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**Sullivan, J. and Kehoe, S.**

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# Truth, Good and Beauty: The Politics of Celebrity in China

Jonathan Sullivan\* and Séagh Kehoe†

## Abstract

A visit to a Chinese city of any size – looking up at downtown billboards, riding public transport, shopping at a mall – is to be in the presence of a Chinese celebrity endorsing a product, lifestyle or other symbols of “the good life.” Celebrity in China is big business, feeding off and nourishing the advertising-led business model that underpins the commercialized media system and internet. It is also a powerful instrument in the party-state’s discursive and symbolic repertoire, used to promote regime goals and solidify new governmentalities through signalling accepted modes of behaviour for mass emulation. The multi-dimensional celebrity persona, and the public interest it stimulates in off-stage lives, requires an academic focus on the workings of celebrity separate to the products that celebrities create in their professional roles. The potential to connect with large numbers of ordinary people, and the emergence of an informal celebrity-making scene in cyberspace symptomatic of changing attitudes towards fame among Chinese people, marks the special status of celebrity within China’s constrained socio-political ecology. The motivation for this article is to further scholarly understanding of how celebrity operates in China and to bring this expression of popular culture into the broader conversation about contemporary Chinese politics and society.

**Keywords:** Celebrity; internet; media; pop culture; fame; politics

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Celebrity images pervade the public spaces and private screens of contemporary China. The “exorbitant visibility of all kinds of celebrities” is testament to the maturation of a celebrity industry that feeds off and nourishes the advertising-led business model underpinning the media system and internet.<sup>1</sup> Despite its increasing ubiquity, the aura of frivolousness that surrounds celebrity perhaps explains why “Chinese stars and stardom rarely receive sustained academic attention.”<sup>2</sup> While the professional milieux of film, music and popular culture that many celebrities inhabit are recognized and closely studied sites of political and cultural power, negotiation and contestation,<sup>3</sup> the contours of Chinese celebrity remain relatively uncharted.<sup>4</sup> This is a significant gap. The capacity to reach substantial audiences and potentially influence society have made individual celebrities and the industry that creates and promotes them subject to a system of control and instrumentalization by the state. Celebrity culture is a powerful instrument in the state’s discursive and symbolic repertoire, used to promote the regime goals of orderly progress towards a modern society under the leadership of the Communist Party. The Chinese celebrity scene is characterized by contradictions. The industry is thriving, despite stringent circumscriptions applied by state and industry actors. Celebrity culture in China can be superficial, yet it retains a strong moral component. Despite the growing attraction and ease with which ordinary people can achieve celebrity status online, celebrity

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\* China Policy Institute, School of Politics and IR, University of Nottingham. Email: [jonathan.sullivan@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:jonathan.sullivan@nottingham.ac.uk) (corresponding author).

† School of Politics and IR, University of Nottingham. Email: [seagh.kehoe@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:seagh.kehoe@nottingham.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> Guo 2010, 61.

<sup>2</sup> Farquhar and Zhang 2010, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Berry and Farquhar 2006; Zhu and Berry 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Exceptions include Edwards and Jeffreys 2010; Hood 2015.

remains a “systematically hierarchical and exclusive category,” and the state, via the media and cultural industries, retains control of the symbolic economy in which it operates.<sup>5</sup> By analysing official documents from state institutions responsible for managing China’s culture industry, Chinese media discourse and online platforms, this article traces the development of the celebrity industry in China, before discussing how and why the state attempts to control its parameters and individual celebrity conduct. It then shows how the state tries to harness celebrity as a vehicle for promoting socialist values and patriotism. Finally, the article identifies the emergence of an informal celebrity-making scene in cyberspace symptomatic of changing attitudes towards fame among Chinese people, but not the state: identified as potentially subversive, the state has moved quickly to exert control over streaming platforms promising “celebritization of the ordinary.”<sup>6</sup>

