Abstract
Focusing on the Chinese context, this investigation addresses how digital labor platforms as specific instances of social media, mediate interactions between workers and clients. This article addresses the evolving landscape of domestic labor in contemporary China, specifically focusing on female internal migrant workers - commonly referred to as “Ayi’s” — in the gig economy. More specifically, by employing a feminist intersectional lens, we analyze the platformization of migrant Ayi’s identities on digital labor platforms and Chinese super-apps like WeChat and Swan Daojia. We also address how these rural-to-urban migrants may use these platforms to create new narratives for themselves. Based on in-depth interviews with 15 female migrant workers alongside a walkthrough study of three digital labor platforms, Ayi’s are found to represent themselves by branding themselves. This form of self-marketing offers the potential to transform their visibility in public from perceived low-skilled laborers to “pre-packaged” professionals. While enhancing visibility, and thereby improving the standing of some, the representational practices of Ayi’s also offer insights into newly emergent forms of vulnerability and marginalization, shaped by gender, migrant status, and socioeconomic class.

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Introduction
The term “Ayi” (ä yí), commonly translated as “aunt” in English, holds broad significance in Chinese society. It is generally used as a form of respectful address towards older women. In urban China, the term “Ayi” has become synonymous with female workers performing domestic labor. Ayi’s often perform a range of household duties, including cleaning, cooking, and caring for children. Twenty-six-year-old Lili, who works as a live-in tutor, presented herself as a “domestic Ayi ()” in her profile on the digital platform WeChat (see Figure 1) and also identified as such during our interview. She is comfortable with being recognized by this label which signifies a certain mature standing, which is revealing given that she considers herself also a young professional. This ambiguity reflects how particular intersections of gender, age, and migration status become markers of distinction within the gig economy. In this scenario, the term denotes not only Ayi’s occupational roles but also conveys a sense of respect, expertise, and intimacy. Nowadays, “Ayi” is commonly used by clients, companies as well as domestic workers, and in media and public discourse. In everyday use, the term blends folk, customary, and vernacular connotations (Yan, 2008).
This article focuses on domestic Ayi’s in the platform-based gig economy in contemporary urban China. Today, digitalization has permeated domestic and personal services, and transformed how customers find workers. Despite the main function of linking clients with workers, digital platforms also provide a space of sociality, shaped by possibilities for digital identity formation, curating one’s visibility, and facilitating connectivity and interactions among clients, workers, and agencies (Nieborg and Helmond, 2019). In Asia, and in China in particular, so-called “super-apps” have proliferated. A super-app is a multifunctional application, usually built for mobile devices such as smartphones or tablets. The super-app integrates a wide range of services, such as social-networking, self-profiling, messaging, photo and video-sharing, payments, shopping, buying services, and more, into a single platform. In China, super-apps like WeChat increasingly mediate labor within the gig economy, and thereby blurring boundaries between digital labor and traditional social media platforms (Steinberg, et al., 2022). Digital labor platforms, either functioning as a standalone application or are parasitic on super-apps like WeChat and Dianping, can simultaneously encourage users to set up a profile while implementing text messaging, voice and video calls, digital payments, information aggregation, maps, and other functions (Chen, et al., 2018; Steinberg, et al., 2022). As shown in Figure 1, Lili created and circulated her profile on WeChat, in order to curate her professional social media presence, communicate with clients, and make financial transactions. China’s digital labor platforms, as such, offer a unique case where super-apps and social media features converge, creating a hybrid space for workers and clients to connect and build a more socially networked version of the digital labor market.

Figure 1: Lili’s profile is shared on the platform WeChat. Information provided by Lili.
The process of digitalization also reflects the gradual acceleration of the domestic industry’s characteristics of informality, unskilledness, precarity, and exploitation (International Labour Organization, 2021). Despite the abundance of literature on the gig economy and platform labor, as well as a growing scholarly interest in gender and feminist perspectives in scrutinizing platform work (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; James, 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño, et al., 2022), female migrant workers, who play a key role in domestic social media platforms, have received little attention. This article seeks to offer a corrective. Currently, the domestic industry in China has a workforce of over 30 million employees (Mo, et al., 2022). The majority of them identify as women migrant laborers. The female platform workers conducting domestic work face several disadvantages, as they are rendered invisible within their respective households, and societal and digitally reinforced structures. Moreover, the gender disparity indicates there may be intersectional barriers, based on gender, migrant status, and class which deter some women migrant workers from seeking offline, traditional forms of employment and instead motivate them to pursue digital labor alternatives.

This study contributes to a better understanding of emerging forms of platform-based domestic labor by illustrating how migrants achieve professionalization and valorization through platform-mediated recruitment and packaging. By introducing the concept of “menu-driven identities” (Nakamura, 2002), this paper adds a new dimension to the literature on digital labor and marginalization, drawing attention to the privacy risks and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by workers resulting from the platformization of their digital identities. In addition, this research, grounded in the context of internal rural-to-urban migration in China, emphasizes how super-apps exacerbate vulnerabilities based on gender, migrant status, and class within China’s urban-rural dualistic migration pattern. Empirically, we draw from an analysis of three selected domestic social media super-apps, namely Swan Daojia, Ayilaile.com, and Ayibang, as well as in-depth interviews with 15 migrant workers from various Chinese cities. We deploy a feminist intersectional lens to analyze how the branding representations of these migrant workers’ identities on social media are constructed in relation to both the purpose and functionality of the platform, and the overarching gendered politics of domestic work.

