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CULTURAL REPORT

Non-western celebrity politics and diplomacy:

introduction

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The origins of the specific project featured in this Cultural Report lie in a larger scale project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and based at the White Rose East Asia Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield. It set out to explore the influence and roles of a range of informal political actors such as former leaders, political spouses and celebrity diplomats,

to name but a few, across both the domestic and international levels of analysis in three regions of the world: East Asia, Russia and the Arab World.

Over recent years increased attention has been devoted to the informal aspects of politics and power, with a privileging of the role played by a range of unofficial actors, often hyper-empowered individuals (Cooper 2014), with no formal status in either state-based organizations or the established structure of non-governmental organizations and international civil society.

Political scientists have long been interested in the informal side of politics, with the main focus directed to how unwritten but accepted rules of the game guide the structure of decision making. Pike (2000) defines informal politics as ‘interpersonal activities stemming from a tacitly accepted, but unenunciated, matrix of political attitudes existing outside the framework of legal government, constitutions, bureaucratic constructs and similar institutions’. In a similar vein, Dittmer (2000, p. 292) stretches the definition to argue that ‘informal politics consists of the use of nonlegitimate means (albeit not necessarily illegal) to pursue public ends’. Examples beyond the West include the informal aspects of electoral politics in Japan, and leadership succession in post-Mao China.

What this traditional literature lacks, however, is an appreciation of agency by diverse sources outside as well as inside government. For example, there have been growing concerns about how changes in global communications have reconfigured public diplomacy. In particular, diplomatic norms have been

challenged by the nature of media coverage, which has expanded with the rise of 24/7 global news programming and led to a decentralisation and fragmentation of opinion. Moreover, the rise of social media networks places a greater emphasis on interactive and person-to-person communications. These developments have placed global concerns on the popular agenda and led to the emergence of a 'new public diplomacy' in the wake of alternative communications through which not only states, but also non-state actors and civil society organizations have promoted cultural interchanges to mobilise public interest and advance their causes.

From this perspective Cultural Studies generally and Celebrity Studies in particular has a great deal to offer by going around the traditional bias of International Relations literature, which deems the activities by actors 'lacking the status of diplomatic representatives' to be 'marginal' in performance (Johnston, 1971). What is more, much of the emphasis remains on the vertical not the horizontal dimension. That is to say, rather than broadening the debate to highlight the richness of the profile of celebrities in the 21st century, there is a concentration on so-called quasi-diplomacy through para- or sub-national units within the state structure.

With this fixed set of boundaries in mind, an international conference was held at the University of Sheffield in January 2015, which led to the emergence of three specific groups looking at: 1) informal political actors in Japan; 2) the role of think tanks in Russia, East Asia and the Arab World; and 3) celebrity politics in Russia, East Asia and the Arab World. This Cultural Report provides important

snapshots of the final group that met again in January 2016 to deepen the thematic exploration.

Not only has our understanding of politics and diplomacy developed beyond the usual suspects of government representatives to embrace informal actors, this understanding has also been enhanced both empirically and conceptually over recent years by the recognition of the multi-dimensional salience of celebrities (Brockington 2014; Cooper 2008; Wheeler 2013). We now talk about celebrity politicians and diplomats, political celebrities and apply categories such as CP1 (essentially politicians who instrumentalize aspects of celebrity) and CP2 (celebrities typified by U2's Bono who enter into the field of politics and international diplomacy; see Street 2014). In turn, celebrity activists have shifted the focus away from state-directed types of political discourse to bring attention to more cosmopolitan concerns related to global citizenship and mutual solidarity.

Most vocally, Cooper maintains that if public diplomacy is married to more open-ended versions of agency, then traditional forms of state-centric diplomacy are eroded even further (Cooper 2008, 2). He argues that celebrity diplomacy creates a new 'space' in which celebrities provide a conduit between public and foreign affairs to overcome the 'disconnect' which has occurred as official diplomats have sought to husband information rather than share it (Cooper 2008, pp. 113–114). Consequently, celebrities can provide points of identification to mobilise public opinion for diplomatic reform.

Still, as illuminating as the literature has been, the focus has continued to be placed on celebrity diplomats, politicians and politicized celebrities from a Western European and North American background. As part of the last substantial chapter of his book on *Celebrity Diplomacy*, Cooper looks beyond the Anglosphere by including celebrities such as Pavarotti and Claudia Schiffer, and in this process embraces Japan's Kuroyanagi Tetsuko and Senegal's Youssou N'Dour, but ultimately 'confirms the tight grip of the model of celebrity diplomacy found in the Anglosphere' (2008, p. 111). The grip of structural barriers (language, access to the entertainment/publicity machine in London, New York and Los Angeles) commonly trumps the power of agency.

Yet, more recently, Lisa Ann Richey's edited collection *Celebrity humanitarianism and North-South relations: politics, place and power* (2016) has paid attention to the Global South as a 'place' wherein celebrities intervene into humanitarian processes and an environment that generates Southern stars who engage in philanthropy. For Richey *et al.*, celebrity humanitarianism provides a means through which to critically investigate the diverse and multiple relations – aid economics, the representation of the 'other' and new alliances – that facilitate the linkages between the North and South:

By investigating one of the most mediatised and distant representations of humanitarianism (the celebrity intervention) from a perspective of contextualisation ... [this analysis] underscores the importance of context in understanding humanitarianism. We examine *politics* to understand how values are linked with authority in global constellations of

humanitarian helping, and in local recipient environments. We investigate the importance of *place* and context ... Celebrity interventions provide an empirical focus point for studying the relations of *power* that may be reproduced or disputed (Richey *et al.* 2016, p. 3).