### **The Emergence of China’s Celebrity Industry**

We understand celebrity as a multidimensional quality, the sum of an individual’s product and packaging, personal attributes and life beyond the professional realm. It is the celebrity persona, “a crafted and consolidated public projection of the real person, built in part out of film roles and other public appearances,”<sup>7</sup> that distinguishes celebrity from mere well-knownness. Celebrity comes in numerous forms, from “stars,” the sub-group at the apex of the celebrity hierarchy, to “celetoids,” ordinary people who become famous for a short time due to particular acts or circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Celebrities can be found across diverse professional sectors, from journalists and artists to businesspeople and athletes. The highest concentrations of celebrities, and the major constituent of the celebrity industry and culture, are the performing arts, notably film and music. While China has a long history of literary, musical and folk heroes in the Imperial and Modern eras<sup>9</sup> and concerted efforts were made to create “socialist stars” during the Mao era,<sup>10</sup> the contemporary celebrity scene is a product of processes associated with the emergence of market socialism in the reform era. Economic reforms and urbanization, increasingly widespread prosperity and the associated rise of consumerism, commercialization of the media and technological change, the growth of individualism and decline of collectivist ways of life have all contributed to the supply and demand for celebrities.

Central on the supply side was the emergence of a media and entertainment system combining control with commercialization, which created the dual constituencies of the public and the state by removing state subsidies while maintaining restrictions on permissible content.<sup>11</sup> In response, the media and entertainment industries were forced to adopt advertising-led business models while keeping their output within deliberately vague, post-hoc and moving boundaries set by the state.<sup>12</sup> Consciously apolitical soft entertainment formats were embraced as a way of achieving both ends, with substantial demand from Chinese audiences accustomed to a diet of ideologically-driven “edutainment.”<sup>13</sup> Expanded media and entertainment scenes provided opportunities for celebrity creation, with actors and singers from Hong Kong and

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<sup>5</sup> Rojek 2001, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Turner 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Shingler 2012, 125.

<sup>8</sup> Rojek 2001.

<sup>9</sup> McDermott 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Cheek 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Zhao 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Stockmann 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Donald et al. 2002; Wen 2013.

Taiwan (*Gangtai* 港台) leading the way.<sup>14</sup> Over time, the various components of the celebrity industry, including advertising, public relations (PR; *gonggong guanxi* 公关) and entertainment media have expanded and professionalized their operations. Official state media outlets such as *Xinhua* (新华), *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报) and *Global Times* (*Huanqiu shibao* 环球时报), as well as leading commercial web portals feature extensive entertainment (*yule* 娱乐) sections replete with celebrity images, features and gossip. Popular magazines like *Southern Metropolitan Entertainment Weekly* (*Nandu yule zhoukan* 南方都市报), *Entertainment Weekly* (*Yule zhoukan* 娱乐周刊) and *Star Weekly* (*Xing zhoukan* 星周刊) regularly feature interviews with celebrities, reviews of popular culture and commentary pieces on entertainers. Individual celebrity and celebrity-centred accounts on Chinese social media attract audiences in the tens of millions. The photographer anointed by *Global Times* as “China’s number one paparazzo” (*gouzai* 狗仔), Zhuo Wei 卓伟, has several million followers on Weibo.<sup>15</sup>

Absent during the Mao era, celebrity advertising endorsements returned to China in 1988 when actress Pan Hong 潘虹 and actor Li Moran 黎明 appeared in advertisements for cosmetics and medicines respectively.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, endorsements with foreign and domestic brands became a lucrative business for Chinese celebrities. There are now hundreds of Chinese advertising agencies and transnational advertising agencies operating as joint ventures, and “a majority of advertising campaigns feature celebrities”.<sup>17</sup> Chinese celebrities endorse everything from precious gems to household goods, with some individuals representing more than 20 different brands.<sup>18</sup> Chinese celebrities like the actresses Li Bingbing 冰冰 and Zhou Xun 周迅 and Olympian Liu Xiang 刘翔 have gained global recognition as representatives for Gucci, Chanel and Nike respectively. Increasingly, endorsement deals, film roles and recording contracts are facilitated through studios or agencies such as the Huayi Brothers (*Huayi xiongdi chuanmei* 华谊兄弟传媒) film and media conglomerate. Since the first PR department was set up in 1984 by state-owned pharmaceuticals firm Guangzhou Baiyunshan 白云山, hundreds of Chinese PR firms, including joint ventures with major American companies like Edelman and Ogilvy, have been established. As China’s PR industry continues to grow rapidly, degrees in Western-style PR are popular offerings at Chinese universities.<sup>19</sup> For these firms and practitioners to succeed in China’s PR industry, “cooperation and communication ties with government departments at all levels” is of critical importance.<sup>20</sup>