We structure this article as follows. First, we contextualize migrant domestic work in China and in the platform economy literature. The focus is in particular on the commodification of visibility which underpins the intersectional platformed identities of migrant domestic workers. Workers are expected to advertise their domestic labor, but in order to do so they increasingly have to perform digital labor to be seen. We propose to study platformed branding of digital labor with the notion of “menu-driven identity” to tease out how marginalized users have made do with limited means of digital representation. Next, we provide methodological and ethical considerations. Finally, the empirical findings are organized and presented thematically in terms of the platform’s claimed professionalism and transparency. We reveal and discuss the configuration of neoliberal subjectivity on the domestic platforms in relation to workers’ characteristics, particularly migrant status, and the discursive branding strategies of classification and exclusion.

Contextualizing domestic work and trans-local domestic workers in China

China’s domestic work sector has been profoundly configured by migration, gender, and class politics (W. Sun, 2009; Wallis, 2016). According to the annual report on China’s domestic work service development, nearly 90 percent of domestic workers are rural-to-urban migrant laborers, and women dominate (Mo, et al., 2022). This trend reflects a global pattern where reproductive labor is often shouldered by racialized migrant women moving from less developing to more developed areas (Hochschild, 2014; Anderson, 2000; Fraser, 2016). In the Chinese context, the domestic work sector unfolds within internal labor migration, with the reproductive labor transferring across different social classes (Yan, 2008). This specific situation is significantly shaped by China’s modernization trajectory and neoliberal governmentality (Wallis, 2016). A case in point is the legacy of the household registration system (known as the hukou system in China), which categorizes a citizen as either a rural or urban resident, and influences citizens’ access to various social services, educational resources, and employment prospects.

Rural women domestic workers, particularly, navigate unequal conditions of work, with intersecting inequalities of class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, and migration status (Duffy, et al., 2015). First, the profession of domestic work has been long marked by gendered segregation, rooted in broader socio-cultural norms that ascribe household and caregiving responsibilities primarily to women (Lan, 2006). Such entrenched segregation has systematically rendered domestic work “invisible” and “devalued” (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003), characterized by irregular labor, marker vulnerability, and marginalized social status (Tong, 2018). Second, the hukou system and suzhi ( ) discourse further marginalize migrant workers structurally and culturally. Most migrant laborers are constrained to engage in “three D” jobs — dirty, dangerous, and demanding (Anderson, 2000; W. Sun, 2009) — with low incomes and lacking benefits. The rural hukou also restricts urban amenities like health insurance, subsidized housing, and public schools. The dual-tiered entitlement system under the “interplay of economic transformation and stage regulation”, marginalizes rural-to-urban migrants into second-class citizens and keeps them in precarious situations [1]. Additionally, the “three D” jobs and urban-rural divide further shape the identity of migrant workers as a population lacking suzhi, which means “quality” in English and emphasizes the social quality of an individual’s physical, ethical, and educational attributes (Anagnost, 2004). China’s neoliberal governmentality discourse uses suzhi to regulate labor migration and reflect migrant workers’ market value (Anagnost, 2004; Yan, 2008). Yan (2008) suggested that official discourse supports the recruitment of rural women workers for urban domestic services as a form of social education to improve their situations. However, these rural women are commonly portrayed as having low suzhi, lacking education, literacy,
Despite the formal recognition of domestic work as a legitimate profession in the 2000s, it is still not included in the Labor Contract Law introduced in 2008 [2], and remains largely informal and unregulated (Tong, 2018). Generally, domestic workers are recruited via the introduction of relatives, friends, and neighbors, or through intermediary agencies (Liu, 2017). These agencies often charge fees without standard regulations. Some deduct a month’s salary from the domestic worker as a commission, while other “illegal intermediaries”, charge fees without providing actual services. This private and “non-regulatory” relation differs from a formalized contract-based relation, placing domestic workers in a legally vulnerable position, where they may face the risk of exploitation, such as underpayment of wages and physical bullying (Liu, 2017). The market-oriented business paradigm, meanwhile, dictates that the fundamental nature of domestic service is to optimize the interests of intermediaries and employers. In-home care and cleaning workers, in consequence, chronically experience situations of irregularity, exploitation, and informality.

The introduction of digital platforms has transformed the domestic service sector, with a surge in online providers (Ticona, et al., 2018). This development promises to formalize the intermediate process (Tandon and Rathi, 2024) and offer precise, broad, and refined services. Particularly in China since the 2010s, online marketplaces and mobile app-based domestic service platforms have expanded, with platforms like Ayibang, Ayilaile.com, and Qingxi Daojia becoming the primary clearinghouse for childcare, elderly care, cleaning, and tutoring, etc. In parallel, several Internet giants, such as JD.com, Meituan, and 58.com, have entered this sector, offering services through subcontracting arrangements with local intermediary companies. Moreover, many region-based smaller domestic service companies have capitalized on social media super apps such as WeChat, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin, for outreach and operations.

Migrant workers make up a substantial part of the workforce in the on-demand platform economy (P. Sun and Zhao, 2024; van Doorn, 2020; van Doorn and Vijay, 2024), but the demographic is experiencing nuanced shifts. There is a reported sharp rise in income levels among domestic workers, now comparable to the remunerations of recent college graduates (LaValle, 2019), but benefits like health insurance remain exclusive. Research has shown that the sector in China is seeing a move towards higher professionalism and income (Rathi and Tandon, 2021; Mo, et al., 2022), with changing migration patterns due to hukou reforms and reduced urban-rural divide (Xiang, 2005). These shifts have catalyzed a reconfiguration in the migration patterns of domestic workers, with higher income becoming a key factor (Lan, 2014). Therefore, the conventional domestic labor workforce which is commonly associated with low levels of education, low suzhi, modest wages, and older age — is being increasingly supplanted by a workforce of younger, professionalized migrants, reflecting a shift towards a more skilled, younger, and higher-paid digital labor force (Mo, et al., 2022).

