# Invisibility by design

Sally Tyler

Reviewed title

**Invisibility by Design: Women and Labor in Japan's Digital Economy**

Gabriella Lukács. 2020.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press
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While reading *Invisibility by Design* for review, I was struck by two news items: 1) Forbes Magazine provoked controversy by downgrading its estimate of Kylie Jenner's net worth to a scant USD 900 million, rather than the USD 1 billion previously reported when the magazine named her the world's youngest self-made billionaire, and 2) Lisa Su became the first woman to top the S&P 500 list of highest-paid CEO's.

Whatever the valuation of Jenner's cosmetics line, launched while she was still a teen, it owes much of its stratospheric success to relentless social media promotion. And Su, CEO of Advanced Micro Devices (AMD), achieved her compensation milestone at the helm of a corporation which manufacturers semiconductors for use in the digital gaming industry. Clearly, neither occurrence would have happened if not for the digital economy.

Author Gabriella Lukács would likely characterize both these examples as outliers that do not typify opportunities for women within the digital economy. She uses her fieldwork exploring the experiences of young women in Japan who became digital photographers, net idols, bloggers, online traders and, cell-phone novelists to underscore the fallacy of the digital economy as a more democratic, egalitarian, and inclusive mode of production.

The growth of Japan's digital economy in the 1990s through the first decade of the 21st Century paralleled its labor market deregulation and accompanying cultural shift in which rigidly-defined, lifetime employment opportunities were no longer the norm. At the same time, the role of women in Japanese society was rapidly evolving with greater expectation of their labor market participation, without social policies to support it, such as paid family leave and affordable childcare. As such, the development of the digital economy provides a flashpoint ripe for analysis in the context of cultural anthropology, labor, and gender, all of which Lukács does with varying success.

Some of the examples Lukács uses to illustrate her thesis that platform owners tap women's unpaid labor and make it invisible do not serve it well. The work is weighed down by overreliance on disciplinarian jargon that does little to advance her case. She repeatedly asserts that the digital economy offers instances of feminized affective labor, yet occasionally undermines her own argument by allowing that most contemporary work represents both affective and intellectual labor and even allows that some aspects of the digital economy reflect forms of reproductive labor. Jargon aside, the type of labor exemplified within the digital economy is less relevant than the question of whether it is labor in the most general sense, as in did the women who undertook the activity have an expectation of earning a living through it? The fields that Lukács examines demonstrate a mixed bag in support.

The chapter on *onna no ko shashin*, sometimes translated as girly photography, which begins the book, offers a fascinating glimpse into the groundbreaking early digital work of Hiromix, Ninagawa Mika, and Nagashima Yurie. Operating before ubiquitous selfie culture took root, these young women frequently turned their cameras on the details of their everyday lives in a vision that was both artistic and political, declaring in effect that their lives were worth memorializing. While some of the women Lukács interviewed stated a desire to become famous through their photography, none explicitly expressed the goal of using the medium to become wealthy. In fact, she offers salient examples of instances in which they rejected commercial opportunity in order to stay true to their artistic vision. Some of them continued to work in other jobs part-time, even after achieving critical acclaim. Ultimately, their stories are ambiguous and could be used either as an illustration of the inherent limitations of the digital economy or to show that creative labor may embody goals beyond the financial.

Similarly, the chapters on net idols (digital content creators who sought branding opportunity via personal websites), bloggers and cell phone novelists fail to disaggregate between motivation such as personal satisfaction, social connectivity, and desire for income. In societies where the views of young women are rarely sought or seriously examined, digital platforms can provide a voice and ready-made audience to offer validation. Absent expanded employment and economic opportunity for women in Japan, the desire for 'meaningful work' illustrated by personal fulfillment, often eluded to by Lukács's subjects, and the premium placed on work based on compensation and opportunity for advancement will likely remain muddled.

The chapter on online trading offers the best fit with Lukács's broader thesis, in that the women who commenced the labor had clear objectives to make money and were swayed by promotion of the digital realm's capacity as a conduit to wealth through part-time, irregular or amateur work not afforded by the traditional Japanese employment system. It is also the only chapter in which she illustrates in detail the extent to which platform owners derived profits from workers' labor, an assertion she makes throughout the book.

The growth in online trading in the second half of the 21st Century's first decade was synchronous with the Japanese government's goal to implement an economic transition away from traditional saving to investing. Japanese housewives, seen as non-threatening, trusted messengers, would become poster children for this seismic experiment in social engineering. The extent to which the women interviewed sought to minimize their efforts, by claiming that they only spent as much as 15 minutes a day to make USD 3,000 per month but later admitting that they initially spent months of 20-hour days in front of the computer to attain trading proficiency, serves to illustrate Lukács' argument about how the digital economy renders women's labor invisible by promoting the myth of its ease.