The major incubators for the performing arts and sports talent pools are the state-academies. Here, at these key sites for cultivating China’s future actors and musicians, children identified as having talent receive stringent training and political education. Of the top earning Chinese performing artists identified by *Forbes* magazine, and the celebrities with the most web searches per Chinese search engine *Baidu*, more than three quarters attended a state conservatory, dance or drama academy.<sup>21</sup> Actresses Gong Li 巩俐 and Zhang Ziyi 章子怡 were discovered by film director Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, himself a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy (*Beijing dianying xueyuan* 北京电影学院), while attending Beijing’s Central Academy of Drama

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<sup>14</sup> Gold 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Liao 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Sun 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Schimmelpfennig and Hollensen 2016, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Hung et al., 2011, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Yan 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Wu 2002, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Flannery 2015; Baidu. 2017. “Jinri yule mingren Paihangbang” (Today’s celebrity ranking), 10 June, [http://top.baidu.com/buzz?b=618&fr=topbuzz\\_b18](http://top.baidu.com/buzz?b=618&fr=topbuzz_b18). Accessed 10 June 2017.

(*Zhongyang xiju xueyuan* 中央戏剧学院). Action movie star Jet Li (Li Lianjie 李连杰) honed his trademark martial arts skills at Shichahai Sports School in Beijing, a state school informally known as “the cradle of Olympic talents.” Emergence from “within the system” (*tizhinei* 体制内) is one of the characteristics of Chinese celebrities and their academy training is a major source of performed or genuine gratitude towards the state and the work ethic they profess as professional performers. Those who do not thank the state in the accepted way, like sports stars Zhou Yang 杨扬 and Li Na 李娜, are exceptions and face public censure.

### Controlling Celebrity

The Chinese celebrity industry operates within an interlinked commercial, legal and political structure. Guided by the Central Publicity Department (*Zhongyang xuanchuan bu* 中央宣传部), the Ministry of Culture (*Wenhua bu* 文化部) (MOC) and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (*Guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju* 国家广播电影电视总局) (SAPPRFT; formerly SARFT) are the two key institutions that oversee celebrity-related affairs. The MOC ultimately determines “who can perform and under what circumstances,”<sup>22</sup> and plays a significant role in the selection of celebrities for ambassadorial roles and participation in state-organized expos, festivals and campaigns. SAPPRFT has the power to determine celebrity appearances across the Chinese media-scape, including prohibiting media from featuring “celebrities embroiled in scandals.”<sup>23</sup> The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC; *Guojia hulianwang xinxi bangongshi* 国家互联网信息办公室) actively manages celebrity-related content online, shutting down 80 popular celebrity news and gossip accounts in June 2017 and urging host platforms like Tencent and Baidu to ensure a “healthy, uplifting environment for mainstream opinion.”<sup>24</sup>

Studios and talent agencies can be punished by state regulatory bodies for their clients’ behaviour, incentivizing them to carefully manage the celebrities they represent, and giving rise to an increasing number of legal firms specializing in entertainment law (*yulefa* 娱乐法) providing background checks, risk assessments, and analysis of related state laws and policies. Celebrity endorsements are closely monitored by the State Administration of Industry and Commerce (*Guojia gongshang xingzheng guangli zongju* 国家工商行政管理总局) under its Code of Advertising Ethics (*Guanggao huodong daode guifan* 广告活动道德规范).<sup>25</sup> The National Advertising Law (*Guanggaofa* 广告法), first launched in 1995, was updated in 2015 to include endorser liability in response to problematic celebrity advertisements, such as the melamine-tainted infant formula, produced by the state-owned Sanlu Group (*Sanlu jituan* 三鹿集团) and endorsed by actress Deng Jie 邓婕, which killed six children in 2008.<sup>26</sup>

The regulatory frameworks governing the conduct of the celebrity industry are supplemented by informal, soft controls in the form of government pronouncements and state media editorials setting out norms and expectations. In 2015, for instance, SAPPRFT introduced a “Pledge on professional ethics, self-discipline for personnel in press, publications, radio, film and television.” Fifty organizations across the entertainment sector promptly signed

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<sup>22</sup> Hood 2015, 6.