Situating domestic work in the platform economy

The gig economy, characterized by Uber-like digital platforms that connect workers with consumers of services, is expanding globally and becoming an infrastructural and integrated part of everyday life (Collins, 2020; de Ruyter and Brown, 2019; Leurs, 2023; van Doorn and Vijay, 2024). This paradigm necessitates workers to engage in task-based “gigs” through platforms. Different from standard employment relationships, the workers are non-employees, task-compensated, and platform-mediated (van Doorn, 2017; Bajwa, et al., 2018).

This platformization process has not only reconfigured employment relations, but formalized transactional and hiring processes (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; van Doorn, et al., 2023). In the domestic sector, platforms promised their employment placement models are more transparent, accountable, and regulated than traditional placement agencies (Rathi and Tandon, 2021). Technical affordances such as digital transactions and recording tasks facilitate the platforms comply with regulations (Tandon and Rathi, 2024). However, such selective regulation prioritizes financial transaction formalization over the security of employment or social welfare (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; van Doorn, 2020).

Digital technologies are used to create new forms of visibility of domestic workers through increased surveillance of workers (Brown, 2011). Ticona and Mateescu (2018) shed light on the pivotal role care work platforms play in enhancing visibility, which effectively converts workers’ online digital identity characteristics into tangible benchmarks for securing employment opportunities. These profiles are meticulously curated, highlighting skills, expertise, and availability. Yet, visibility is highly individualized and predicated upon various metrics like personal backgrounds, performance ratings, and trust-centric brandings (Tandon and Rathi, 2024; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Workers’ profiles are standardized to facilitate comparison and ranking, showcasing the specific qualities of workers. However, this demand for visibility risks repeating stereotypes leading to the reinforcement of pre-existing inequalities among domestic workers (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Demographic variables like race, gender, migration status become entangled with digital literacy requirements, such as Internet connectivity, response times, and digital confidence. This black-boxed algorithmic governance process often feeds off from metrics that contribute to disparities (Fetterolf, 2022; Flanagan, 2019; Ticona, et al., 2018; van Doorn, 2017).
In addition, the “currency” of the gig economy, the reputation and trust between workers and potential clients (Tanz, 2014), is algorithmically quantified and presented in a way that influences outcomes (Irani and Silberman, 2016). Establishing trust requires extensive verification and surveillance, involving background checks, social media engagements, and positive reviews (Tandon and Rathi, 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño, et al., 2022). These elements facilitate representing and branding domestic workers as “trusted strangers” one would welcome into one’s houses [3]. Fetterolf (2022) further adds that the “passion for the job”, which posits “care as a passion first, and a job second” [4], markedly amplifies visibility, thereby bolstering trustworthiness during the search process. The care labor to deliver domestic work, the digital labor to be seen, and the emotional labor to convey “passion”, in this sense, are commodified as a form of visibility labor (Abidin, 2016). Workers are expected to be willing to engage in the “visibility game” in order to appear in the top rank of search results (Cooper, 2019; Duffy, et al., 2021; Fetterolf, 2022).

Digital identities and menu-driven marginalization

Platformization has redefined identity construction, fostering a new space where individuals are expected to present themselves online. Digital identities are co-shaped by how users navigate the affordances of interfaces as well as by how users shape communities through socio-cultural practices and ideological meaning-making. Digital identity construction does not happen in an ideological void. Digital identities on digital labor platforms are for example commonly represented in the form of profiles which are inherently constrained and limited as they are “menu-driven identities” (Nakamura, 2002).

More than 20 years ago Nakamura (2002) proposed the concept of “menu-driven identity” to address how identity can be constructed digitally by users selecting options from specific, detailed menus. This system offers initial broad, general categories and becomes increasingly narrowed down, forcing “the user to choose ‘what’ they are, and allows only one choice at a time” [5]. These options are typically singular and restrictive, users “have no choice” but to select from a limited range of available profiling options, leaving no room for any kind of hybridity save, except for the option of “other”. Nakamura (2002) argued that these menus inherently prioritize dominant cultural norms, thereby limiting the space for users to express identities that challenge those norms. For marginalized users such as people of color, this constriction can be particularly acute. Digital and critical race scholars argue that racial categorizations are built into the logic of contemporary platforms and digital systems of classification and enumeration (Stark, 2018). Platforms frequently fail to provide categories that truly reflect users’ self-identifications, compelling them to select labels that are either restrictive, narrow, or essentializing. In other words, from the moment platforms are built, design and programming decisions reflect an “ideal user” and thereby include some and exclude others (Mulvin, 2021). Moreover, the algorithms that underpin platform operations can perpetuate stereotypes by favoring specific items recorded on a digital profile in search requests (Noble, 2018). For example, a user’s name or profile image may be overly emphasized at the expense of their qualifications or work history, which can result in biased treatment (Roth, 2014). Additionally, items that show up at the top of a search are generally considered more reliable than those that do not (Noble, 2018).

