

Chinese Celebrity and Wanghong Economy: Diversification, Motivation and Capitalisation

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“Wanghong economy” (internet celebrity economy), as a new form of internet economy, has garnered great attention in recent years (Abidin, 2016; Chen and Qiu, 2019; Guan, 2021; Zheng and Xu, 2024). The rise of the “Wanghong economy” in China reflects a convergence of digital platforms, consumerism, and celebrity culture, creating a unique media ecosystem (Zhang and Hjorth, 2019; Cunningham et al., 2019). Characterised by influencers, live-streaming, and e-commerce industry (Xu and Zhao, 2019; Craig et al., 2019), this phenomenon exemplifies diversification and capitalisation motivations in China’s digital age. Rooted in economic, social, and cultural factors, the Wanghong economy highlights the evolving role of online platforms in shaping celebrity and internet culture, as well as digital labour.

This new dossier pays special attention to the diversification of the Wanghong economy in China after the pandemic, which is evident in the various platforms and strategies adopted by influencers. Platforms such as Xiaohongshu (RED), TikTok (Douyin), and Bilibili enable influencers to engage in activities ranging from live-streaming product reviews to creating their own branded merchandise. This diversification extends to the influencers themselves, categorised into “Sponsored Wanghong” and “DIY Wanghong” based on their marketing focus and revenue generation methods (Prud’homme et al., 2020). The former gain fame through their digital content and subsequently partner with established companies to promote products or services. They influence consumer decisions by sharing opinions and recommendations, thereby guiding purchasing behaviour, while the latter achieve online fame through their content and directly monetise their reach by selling self-made products or services. They leverage their popularity to drive sales, often operating their own online stores (Prud’homme et al., 2020). These categories underline the varied roles Wanghong play in the broader economic landscape, blending personal branding with entrepreneurial ventures. The expansion of the Wanghong economy is also tied to regulatory evolution. Authorities help to shape a governed ecosystem, balancing innovation and content control. This regulatory maturity positions China’s Wanghong economy as distinct from its Western counterparts, offering insights into the role of governance in digital economies (Han, 2022).

Economic incentives are usually central to the Wanghong phenomenon. Influencers capitalise on several revenue streams, including e-commerce live-streaming, direct fan donations, merchandising, and participation in digital entertainment projects. These monetisation strategies demonstrate a robust interplay between creativity and commercialism. The rapid growth of live-streaming as a key driver exemplifies how real-time consumer engagement has become a cornerstone of this economy. Additionally, the societal appeal of digital entrepreneurship, often framed as self-empowerment, drives participation. For many, becoming a Wanghong represents an opportunity to achieve financial independence and social mobility. However, these opportunities are not evenly distributed, reflecting China’s socio-economic stratifications (Han, 2022).

The Wanghong economy operates within the larger framework of neoliberal capitalism in China. Platforms such as Taobao, Douyin, and Bilibili act as gatekeepers, dictating the terms of participation and success. This creates a hierarchical structure where platform algorithms and corporate partnerships significantly influence visibility and profitability. Critics argue that this replicates traditional capitalist dynamics, with influencers acting as digital labourers subject to exploitation despite their perceived autonomy (Yazdanipoor et al., 2022; Heeris et al., 2024). Moreover, the integration of Wanghong into state-led consumerism highlights China’s unique capitalist approach. Influencers are instrumental in promoting consumption as a national economic strategy, blending individual aspirations with collective economic goals

(Han, 2022). This has been increasingly deployed by the authorities to motivate self-driven Wanghong economy, given the declining economic situation in today's world.

The Wanghong economy exemplifies the transformation of celebrity culture in the digital era to a large extent. Unlike traditional celebrities, internet influencers derive their fame from relatability and niche appeal as they are not always endorsed by mainstream media in a traditional way (Xu et al., 2021; Brooks et al., 2021). This shift emphasises the importance of authenticity and interaction over mass appeal. Wanghong heavily rely on the trust and intimacy of the public to develop and maintain their business. However, as the industry matures, professionalisation and commercialisation increasingly blur these distinctions, raising questions about the sustainability of "authentic" connections in a profit-driven environment (Zheng and Xu, 2024). Furthermore, the economy illustrates how digital consumerism intertwines with gender and class dynamics. Middle-class women, for instance, emerge as both key consumers and prominent Wanghong on social media such as Xiaohongshu (RED), embodying the "her-economy" (Guo, 2022). This gendered aspect of consumer capitalism underscores broader socio-cultural shifts in contemporary China, where digital platforms amplify both opportunities and inequalities (Guo, 2022).

This new dossier therefore is called upon these requests and provides a space to uncover the various types of Wanghong, which features two original research articles on Chinese internet celebrities. In the first essay, Xu and Zheng explored the culture of self-confidence constructed by female toubu vloggers on Xiaohongshu (RED), a lifestyle platform combined with e-commerce that is widely popular among young women in urban China to respond to the proliferation of self-improvement content on Chinese social media platforms. Their findings show that toubu vloggers, as Chinese Wanghongs, create content about confidence in noticeable, shared patterns, highlighting individuals' multifaceted efforts to realise perceived self-empowerment. Xu and Zheng also suggest the limitations of localised postfeminist ideas manifested through confidence messages. By revealing the construction of a culture of confidence within the Wanghong economy in the Chinese context, their essay contributes to discussions of female confidence in non-Western contexts in an age of precarity.

In the second essay, Chen and Cameron examine the rise of comedic, lowbrow, and queer(ed) internet celebrities within Chinese internet vernacular cultures. Focusing on Guo Laoshi (郭老师 Guofucius) and her cult following of 7 million, it explores how gendered, classed, and sexualised identities are performed and recognised through non-conforming narratives and humorous tropes on platforms like TikTok (Douyin) and Bilibili. Chen and Cameron argue that marginalised groups find empowerment through alternative place-making but critique how such tactics are appropriated by platformisation and state censorship. Using the concept of "queering paradox", they highlight how queer subjects are simultaneously targeted, cancelled, and regenerated by fans in China's mediascape.

The Wanghong economy represents a multifaceted intersection of digital innovation, consumer behaviour, and capitalist dynamics. Its diversification into various platforms and monetisation strategies highlights the adaptability of digital economies, while its reliance on platform governance and socio-cultural factors reflects broader trends in modern capitalism. As this economy continues to evolve, this dossier offers valuable case studies for understanding the implications of digital labour, consumerism, and celebrity culture in a rapidly changing world. We hope it benefits future research and inspires great scholarly insights in this field.

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