<sup>23</sup> China.org.cn. 2009. “SARFT bans media hyper on celebrity scandals,” 29 April, [http://www.china.org.cn/culture/2009-04/29/content\\_17696621.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/culture/2009-04/29/content_17696621.htm). Accessed 10 June 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Qin 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Li, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Gov.cn. 2015. “Zhonghua minzu gonghe guo guanggao fa (quanwen)” (Advertising law of the People’s Republic of China (full text), April 25, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-04/25/content\\_2852914.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-04/25/content_2852914.htm). Accessed 24 October 2017.

the pledge. Speaking at the launch, actress Fan Bingbing 范冰冰 declared that “to be a good actor, one must first be a good person,” which notably included “abiding by the law” and promoting “truth, good and beauty.”<sup>27</sup> A follow-up editorial in the *People’s Daily* (2015) set out the rationale for regulating celebrity behaviours:

As public figures, celebrities have a huge influence on society, and are often imitated by fans. Although their social responsibility as public figures is not clearly stipulated, it is very much a moral issue (*zhuyao zai daode cengmian* 首要在于道德层面). Because they influence society, they have an even greater obligation to set an example (*geng you yiwu zai daodeshang zuochu biaooshuai* 更要在道德上做出表率), and standard for the moral direction of society.

Expectations about the morality of celebrity conduct and their personal “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) are not restricted to the state. As Edwards and Jeffreys note, Chinese publics care deeply about “the moral virtue of prominent individuals.”<sup>28</sup> Normative values like filiality, faithfulness in marriage and the collective good are dominant social norms that celebrities are expected to conform to by the state, business and publics.<sup>29</sup> Transgressions such as drug use or sex scandals can result in celebrities being forced to issue public apologies, disqualification from awards or blacklisting from professional and endorsement roles. Actor Huang Haibo 黄海波, for instance, spent six months in “custody and education” in 2014 for soliciting commercial sex, reflecting upon release that “as a public figure, I failed as a role model.”<sup>30</sup> Conspicuous consumption that is deemed excessive by the authorities or the public also attracts censure, as actors Angelababy (Yang Ying 杨颖) and Huang Xiaoming 黄晓明 discovered after their extravagant wedding ceremony in 2015.<sup>31</sup>

While the celebrity sector is subject to circumscription and control, individual celebrities have used the affordances of their status to raise public awareness around LGBT issues, notions of Chinese-ness and filiality.<sup>32</sup> For instance, TV host Jin Xing 金星 has raised the profile of transgender issues, as news anchor Chai Jing 柴静 did with pollution. Celebrities also support social causes through philanthropy,<sup>33</sup> advocacy and representation in formal political institutions like the CPPCC,<sup>34</sup> and as activists and social critics.<sup>35</sup> The punishment of other celebrities, like outspoken government critic and celebrity businessman Xue Manzi 薛蛮子, demonstrates the fine line between celebrity activism and what the state regards as transgressive acts.

## Harnessing Celebrity

The scholarly literature on celebrity in the West has established that there is nothing accidental in the way that celebrities are created. Carefully mediated fabrications advanced via “chains of attraction”<sup>36</sup> and representing “typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary

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<sup>27</sup> Canaves 2015.

<sup>28</sup> 2010, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Zhou and Whittle 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Wang 2014.

<sup>31</sup> China Digital Times. 2015. “Minitrue: take celebrity groom off air,” 21 October, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2015/10/minitrue-take-celebrity-groom-huang-xiaoming-off-air/>. Accessed 10 June 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Fung 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Hood 2015; Jeffreys 2015a.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffreys 2015b.

<sup>35</sup> Strafella and Berg 2015a; 2015b.