Although platforms allow users to express their digital identities in a variety of ways “the choices a social media site offers afford particular types of representations and relations” [6]. In recent years, platforms have taken initiatives to foster inclusivity by offering a wider array of identity markers in menus and allowing for richer profile descriptions beyond mere checkboxes (Bivens, 2017). Nonetheless, it must be noted that in the digital platform labor market, drop-down menus are common ways to curate content on workers’ profiles. These content prompts are also made to function as individualized visibility mechanism (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Fetterolf, 2022). Customers browsing offers on the platform might make discriminatory selections based on certain digital identity markers, bypassing qualified workers of color, or workers of a certain age in favor of those who fit certain gender, age, race, or class-based stereotypes. Moreover, platform companies themselves might exploit data in user profiles to manipulate or control workers (Bozdag, 2013; Bishop, 2019). Algorithms might prioritize workers who are less efficient or more readily available, leading to a race to the bottom that undervalues workers’ skills and time (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Fetterolf, 2022). As such, the menu-driven identities may result in forms of menu-driven marginalizations, exposing a critical tension within the digital labor platforms. While these platforms promise workers a new space for self-representation as they can curate their appearance, the constraints of these menus or checkboxes can exacerbate existing inequalities and further exclude particular workers.

Methodology

This study is part of a larger ethnographic research project on platform-based female migrant laborers in China, derived from the first author’s doctoral project. It uses a mixed qualitative approach to integrate both online and offline observational and interview data. The findings presented in this article specifically focus on a subset of fieldwork data concerning how domestic workers are (made) visible on home service platforms. Using a walkthrough method (Light, et al., 2018), this research also
collected materials such as screenshots, features, and search results of platforms, which we used to supplement interview data and field notes.

This study draws from a corpus of interviews with 15 female domestic workers from different cities across China, all of whom have mobile experiences, moving from rural to urban areas or from third-tier to first-tier cities. The first author conducted an eight-month ethnographic fieldwork in two urban centers in Beijing and Chongqing, and engaged in observations of the living and working conditions of the participants. Online interviews and digital ethnography were employed as a means of data collection in regions outside of the two cities, due to the implementation of the zero-COVID policies and intermittent lockdowns in China during the fieldwork period from April to November 2022. Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 60 to 120 minutes, were conducted in either Mandarin or Sichuanese. The offline interviews took place either at the workplaces of participants or at their homes, to ensure they felt comfortable, while online interviews were carried out through WeChat. Participants were required to provide their consent prior to the interview and voluntarily provided screenshots of their platform interfaces and other pictures. All names mentioned in the article are pseudonymized and certain data in the screenshots of worker’s profiles on platforms are blurred to limit the possibility of re-identification (Roberts, 2015).

Respectively, the 15 participants included one founder, one manager (also called a broker), and 13 workers. They offered services through 10 distinct domestic service platforms and all of them possessed prior working experience in the field. The occupational roles varied, including work such as cleaning, housekeeping, childcare, live-in tutors, household organizing, and home massage services (see Table 1). In addition, the first author conducted a one-year-long digital ethnography to observe participants’ digital practices on Douyin, WeChat Moments, and Douban, analyzed as supplementary materials. The study obtained permission from the Utrecht University Faculty Ethics assessment Committee Humanities (FEtC-H) Institutional Review Board (General Chamber, Application # 22-027-02).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>origin</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Type of work</th>
<th>Working platform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cui Jie</td>
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<td>Beijing</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Live-in nanny</td>
<td>WeChat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang Xue</td>
<td>Handan, Hebei</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Ziru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ming</td>
<td>Fuxin, Liaoning</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>58 Daojia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fang Lian</td>
<td>Henan</td>
<td>Shanghai</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Ziru/WeChat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Guangzhou</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Lan Yueliang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siwen</td>
<td>Jiangsu</td>
<td>Wuhan</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Swan Daojia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nana</td>
<td>Nanyang, Henan</td>
<td>Xi’an</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>Qingxi Daojia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yue</td>
<td>Shanxi</td>
<td>Beijing</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Cleaner</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lili</td>
<td>Hubei</td>
<td>Shenzhen</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Swan Daojia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qi</td>
<td>Yunnan</td>
<td>Shenzhen</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Postpartum doula/Broker</td>
<td>Huangqi (WeChat)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Xiaoyou</td>
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<td>Beijing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Live-in childcare</td>
<td>yi Laile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hua</td>
<td>Rural Chongqing</td>
<td>Chongqing</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Domestic organizer</td>
<td>Xiao Zhushou</td>
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<td>Zeling</td>
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</table>
To understand the nuanced operational mechanisms of different platforms as described by the participants, the authors proceeded a walkthrough of each digital platform mentioned by the interviewees. This was aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the specific digital operations and interactions of platform workers. The first author downloaded the apps and initiated use, setting up a profile in the capacity of a worker offering services and in the capacity of a client seeking workers. During the process, the author observed and systematically recorded the mobile applications’ screens, features, and flows of activity (Light, et al., 2018), and discontinued promptly when sensitive ethical or privacy issues came up, such as further communication with company managers. The first author randomly browsed through the profiles of workers by selecting different location and job types and took screenshots as supplementary material for content analysis. All materials were transcribed and coded using Nvivo and were subsequently thematically analyzed (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

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**Findings**

*From suzhi to professionalism*

A discourse of professionalism is reshaping the identities and practices of workers on Chinese super-apps. Although the suzhi discourse has long shaped Chinese societal attitudes towards domestic work, emphasizing it as a low-status, low-skilled occupation (Jacka, 2005), the platformization of the domestic sector has accelerated the formalization and specialization of household work (Lan, 2014; Rathi and Tandon, 2021). A major manifestation of this professionalization is the requirement and representation of certificates, indicating a shift from a suzhi-based assessment to an evaluation grounded on digital indicators of skills and performance.

