 더 안전하고 자유로워 보이는 인터넷 성 산업에서 여성 성 연기자들이 자신의 몸을 통제할 수 있다는 환상에 사로잡혀 이윤을 위해 이 분야로 끌려 들어가고, 다른 한편으로는 자신의 노동에서 소외되고 무자비하게 잉여 가치를 박탈당하는 방식도 살펴봅니다. 이 논문은 이러한 문제를 살펴봄으로써 중국적 특성을 지닌 성 풍경을 제시하고자 한다.

키워드: 키워드: 디지털 인류학, 중국의 섹슈얼리티, 소프트코어 포르노, 감정적/정서적 노동, 에로틱 자본

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