<sup>36</sup> Rojek 2001, 10.

society,”<sup>37</sup> celebrities symbolize modes of behaviour consistent with the goals of government and business.<sup>38</sup> With notable exceptions, celebrities are generally symbols of system-acceptance and a demonstration that “the system rewards talent and cherishes upward mobility.”<sup>39</sup> In China, the state, which has long promoted role models for their patriotism, heroism or exemplary role-fulfilment,<sup>40</sup> uses celebrities as a vehicle for promoting nationalism, traditional virtues and the pursuit of modernity. It has identified celebrities as purveyors of “spiritual goods” (*jingshen chanpin* 精神产品), exhorting them to “perform conscientiously, behave respectfully” and “take the lead in setting an example” for society to follow.<sup>41</sup> As Stockmann and Gallagher conclude in their article on Chinese commercial media, the state has learned that popular vehicles can transmit political messages more effectively than “old-style propaganda.”<sup>42</sup> Possessors of “symbolic capital” derived from constant publicity and deliberately crafted personas,<sup>43</sup> Chinese celebrities have inherited the mantle of socialist role model, embodying accepted modes of behaviour for mass emulation. This includes exhibiting norms structured by class,<sup>44</sup> gender<sup>45</sup> and the “continuous striving and upward mobility” manifest in “middle class” consumption behaviours.<sup>46</sup> The state’s expectations are established and enforced through a repertoire of formal, informal and delegated control mechanisms described in the previous section.

Under market socialism the state’s social engineering (*shehui gongcheng* 社会工程) and moral construction (*daode jianshe* 道德建设) projects increasingly take the form of “governmentalities” associated with neoliberal ideas on the management of individual conduct.<sup>47</sup> As individual merit, material wealth and consumption have become the hallmarks of market socialist progress, elevating the “quality” and “civilization” (*wenming* 文明) of the Chinese people has been identified as a prerequisite for an orderly and stable modern society under continued CCP rule.<sup>48</sup> Individual self-improvement and learning from role models are framed by the state via the media, entertainment and curricula as patriotic acts advancing national prosperity, unity and strength. The production and consumption of celebrity in China thus takes place in a discursive context in which “quality” and “civilization” symbolize prescribed ways of behaving that underpin Hu Jintao’s “harmonious and well-off society” and Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream.” Yet, as Brownell points out, the discourse around “quality” and “civilization” has displaced the responsibility for progress to individuals, while masking the class structure and other systemic inequities that determine their access to the fruits of development.<sup>49</sup>

Reform era economic development and the partial retreat of the state from many areas of life have resulted in greater prosperity and the expansion of individual freedoms. Yet, some scholars argue that the transition from socialist collectivism to competitive market socialism

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<sup>37</sup> Dyer 1986, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Marshal 1997.

<sup>39</sup> Rojek 2001, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Edwards and Jeffreys 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Guancha. 2015. “Chunwan weihe bu yong ‘wudian’ yanyuan” (Why Spring Festival does not need “tainted” actors), 2 February, [http://guancha.gmw.cn/2015-11/10/content\\_17675448.htm](http://guancha.gmw.cn/2015-11/10/content_17675448.htm). Accessed 19 March 2016.

<sup>42</sup> 2011, 459.

<sup>43</sup> Bourdieu 1986.

<sup>44</sup> Evans 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Wallis 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Yu 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Jeffreys 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Tomba 2009.

<sup>49</sup> 2001.

has also created an ideological void.<sup>50</sup> Partially filled by a state-led “nationalist turn” post-1989,<sup>51</sup> it is manifest in a nationwide religious resurgence,<sup>52</sup> the re-establishment of clan and temple organizations<sup>53</sup> and the state-sanctioned revival of elements of Confucianism.<sup>54</sup> The history of celebrity in the West is also closely associated with a “void,” created by the encroachment of alienating capitalist economic structures, the industrial production of culture and the contemporaneous decline in organized religion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>55</sup> Scholars identified an “affective deficit in modern life” where direct social contact is replaced by parasocial relations with celebrities, who provide an “illusion of intimacy”<sup>56</sup> and are subject to the projection of “fantasies of belonging and fulfilment.”<sup>57</sup> Recent research on fandom in China<sup>58</sup> similarly suggests that celebrity engagement is a “vehicle for self-idealization and psychological reinforcement”<sup>59</sup> and a site for identity and community formation.<sup>60</sup> Whether prompted by state discourse or an unguided response to changing economic and social conditions, there is widespread enthusiasm for self-improvement in China and Chinese celebrities nourish the vogue for self-help or “success study” (*chenggongxue* 成功学) by portraying the value of hard work and learning in pursuit of a better life. From factory workers learning skills to move up the career ladder,<sup>61</sup> rural migrants using technology to look and feel modern and urban,<sup>62</sup> to petty bourgeois (*xiaokang* 小康) adopting symbols of middle-class lifestyles,<sup>63</sup> self-improvement is a widespread endeavour. Magazine stories and celebrities’ communications on social media frequently emphasize the sacrifices and work ethic needed to become a successful performer, athlete or businessperson. The message conveyed by celebrities is that the system rewards perseverance, cultivation of talent and broadly compliant behaviours.