*Certificates as capital*

Certificates have become an indispensable part of how domestic workers represent themselves and connect with clients on platforms. They are not just pieces of paper; they symbolize a worker’s dedication, expertise, and reliability. First, as a benchmark for platform-based care work, skills certification is standardized and prominently featured on a worker’s online profile page (see Figure 2). Taking the platform Swan Daojia as an example, “assessment” appears as a distinctive section on the personal profile page, documenting the specific training content and date that the worker has passed examinations. Within the on-demand tasks posted on the platform, “obtaining certifications” is often a fundamental requirement. Hua, an entrepreneur from a household organization platform, underscores the significance of certificates: “To become a specialized home organizer, one must have accredited skill certification.” Also, Qi, a former postpartum doula, and now a care service broker further elaborates:

> “The first thing that (the platform intermediaries) require Ayi’s is their skills; they must go through formal platform training and possess relevant certifications ... Only after verifying that their preparations are in order, we [start] matching them with clients.”

In this context, the certification process goes beyond merely representing industry standardization. Instead, we found certificates are used as symbols of personal branding, enabling workers to communicate a sense of professionalism and trustworthiness (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). In turn, digital certificates shape how the workers are perceived, elevating the public professional branded image of domestic workers both in substance and form.
Second, certification is a vehicle for enhancing the worker’s upward mobility. On the one hand, it acts as a prerequisite for workers aspiring to advance into specialized and more remunerative roles. Such transitions typically necessitate the completion of targeted training programs in niche areas, such as the “Private chef” and “Filipino nanny” certificates, as shown in Figure 2. Possession of these certifications is not merely symbolic but a fundamental criterion for advancing to better positions. For example, participants Nana and Yue, who work as cleaners, point out the hierarchy of work within the platform and also their aspirations to be “upgraded” as higher-paid babysitters:

“This company [platform] is stratified in its organization. You may begin [working] as a daily cleaner, but if your performance is particularly good ... [your record has] no complaints, or no bad reviews within three months, you may be eligible for a ‘star nanny’ training ... After getting certificates, you can ascend to the position of a nanny, and your salary will also rise.”

On the other hand, the accumulation of certifications serves as a tangible indicator of a domestic worker’s experience and competence, reflecting their experience,
The walkthrough data shows this array of certificates can enable a worker to “stand out” in the digital job selection process to a great extent, positioning them as a preferable candidate for specialized tasks through a process of platformed branding. Such as in the hierarchy of domestic certificates, the title of “Filipino nanny” represents the highest level, attainable only through completing a particular training. This designation is prominently displayed on digital profiles, with corresponding algorithmically enhanced higher result rankings and increased wages. Yet, it is crucial to note that the title “Filipino nanny” here does not refer to laborers from the Philippines but rather to Chinese workers who have undergone a particular training. The certificate of “Filipino nanny” exploits associations with the transnational Filipino “super maids”. It offers a distinctive cohort of trained Ayi’s added value and comparative advantage (Guevarra, 2014, 2010). Platforms use this racialized branding of domestic working women, selling it as a pathway to achieve a coveted status and higher classification.

Commercialized professionalism

Notably, certificates are essentially products “sold” to workers by platforms. Each training course requires workers to pay a substantial admission fee to the platform intermediary. Participant Lili, for instance, after being unemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic, spent her “last bit of money” on two training courses offered by a care-provider platform, lured by the promise of stable employment and a decent income as a domestic Ayi:

“I was really short on money at the time, and the [platform] was asking me to pay [such an expensive fee] … I was very resistant to … but somehow, I don’t know if I was brainwashed or what as they kept persuading me … Eventually, I thought: Fine, I’m unemployed anyway, and if being a domestic Ayi can earn 7,000 or 8,000 yuan (approx. 1,000 euros) a month, then I would have a try. So, I just handed over the money and went to take the training.”

Nonetheless, their upward social mobility is constrained by the exclusivity of certificates within the domestic platform industry. Typically, there is no interoperability of certificates between large-scale domestic service platforms, and there is no unified standard for certificate recognition within the field of domestic work in China (Mo, et al., 2022). It means that if a worker wants to switch to another platform, they need to pass again the training programs of the new platform, which represents a form of “double” exploitation of the workers — financially and energetically — consequently binding domestic workers to platforms. This limiting of interoperability of the digital identity profiles of workers of echoes the concept of “sticky labor” in the food delivery gig economy (Berheide, 2013; Sun, et al., 2022). It means that if a worker wants to switch to another platform, they need to pass again the training programs of the new platform, which represents a form of “double” exploitation of the workers — financially and energetically — consequently binding domestic workers to platforms.

Professional certifications, thus, become a new manifestation of cultural capital that is increasingly being platformized. Bourdieu (1986) defined cultural capital as the degree of familiarity with the dominant culture and mastery of its norms. Domestic platforms strategically commodify and fetishize certifications, imbuing them with both material and symbolic value, analogous to currency within these digital platform ecosystems. Their efficacy depends on the recognition of these certificates as valuable symbols, serving as “a force, a power or capacity to exploit, therefore considered legitimate” and capable of generating symbolic profits [8]. Indeed, the presence of certificates may afford Ayi’s the opportunity to mitigate discrimination based on existing and observable attributes such as gender, age, place of origin, and appearance. However, the additional costs and labor associated with obtaining these certificates further consolidate the uneven distribution of this platformized cultural capital among domestic workers, favoring certain individuals over others in the management of digital technology and entrenching existing social stratifications (Ollier-Malaterre, et al., 2019).