So, this issue's Cultural Report resonates strongly with the overarching rationale of bringing the relatively obscure into relief within the field, and introducing non-Western examples into the discussion of celebrity politics and diplomacy. To this end, the project brings together a range of contributors from a variety of backgrounds that cross geographical and disciplinary boundaries. In filling this gap Area Studies scholars come into their own.

In expanding the vista of Celebrity Studies, nonetheless, the hold of the state remains strong. By expanding the geographic focus to Russia, Adrian Campbell and Elena Denezhkina of the University of Birmingham in the UK place the conceptual attention on a dominant politician celebrity in the shape of President Vladimir Putin. Putin represents an excellent example of a CP1 politician who utilizes elements of both fame and celebrity, a phenomenon that overlap but can be understood to function very differently outside the West. Campbell and Denezhkina trace the process by which political celebrity in 2010 was synonymous with Obama (Kellner 2010) but by 2016 had become synonymous with Putin, previously regarded as projecting the image of a mere technocrat. The rise of 'Brand Putin' represents a considerable shift in the cult of political personality within Russia. Whereas through the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation, images, artifacts and slogans were

targeted at Western audiences, Putin's celebrity status appeals directly to a Russian audience either at home or overseas, whether it be managed or spontaneous, and stresses an underdog narrative behind both Putin and Russia's rise. This process demonstrates clearly that different country contexts matter – the overarching theme of this Cultural Report.

Marc Owen Jones of Exeter University in the UK shifts our attention to the Arab World and the small Gulf kingdom of Bahrain in particular. Despite a conservative crackdown since 2011, a string of high-profile Western celebrities have visited Bahrain thereby helping to improve the kingdom's image and participating in its nation-branding strategy, whilst also prompting outrage from the opposition. By looking at this phenomenon, Jones raises questions such as when do celebrities move to become public diplomats in contested situations, with serious implications for the elasticity of the concept 'celebrity diplomacy'? The stereotypical image of celebrity diplomats in the North is as progressive agents of change, not as defenders of the status quo.

In tackling this question Jones is interested therefore in looking beyond the celebrities who consciously move out of their celebrity comfort zone to take on an overt political role, such as Bono, Angelina Jolie and George Clooney at the core of this world for example. He highlights a spectrum of celebrity participation in the promotion of 'Brand Bahrain' with some celebrities simply and passively visiting as part of a tour, while other celebrities more actively tweet and publicise the kingdom's charms and thereby commit a diplomatic, political and ethically questionable act. A fact that is not lost on the opposition

who then petition these unwitting celebrity diplomats embroiling them further in the kingdom's politics and forcing them to react or attempt to maintain a neutral distance. Either way, the result raises ethical questions but also serves to reinforce the nation branding.

Florian Schneider, a political scientist and Chinese Studies scholar based at Leiden University in the Netherlands, turns our attention to recent developments in Sino-Japanese relations and in particular the role of Chinese celebrity bloggers. He focuses our attention on the means by which celebrities engage in politics and the role of social media. China presents a particularly relevant case study because of the rise in the use and dissemination of digital information and communication technologies (ICT), as captured by China's most popular microblogging platform, Sina Weibo, in addition to the political challenge this represents to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as they seek to control the public narrative.

Within this context, one that is very different from the gossip-oriented forms of use, Schneider explores the status, role and influence of Weibo's most influential users, the celebrities and public figures that are collectively known as 'Big Vs' ('V' indicating that their accounts are verified). The challenge for the CCP can be imagined in light of the fact that some of these celebrities have more followers than the UK has citizens and are able to shape and direct public discussion and debates – something that was traditionally the preserve of the CCP. The case of recent deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations, and the various levels and numerous sites at which this played out, offers a highly illuminating

case study to conduct this exploration of the role and influence of celebrity microbloggers.

Finally, Jamie Coates, an anthropologist affiliated with the White Rose East Centre at the Universities of Leeds and Sheffield who has recently completed a post-doctoral fellowship at Waseda University in Japan, continues the focus on recent Sino-Japanese relations but sheds light on the role of Sola Aoi, the Japanese former adult video (AV) star. Faced with declining popularity at home, Sola experienced a second life as a celebrity in China animated by pirated DVDs and her social media presence. Her celebrity status in China expanded rapidly beyond her porn star origins to include a charity role, a range of endorsements as well as her own range of products.

The importance of Sola lies in the intersection of an apolitical celebrity with an intensely political environment. The move from Japan to China coincided with a dramatic worsening of relations between Asia's two superpowers. Sola was unable to avoid becoming embroiled in this turbulence and had a political role thrust upon her. Ultimately she was able to exert little agency upon the way in which her celebrity status was coopted into the 'everyday mobilities' in Sino-Japanese relations separate from but at the same closely connected to the governmental level. In this light, Sola appears to be the antithesis to celebrity diplomats such as Bono, who exhibit clear political goals and possess strategic ownership their agency. What her example highlights is that Bono is only one category in celebrity politics and we need to pay more attention to the

importance of symbolism and how celebrity persona, once constructed, can have a transnational, political life of its own.

By opening up the world of celebrity studies beyond the West, it is clear that there is not one model of performance. In the case of Putin we see a tight state-orchestrated creation and management of celebrity status. In the Bahrain case we see the cooption of Western celebrities for a state-run public campaign. Unlike other causes, though, there seems to be no ideological basis for this advocacy. Instead the mobilization of these individuals is done via either monetary or publicity incentives. Alternatively the cases of 'Big Vs' micro-bloggers and Sola Aoi show the mix of opportunity and constraints from bottom up freelance actors. Unlike the stage-managed scripts of the first two cases, these snapshots of the shifting domain of the celebrity world showcase a high degree of innovation and awkwardness in the exaggerated differentiation from orthodox diplomatic practices.

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