Chinese celebrity is also “embedded within a CCP-led nationalistic project that encourages public pronouncements of unabashed patriotism,”<sup>64</sup> with punishments and public abuse heaped on those associated with “unpatriotic acts.” Actress Zhang Ziyi, whose global stardom is predicated on having become the “embodiment of the transformation of Chineseness in the age of global modernity,”<sup>65</sup> was criticized in state media for playing the paramour of a Japanese man in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, a Hollywood production of an American novel. Zhang, a Global Ambassador for the Special Olympics, was accused of “betraying national loyalties” and subject to online abuse when naked images of her on set with Japanese co-star Ken Watanabe were posted online. In 2008, SARFT banned media coverage of Tang Wei (□□), a Chinese actress who starred in Taiwanese director Ang Lee’s (Li An □□) *Lust, Caution* (*Se, Jie* □, □), a film the central government said “glorified traitors and insulted patriots.”

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<sup>50</sup> Kipnis 2001.

<sup>51</sup> Rosen 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Chau 2008.

<sup>53</sup> Tsai 2007.

<sup>54</sup> Bell 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944.

<sup>56</sup> Turner 2013, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Rojek 2001, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Zhang 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Turner 2013, 23.

<sup>60</sup> Wang 2008.

<sup>61</sup> Chang 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Qiu 2009; Wallis 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Latham et al. 2006.

<sup>64</sup> Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, 15.

<sup>65</sup> Kourelou 2010, 123.



Numerous Taiwanese celebrities like pop stars Chou Tze-yu (Zhou Ziyu 周子瑜) and A-mei (Zhang Huimei 張惠妹) have been compelled by their industry employers to issue apologies for waving the flag or singing the anthem of the Republic of China. Others, like Hong Kong Cantopop singer Denise Ho (He Yunshi 何韻詩) have been blacklisted by the Ministry of Culture for associations with the Umbrella and Sunflower movements or “pro-independence” opinions.<sup>66</sup> For individual celebrities, studios, agencies and the brands they represent, the threat of denied access to the Chinese market is economically significant and an incentive to moderate public pronouncements and avoid association with “sensitive” issues. By contrast, “celebrities who adhere to state ideals are rewarded handsomely.”<sup>67</sup> Fan Bingbing, for example, has occupied the top position in *Forbes*’ ranking of total annual income for Chinese celebrities in each of the last three years, reportedly earned 128 million yuan (£13.7 million) from film roles and endorsements in 2014.<sup>68</sup>

### **Celebritization of the Ordinary? Reality TV and the Internet**

In Western democracies like the US and UK, where ubiquitous celebrity culture has “colonized the expectations of everyday life,”<sup>69</sup> Turner characterizes the popularization of self-mediation and the celebritization of regular people via reality TV as a “demotic turn.”<sup>70</sup> Reflecting the broader entertainment industry in which it is situated, reality TV in China is a highly controlled environment with substantial barriers to the participation of ordinary people in the celebrity-making apparatus. Commercial experimentation with reality TV was quickly contained by the state, as the case of Hunan Satellite TV’s *Super Girl* (*Chaoji nüsheng* 超級女聲) illustrates. After propelling amateur singers Li Yuchun 李宇春 and Zhang Bichen 張碧晨 to stardom, *Super Girl* ended its three-series run in 2006, when SARFT, Party officials and state media denounced “the vulgar inclination of entertainment programs,”<sup>71</sup> which contravened the pedagogical role fundamental to the media and cultural industries.<sup>72</sup> Unlike in the West, where extreme behaviours are encouraged, the undergrown Chinese reality TV scene is closely controlled to ensure it reflects traditional values. In consequence, family-oriented shows like *Dad is Back* (*Baba huilai le* 爸爸回來了) and *Where Are We Going Dad?* (*Baba qu nar?* 爸爸去哪兒?) have competed with earnest dating shows like *If You Are The One* (*Feicheng wurao* 非诚勿扰), where contestants displaying unseemly attitudes like materialism attract public and media criticism. Despite careful management, even these shows have fallen foul of SAAPRFT.<sup>73</sup>