“A worm that lives only in summer has no knowledge of ice ... Ayi’s from the countryside do not comprehend the true essence of what ‘quality’ life necessitates, this status quo… it is difficult to change ... [clients’] complaints have no way to solve ... no one can fundamentally address this problem in the short term.”
Therefore, the platforms’ practice of “packaging” domestic workers with professional certification on digital profiles represents a deeper symbolic entrapment within platform capitalism. It manipulates the aspirations of the labor force, reinforcing a cycle of dependency and exploitation. This mechanism does not effectively address underlying inequalities inherent in suzhi discourse; rather, it capitalizes on them, often magnifying the inequities it ostensibly promises to ameliorate.

**With hyper-visibility comes vulnerability**

Digital platforms have transformed historically invisible domestic laborers into hyper-visible subjects of scrutiny and surveillance (Daniels, 1987; Duffy and Schwartz, 2018; Mosseri, 2022). The transition to platforms has offered workers individualized forms of visibility. Through their digital profiles and rating systems they can construct a trustworthy image for potential clients (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). However, “menu-driven” digital visibility (Nakamura, 2002), which we will discuss in this section, brings forth new challenges of privacy, inequality, and the reconfiguration of labor dynamics for domestic workers. These challenges result from asymmetrical transparency, invasive surveillance, hierarchical classification, and black-boxed algorithmic representation.

*Transparency for whom?*

Platforms claim to assure the transparency and high quality of domestic services through multifaceted vetting processes of workers. “Rigorous” and “comprehensive” screening criteria are employed as part of their strategies of branding themselves as trustworthy agencies, which agencies seek to display on their platform pages. For instance, Ayibang highlights that the caregivers presented on their platform are “the best of best” and have undergone “six layers of strict evaluation and comprehensive background checks”, to engender trust and comfort in clients. The screening involves multiple checks: verifying personal identification documents, passing physical health examinations, participating in skill training, background checks including criminal records and financial risks, and assessing the worker’s past work history and family situation (see Figures 3 and 4). Once information is verified, this is shown in the form of badges or text on the worker’s digital profiles, with the number and type of banners varying based on the outcomes of each worker’s evaluation.

Yet, as shown in Figure 3, platforms subtly shift the responsibility of trust-based governance onto new labor dynamics (van Dijck, 2021). They issue a “friendly” note that declares the limitations of their accountability and transparency — asserting that while worker information is verified by the platforms, the risk remains with the client hiring workers. Potential labor conflicts, happening outside of the digital platform in private households, are rendered invisible again as risks are transferred to consumers and workers.
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**Figure 3:** A care worker’s profile on Ayilaile.com, showing various evaluation criteria.
Platforms further shape “transparent” management mechanisms by engaging clients in oversight. This manifests in a dual surveillance perspective that combines “algorithmic management”, facilitated by rating and reputation systems (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Wood, et al., 2018), with pervasive monitoring inherent in domestic service performed in private spaces (Daniels, 1987). Algorithm-driven search engines play a vital role in determining the (in)visibility of workers (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018), with those with higher ratings, positive reviews, certificates or greater experience (indicated by a higher number of completed orders and more certifications) being more prominently featured on search pages, thereby enhancing their prospects of securing job opportunities (Fetterolf, 2022). Conversely, domestic service, even more than other types of gig work, is subject to continuous scrutiny by employers, with workers constrained by internal surveillance during their labor processes. These monitoring processes often transform into implicit metrics influencing labor dynamics, ultimately reflected in the form of the platform’s review system.

During our interviews, domestic workers shared that the prevailing rating system is more concerned with the interests of the platform companies’ reputation and image, rather than their own (in)visibility. Paradoxically, profiles potentially compromise workers’ interests. Yue points out that while ratings have limited influence on order acquisition due to the market’s supply falling short of demand, negative reviews significantly affect their income. She explained:

“There is no reward for positive reviews; it merely ‘beautifies’ the data ... Conversely, if [a client] gives you a bad review, you could be charged the equivalent of four hours of [cleaning] for nothing. This results in a day’s work rendered futile.”

Under this condition, workers with bad reviews lose their income, and the platform returns their money to the customer in the form of a refund. Yang Xue and Ming further added:

“[The pursuit of positive reviews] stems from the company’s need for favorable data ... Poor evaluations are detrimental to the company’s [reputation] ... we face financial penalties [if we get bad reviews].”
In the meantime, “no client complaints” is the primary benchmark for evaluating the digital identities of domestic workers. This scenario however in practice demands workers to engage in additional physical and emotional labor to guarantee client satisfaction. For example, our interviewee Yang Xue meticulously observed clients’ expressions and reactions during each cleaning task to gauge their satisfaction levels; Fang Lian frequently took the initiative to undertake tasks beyond her prescribed responsibilities, such as washing and organizing clothes for customers, to circumvent potential bad reviews. Nevertheless, Fang Lian also critically highlighted the idiosyncrasies of domestic services and the irrationality of the platform’s rules. She argued:

“There is a lack of a quantifiable standard for [domestic] tasks. According to the standard of the platform, that is, the client does not complain ... I think it is unreasonable, as the tasks are performed by humans, not machines ... Some people are quick, and some people are slow, right? ... Clients’ expectations [also] differ; some demand thoroughness, while others are content with basic cleaning ... But if a client thinks the cleaning is subpar and issues a negative review, it results in a 200 yuan (approx. 25 euros) penalty, effectively rendering the day’s labor void.”