As a policy professional, my primary lens is admittedly in the applied context and my most salient critique of the book is that it fails to examine any policy prescriptions that could remedy the inequities Lukács attempts to describe. Was there no discussion with subjects about the extent to which wage parity, affordable child care and equal opportunity for advancement within traditional employment would have rendered the digital economy less attractive to them? Likewise, a rigorous examination of whether the digital economy merely provides a fallback when traditional opportunities stagnate or if a newer generation of workers truly prioritizes the flexibility and degree of autonomy it represents over job security and compensation would have been useful. If the latter were indicated, then an exploration of subjects' reaction to the concept of minimum basic income might be warranted.

*Invisibility by Design* offers many lively examples of the gendered impact of new work opportunities in Japan, but ultimately raises more questions than it answers. As digital platforms including Task Rabbit and Fiver grow exponentially, underscoring a dramatic global shift toward the gig economy, research leading to policies supporting worker equity becomes even more critical if the digital economy is to have any chance to fulfill its promise as the egalitarian and inclusive sphere some envision for it.

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# Caring in times of precarity

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Reviewed title

**Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women doing Creative Work in Shanghai**

Chow Yiu Fai. 2019.

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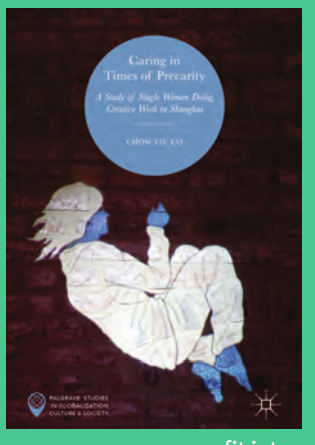


Is 'being single' or 'going solo' (Kinneret Lahad, *A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time*, Manchester University Press, 2017) still a taboo to be subsumed under singlism? One would be surprised given that in everyday worlds across the globe, the 'type' of the single – be it man or woman – has become a fairly common sight and narrative in the past two decades or so. And yet, surprisingly, there is yet not much research published about what could be considered as one of the most interesting phenomena of global urbanization and social transformation, and even less so in the context of the so-called Global South, and with respect to women. If there is, then much attention is paid to how this 'abnormal' lifestyle can be overcome, still pathologizing the single woman as 'left-over' or 'off the shelf', 'too demanding' and 'selfish', to be normalized into marriage or at least a heteronormative relationship. But like Georg Simmel's figure of the stranger, or Benjamin's *Flaneur*, the single (woman) is a fascinating – and urban – phenomenon that emerges almost hundred years later, and allows us to think about neoliberal politics of creative (self-) employment, poetics of pleasure and the possibilities of unfolding a life of one's own – despite all challenges – in urban habitats. Being single gestures towards concepts of respectability, autonomy and precarity at a particular moment and place in time.

How does a single lifestyle correspond with the highly demanding conditions of creative work in globalizing urban environs? And how does the single woman fit into an Asian realm, particularly under a paradoxical presence of Maoist notions of femininity, Confucian values and globalized and consumer-based repertoires of neo-liberal qualities of womanhood. With his book on single women in the creative industries of Shanghai, Chow Yiu Fai enriches and expands the slender field of 'single studies' and challenges views of precarity that often dominate the debate by proposing an ethics of care. The Associate Professor at the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing of Hong Kong Baptist University considers the perspective of journalists, musicians, artists, designers, and others. Altogether 25 interlocutors from various age, social and economic backgrounds were interviewed in Shanghai between 2015-17. Chow asks as well as ethnographically delineates how they experience precarity as stigmatization, stress and anxiety, but also nurture liberty, independence and choice. Care is defined as large as self-care (not to be identified with selfishness), for one's well-being, agency and aspirations towards success and recognition, be it among working class or upper middle class. The author considers intergenerational relations of single women, how single women in the media reflect their media-based representation – between glamourization and stigmatization, inequality and empowerment. He also considers the role of the city as a laboratory and catalyst but also a highly competitive and lonely space. The eight chapters and epilogue of *Caring in Times of Precarity* are a fascinating read even for non-China specialists. Chow takes the reader to the various empirical grounds he has defined in the individual chapters. The sensibility for small details, for vernacular utterances, and the ability to relate this to larger questions, marks the book as engaged and engaging. But the book is also a remarkable read for its critical recalibration of certain Western-based theories on womanhood, feminism and precarity that – as a consequence – does not fall into the trap of Asianisms and rejection of theories from the 'West' (e.g., Foucault, Mouffe). This book is certainly a good choice for scholars and students in critical area studies, Asia/Chinese Studies, Gender and Urban Studies, as well as Transcultural and Globalisation Studies.

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