In Chinese cyberspace, which despite an effective censorship regime is still a *comparatively* free space,<sup>74</sup> there is evidence of an emerging “demotic” celebrity sphere where ordinary people “turn themselves into media content through celebrity culture.”<sup>75</sup> The rise of “me-casting” technologies, the attraction of going viral and the quest for external validation through the accumulation of likes and followers on social media has popularized the pursuit of online celebrity (*wanghong* 網紅). This includes the “camgirls” who nurture followings through

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<sup>66</sup> Huang 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Hood 2015, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Flannery 2015.

<sup>69</sup> Turner 2006, 153.

<sup>70</sup> 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Miao 2011, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Keane 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Keane and Zhang 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Sullivan 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Turner 2006, 153.

online streaming sites,<sup>76</sup> to bloggers and vloggers like exercise guru Zhang Jingqi 张静琪 and idiosyncratic gaming critic Yi Xiaoxing 易晓星. Reflecting early criticism of the inauthenticity of celebrity, there are also people “well-known for their well-knownness,”<sup>77</sup> celestoids like Guo Meimei 郭美美 or Zhang Zetian 张缜天, ordinary people whose short-lived celebrity arrived “accidentally.” Rojek describes “the accelerated commodity life cycle of the celestoid” as an “industrial solution” to the problem of satisfying media and audience demands for consuming and pursuing celebrity.<sup>78</sup> There is clearly abundant supply and demand: more than 300 dedicated streaming companies serve an audience of over 300 million people, 20 per cent of whom view live chat shows with amateur hosts (*zhenren liaotianxiu* 真人聊天秀).<sup>79</sup>

Celebrification, which Rojek describes as a familiar mode of “cyberself-presentation,”<sup>80</sup> is evident in Chinese social media platforms used for “presenting the self,”<sup>81</sup> “prosuming” (simultaneous production and consumption) in the guise of internet parody (*egao* 恶搞),<sup>82</sup> publishing fan fiction<sup>83</sup> and constructing online fan communities.<sup>84</sup> Some users have gained fame and income from web-advertising and product endorsement deals from “performing” on streaming platforms like *Meipai* (美拍) and video-sharing sites like *Kuaishou* (快手). From lifestyle gurus like Lingling 伶伶, gamers like JY Daishi JY 杰艺 to irreverent social commentators like Papi Jiang (Jiang Yilei 江依莱), the popularization of “DIY celebrity” platforms allow Chinese desiring celebrity to sidestep gatekeepers in the media and entertainment industries. Technological affordances and “consumer” demand mean that the possibility of celebrity is no longer restricted to elite performers and graduates of state academies.

Streaming platforms celebrate the ordinary, giving all manner of subculture enthusiasts, exhibitionists and talented (or not) amateurs the chance to experiment with an accessible celebrity-making apparatus. The streaming business is lucrative, growing and attracts substantial commercial investment.<sup>85</sup> However, the state control apparatus has responded quickly to the potential for video and streaming platforms to become a potentially subversive site for presenting, negotiating and challenging “orthodox” cultural meanings. In May 2017, the MOC shut down more than 30,000 live streaming hosts citing content they judged to be “vulgar, obscene, violent, superstitious, and damaging to the psychological health of juveniles.”<sup>86</sup> The CAC launched strict new rules requiring companies to enforce controls on

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<sup>76</sup> Senft 2008.

<sup>77</sup> Boorstin 1961, 58.

<sup>78</sup> 2001, 20–1.