Consequently, domestic workers generally find themselves subjected to extended working hours, enduring fatigue, and exploitation (Rani, et al., 2022), partly under coercion to maintain a positive digital appearance on the platforms. Often, they face a lack of agency in addressing bad reviews, leaving them without options to articulate their perspectives or grievances to clients. Allowing workers to respond to reviews or to rate clients would increase transparency and would ensure their digital profiles become a more level playing field (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018).

The “transparency” promised by domestic digital labor platforms raises questions regarding to whom transparency is actually directed. Ostensibly designed to engender trust among clients and formalize the digital trading process (Tandon and Rathi, 2024), this transparency is conspicuously one-sided and asymmetrical (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). It heavily favors the visibility of workers from the perspective of clients, while simultaneously obscuring the realities of the laborers’ experiences and challenges, placing them within an opaque, highly centralized platform power structure (van Dijck, et al., 2018). These platforms take workers’ profiles and client reviews as tools for brand-enhancing credibility and trustworthiness. However, for the workers, transparency morphs into a form of pervasive surveillance, whereby their labor is continuously monitored and variably exploited based on fluctuating standards (Rodríguez-Modroño, et al., 2022).

**Sorting workers out**

Intrusive surveillance extends to the expected excessive disclosure of domestic workers’ personal information. Basically, in the care sector, as illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 4, workers have to provide specific personal information, including age, origin, ethnicity, Chinese zodiac ( ) and astrological signs, educational background, family situation, and work experience. These details are displayed in their digital profiles, rendering many of the unofficial, implicit cultural norms and biases within the Chinese domestic sector significantly visible and explicit.

Firstly, the industry’s tacit age-based hierarchy and discrimination, intertwined with norms of heteronormativity and digital exclusion, engender new forms of disparities. The type of employment available to workers varies depending on their age stages. Qi, as a broker, explained the internal hiring criteria of domestic service platforms: “Age is the primary criterion. Even for roles such as elderly care, we do not consider candidates over 45 years old without experience.” Generally, for the higher-wage positions such as infant care and postpartum doula, workers aged between 30 and 45, with personal lived experience in marriage and child-rearing, are favored for employment on these platforms, and are more likely to be recommended to clients. Conversely, those over 50 or younger are often steered towards roles in cleaning, nannying, or hourly work. Twenty-six-year-old Lili, for instance, despite having already passed training in infant care and early childhood education, was not competitive in the market due to her lack of personal parenting experience. She said: “Those who have had children know how to care for babies, unlike us younger ones. Usually, they [platform agencies] won’t let anyone under 30 years old care for a baby. They require that you be married and have a child.” Meanwhile, for 51-year-old Cui Jie, she transitioned from an infant carer to a daytime nanny after her 50s and acknowledged the implicit ageism in the domestic service market: “Although the platform says women under 55 [the legal retirement age for women in China] is able to take [maternal-child caring] tasks, the available options decrease with age.”

The age obstacles that they encounter in accessing specific platform work underline age-based prejudices and ubiquitous gendered, heteronormative norms within the care service sector.

Moreover, the age-based hierarchical system of domestic platforms intertwines with the digital exclusion of the elderly, particularly those from rural areas. The platforms digitize the assessments of training, requiring workers to take tests on digital devices (Suh and Hsieh, 2019). While this shift to digital modalities might seem simple for younger workers, a required level of digital literacies may result in a formidable digital divide for the older workforce. Lili shared her observation:

“The older workers, especially, find it difficult to even read the questions clearly [on smartphones]. I know an older Ayi who failed her first test and barely passed on the second. She is older, and her vision is not very good.”
The outcomes of training tests are listed as scores on their profiles. Additionally, proficiency in various mobile apps, including mapping, food delivery, and ride-hiring services, has become an essential digital media literacy skill that workers must possess. As such, the skewed accessibility and inclusiveness of these digital domestic platforms, unfavorably affect older demographics as well as those who lack connectivity (Tverdostup and Paas, 2018; Monteiro, 2022).

Secondly, beyond age, personal characteristics are used to create “data-doubles” or digital proxies that stand in for workers (Bigo, 2014), which in turn are used for filtering on platforms, unveiling inherent discrimination and stereotypes within Chinese domestic cultures. The option “Preference for Zodiac Sign of the Worker” on Swan Daojia illustrates the prevalent role of astrological signs in the employer-employee matching process. Traditionally, clients often require workers to provide their Ba-Zi [9] (birthdate) and Chinese zodiac animal [10] for compatibility assessments. In instances where a worker’s astrological or zodiacal attributes are in conflict with clients, signaling ominous and potential challenges in their relationships, the worker is very unlikely to find employment. The hiring practices, long-standing yet uncodified, are governed not by the worker’s experience and ability, but rather by the employer’s keen aspiration to find a harmonious match between clients and workers based on entrenched Chinese astrological stereotypes (Tandoc and Ferrucci, 2014). The digitalization of this personal information further legitimizes these latent norms, with astrology functioning as an “ideology of dependence”, further exacerbating the cultural stereotypes and violations of workers’ privacy (Adorno, 2002).

