

Chinese celebrity and the pandemic: Introduction

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The Cultural Report section was launched nearly a decade ago with the explicit aim of expanding the international horizon of *Celebrity Studies* by interrogating cultures of celebrity that had yet to receive adequate critical attention. Since then, it has been home to dossiers of short articles on a range of themes – such as Black Lives Matter (Vol.13, Issue 1; Vol.13, Issue 2), Non-western celebrity politics and diplomacy (Vol. 8, Issue 2), and the celebrity of Haruki Murakami (Vol.9, Issue 2) – and on celebrity culture in a range of national contexts, such as the Nordic nations (Vol. 7, Issue 3), Korea (Vol. 8, Issue 1), Australia (Vol. 9, Issue 1), and Turkey (Vol 14, Issue 3).

This new dossier, which features two original research articles on Chinese celebrity during the pandemic, contributes to a surge in scholarship on celebrity in China over the last decade, some excellent examples of which have appeared in this section of the journal. For instance, the Cultural Report was home to a dossier on Non-western celebrity politics and diplomacy published in 2017 (Vol. 8, Issue 2) that included two articles on Sino-Japanese relations (Coates 2017; Schneider 2017), and a dossier dedicated to martial arts celebrity published in 2019 (Vol. 10, Issue 2) that included articles that critically examined the film stars Donnie Yen (Richards 2019), Wang Baoqiang (Schultz 2019), and Adam Cheng (To 2019).

Meanwhile, the most recent dossier dedicated to celebrity in China (Vol. 12, Issue 2) comprised articles on the workings of wanghong incubators (Han 2021), beauty bloggers and platform labour (Guan 2021), the hanmai phenomenon MC Tianyou (Xu and Zhang 2021), the sex blogger Muzi Mei (Cai 2021), and the ways that actor Kai Wang is used in Real Person Slash Fan Fiction (Zhang 2021). It was initially published in 2020 online during the darkest days of the coronavirus pandemic at which point lockdowns were in force across the

globe, anxieties about global supply chains and de-globalisation were prominent in everyday media and political discourse, nativist and populist political actors were on the march, and the then US President had named Covid-19 ‘the Chinese virus’. The introduction of that dossier noted that ‘It should go without saying that this dossier is published in the spirit of international friendship and collaboration between intellectual citizens of different nations, and in solidarity with the people of China’ (Ewen 2021). In light of the current levels of geopolitical tensions around the globe, and the fact that the 45th US president is currently the favourite to return as the 47th (Vinocur and Plitz 2023), it is a message worth repeating.

In the first essay, Shiyu (Sharon) Zheng and Min Xu conduct an in-depth examination of Zhihu answerers in health and medical-related fields against the backdrop of the global pandemic. Their focus revolves around the transformation of these individuals into grassroots celebrities with the influential support of Zhihu, China’s largest community for questions and answers (CQA). Utilising a netnography spanning over three years, Zheng and Xu assert that professionalism plays a pivotal role in shaping online opinions and crafting a distinctive public persona for these grassroots celebrities. Simultaneously, they argue that evolving internet celebrities and innovative business models contribute to the diversification of the attention economy. Their meticulous exploration of the professionalism and manifestation of these grassroots celebrities adds nuanced layers to existing research on wanghong and microcelebrities.

In the second essay, Yang Yu and Fei Jiang delve into the narratives of frontline care workers amidst the Xi’an lockdown as portrayed on Douyin, a widely popular short video platform in China. Employing a digital ethnography approach, their findings reveal that official media accounts predominantly served as the primary sources for the most engaging

videos with over half featuring frontline workers. These videos predominantly conveyed uplifting, endearing, touching, grateful and empathetic sentiments towards the frontline workers with only a minimal number adopting a critical tone. The study underscores the intricate interplay between political and commercial forces during a pandemic lockdown and illuminates its far-reaching implications on China's celebrity culture.

Recent studies on Chinese celebrities have significantly delved into various aspects including the pursuit of gender equality (Cai 2021), the phenomenon of self-mediation (Sullivan and Kehoe 2019) and the emergence of fan activism (Zhang 2021). The intricate interplay of media surveillance, cultural governance and traditional norms in China adds complexity to the landscape of celebrity studies, making it challenging to forecast future developments. As such, the unpredictable nature of Chinese celebrity studies becomes an invitation for scholars to embark on further exploration. This dynamic and evolving field offers an opportunity to uncover novel dimensions and trajectories in understanding the role of celebrities within the world's second-largest economy. As the landscape of fame and prominence undergoes continuous transformation in the Chinese context, scholars are encouraged to contribute to the discourse, shedding light on the intricate interconnections between media dynamics, cultural influences, and societal norms in shaping the narratives of Chinese celebrities. Charting some of these threads, further dossiers on various aspects of Chinese celebrity will appear in the Cultural Report section in the coming months.

Disclosure statement

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