<sup>79</sup> China Internet Network Information Center. 2017. “Di 39 ci Zhongguo hulianwang fazhan qingkuang tongji baogao” (The 39<sup>th</sup> statistical report on internet development in China), 22 January, <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201701/P020170123364672657408.pdf>. Accessed 10 June 2017.

<sup>80</sup> 2001, 20–1.

<sup>81</sup> Li 2009; Sima and Pugsley 2010.

<sup>82</sup> Gong and Yang 2010.

<sup>83</sup> Yang 2009.

<sup>84</sup> Zhang 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Zhang, Liping. 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China. 2017. “Wenhuabu yangan wangluo biaoyan shichang yancha guanting weigui zhiboping” (Ministry of Culture to strictly control online performance market and strictly investigate and shut down illegal live-streaming), 24 May, [http://www.mcprc.gov.cn/whzx/whyw/201705/t20170524\\_494644.html](http://www.mcprc.gov.cn/whzx/whyw/201705/t20170524_494644.html). Accessed 10 June 2017.

content broadcast on their streaming platforms.<sup>87</sup> In June 2017, SAAPRT warned that online programming must “advance patriotism, extol the motherland and praise heroes” and not engage in “wasteful star-chasing.”<sup>88</sup> These measures demonstrate that the state believes the informal celebrity sphere requires the same circumscriptive controls as its industrial cousin. Internet celebrities may resemble carnival performers,<sup>89</sup> but in a controlled society the carnival is also carefully regulated.

## Conclusion

Celebrity is frequently overlooked in scholarly work on politics, society and culture in China. Furthermore, China is largely absent from the substantial, US- and UK-centric Celebrity Studies literature. Both absences are regrettable given the scale and distinct nature of China’s experience with celebrity in the reform era. Chinese celebrities have derived financial, cultural and symbolic capital through a combination of their professional roles, constant publicity and the influence that the crafted celebrity persona exerts on the “experience of everyday life and its implication in the construction and definition of cultural identity.”<sup>90</sup> The state is acutely aware of this “celebrity power,” attributing a range of responsibilities that come with celebrity status and adding specific layers of regulation to individual celebrity conduct to reinforce the multidimensional controls prevailing over the media, internet, advertising, cultural industries and society. Harnessing the power of celebrity on the public consciousness to facilitate their goals to govern and seek economic gains, state and industry actors fabricate celebrities as exemplars of model behaviours relating to consumption, “middle class” and “traditional” values, patriotism and acceptance of the political regime.

Distinguished by multi-layered formal and informal institutions of control and the Party’s determination to maintain the “commanding heights” of media and cultural production,<sup>91</sup> Chinese celebrity is different to the Western societies that dominate the celebrity studies literature. For instance, due to the exigencies of state control and a vastly different political culture, China has resisted the “celebritization of politics” that reached its apotheosis in the US with the election of celebrity businessman and Reality TV star Donald Trump to the American presidency in 2016. However, the Chinese celebrity industry is not unique. Celebrities in other contexts also serve multiple principles and occupy a liminal space between state, market and publics. Patriotism is expected of celebrities in other nations and the training and careful manufacture of performers is common to other Asian societies, notably Korea.<sup>92</sup> Like their democratic counterparts, the Communist Party has shown a growing appreciation of the utility of the mechanics of contemporary celebrity creation, incorporating lessons from professional PR, marketing and advertising into a nascent hybrid “pop-propaganda” system used to promote some state actors, state-sanctioned role models and “manage the message.” And despite distinct ideological, historical and social factors, not least the tension between the

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<sup>87</sup> China Digital Times. 2016. “Cyberspace admin issues new live-streaming rules,” 4 November, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2016/11/cyberspace-administration-issues-new-live-streaming-rules/>. Accessed 10 June 2017.

<sup>88</sup> South China Morning Post. 2017. “China’s media watchdog, tightening control of content, promotes ‘core socialist values’,” 2 June, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2096774/chinas-media-watchdog-tightening-control-content>. Accessed 11 June 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Herold and Marolt 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Turner 2013, 24.

<sup>91</sup> Zhao 2008, 75.

<sup>92</sup> Kim 2013.



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