Xiaokui described her encounter:

“[Platforms and employers] have various requirements, and it’s particularly frustrating ... what really bothers me is that they ask for my zodiac sign... and also, my age, appearance, family situation, and even Ba-Zi ...

Is it necessary to provide such private information as Ba-Zi?

Yes ... There is [also] regional discrimination, like biases against people from the Northeast or Henan province. It’s quite severe.”

As Xiaokui says, the filtering options on these platforms, particularly regarding education, zodiac signs and geographic origin, intensify the implicit discrimination and internal stratification that migrant workers encounter during the hiring process. Clients can select workers based on a range of educational qualifications ranging from primary to bachelor’s degrees. Platforms like Ayilaile.com even offer “crown certification” for those with higher education, as a privileged status marker (see Figure 5).

Educational levels correlate with distinct salary structures, as experienced by Lili: “[For live-in tutor], associate degree holders generally earn about 7k, bachelor’s degree holders around 7.5k, those passing CET-4 [11] in English are 8k+, and even higher for CET-6”. For 26-year-old Lili, who had no reproductive experience, this bachelor degree was the only proxy that she could include as a way to stand out. Education, thus, emerges as an additional expression of cultural capital in the digital identity profile of workers complementing other distinctions that reinforce the existing inequalities among workers.

Similarly, the platformed visibility of migrant workers is exploited to create classifiable and comparable digital identities (Bowker and Star, 2000; Cabalquinto and Wood-Bradley, 2020). These invasive requirements for visibility can disproportionately impact workers with marginalized identities, intersecting with education, age, migration status, and language levels, and may introduce additional barriers to work and fair treatment (Duffy, 2015; Triandafyllidou, 2016).
The findings unveil an ideological classification system based on personal information as well as professional certificates on domestic platforms (van Dijck, et al., 2018). Far from being mere technical or organizational tools, categories employed mirror deeper ideological biases and preferences (Bowker and Star, 2000; Bucher, 2012). Classification systems within these platforms establish hierarchies and positional preferences. The way domestic work is categorized shapes what is deemed valuable in domestic labor. This, in turn, molds workers’ self-perception and their views on their roles and career paths (Cabalquinto and Wood-Bradley, 2020). Meanwhile, these classification systems affect the distribution of resources and the evaluation of performance. They decide how to hire workers, design services, and assess them, which reflects and reinforces the ideological priorities of commercial platforms. Consequently, the visibility enabled by platformization emerges as an organizational tool rooted in platform capitalism, materializing in both tangible and symbolic forms, generating new mechanisms of invisibility and vulnerability for domestic workers.

Conclusion

Addressing China’s burgeoning gig economy, this paper provides a case study of the construction of migrant workers’ identities on super-apps and domestic digital labor platforms. Through an ethnographic and walk-through analysis of platforms and in-depth interviews with rural-to-urban internal migrant women who earn a living being platform workers, we examine the interplay of migration, gender, class, and digital technology in shaping the experiences and public digital identities of these workers, as well as the nuanced dynamics of visibility, professionalism, classification, and vulnerability faced by them.

Our analysis critically scrutinizes the purported “professionalization” and “transparency” claims made by domestic platforms regarding their role in regularizing and formalizing domestic service, and adopts a critical perspective on this facilitative aspect (Flanagan, 2019). Platforms that pair domestic workers with households appear innovative and personalized, but the underlying structures of digitally branding workers are inherently non-neutral and reflect and reinforce specific ideological values. On the surface, these narratives increase the visibility of migrant domestic workers, rendering them more conspicuous yet more vulnerable. In essence, domestic platforms have established what appears to be an egalitarian yet strictly hierarchical control structure, pursuing their commercial objectives under the guise of serving public values. Digital identity profiles that foreground certificates and other modes of distinction reveal how workers are expected to present themselves as desirable, trustworthy, and caring. These reflect and perpetuate societal prejudices and stereotypes, reshaping the modalities of labor control and the dynamics of power.

Overall, the findings of this research underscore the ambiguous implications of the platformization of migrant domestic workers’ identities. It calls for a critical examination of the role of digital platforms in shaping labor dynamics and the need for more equitable and transparent practices that protect the rights, well-being, and dignity of these workers. The study contributes significantly to our understanding of the intersectionality of digital labor, migration, and gender, offering insights into the broader implications of platform capitalism for marginalized labor forces.

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Notes

The Labor Contract Law (《劳动合同法》) regulates contractual relationships between employers and laborers. However, as defined by this law, the relationship between households and domestic workers does not fall under the category of a labor relation.

Ticona and Mateescu, 2018, p. 4,384.

Fetterolf, 2022, p. 65.


Ba-Zi, literally translated as “Eight Characters”, also known as Four Pillars of Destiny (四柱八字), is a Chinese astrological concept that a person’s destiny or fate can be divined by the two sexagenary cycle characters assigned to their birth year, month, day, and hour. When two individual’s Ba-Zi are said to not match (Ba-Zi Bu He), it implies a lack of compatibility in their personal relationships, potentially leading to conflicts or disharmony.

The Chinese zodiac animal system consists of 12 animal signs and each year is associated with one of these animals. When two animal signs are in direct opposition in the zodiac cycle, they are believed to clash or conflict.

The CET-4 and CET-6 are English proficiency tests in China, known as the College English Test. The CET stands for “College English Test”. These tests are designed to assess the English language proficiency of undergraduate students in China.

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