

## **“Pulling sheep’s wool”: Digital money, online thriftiness and organizational misbehaviour in a Chinese factory**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a factory in southwest China to describe the nature and significance of a group of activities that are colloquially described as “pulling sheep’s wool”. This expression, which has in recent years become a popular phrase in the nation’s rich repertoire of internet slang, refers to a wide-ranging group of thrift-oriented practices—frequently involving collecting various credits and points through novel online infrastructures such as digital shopping and payment platforms—and directed toward reaping some kind of reward, ideally involving the minimal effort possible. This paper explores the social significance of these widespread and popular online thrift activities, showing how these practices are reshaping the rhythms and structures of everyday factory life by bringing into sharp focus competing demands between online and offline, work and leisure and challenging the distinctions between these domains. We argue that online thrift-oriented practices provide a novel perspective from which to understand workers’ attitudes to labour and economic relations as they occur in the factory environment. “Pulling sheep’s wool” constitutes more than simply a money-saving activity engaged in by financially precarious semi-skilled workers. We draw attention to how these economic practices often run counter to rational economic logics. In so doing, we aim to foreground how worker’s online thrift activities have established themselves as an important avenue for workers to enact forms of “organizational misbehaviour” (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, 2015) that pose an implicit challenge to the orthodoxies of power and property that dominate the factory floor.