

Chapter 4

Being “Red” on the Internet: The Craft of Popularity on Chinese Social Media Platforms

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Abstract

While in common English-language parlance speaking of “online celebrities” encourages the conflation of new forms of famousness with existing discourses on mass media stardom and fandom, the Mandarin Chinese term *wanghong*, a shorthand term for *wangluo hongren* (literally “person popular on the internet”), frames the enticing shores of online celebrity through the peculiar lexical domain of a grassroots popularity. The figure of the *wanghong* has in recent years accompanied the development of social media platforms in China, becoming a profitable profession, an inspirational role model, a morally condemnable by-product of internet economies, and in general a widely debated social phenomenon among local users. Drawing on interviews with more and less successful local online celebrities and discussions with their audiences, this chapter offers an up-to-date portrayal of the various forms of *wanghong* currently vying for attention on Chinese social media platforms, illustrating how popularity is crafted along with narratives of professionalism and economic aspirations intimately connected to the sociotechnical contexts of contemporary China.

Keywords: China; microcelebrity; livestreaming; social media; *wanghong*

***Wanghong*: Online Celebrity With Chinese Characteristics**

I have two modes of performance when livestreaming: one is talking mode, the other is singing mode, and I can freely switch between the two (...). I don't want to waste the time of my fans, I hope they can get something from my livestream, I hope they can receive some

happiness (...). For me, happiness is being able to buy a property for my mum. Being able to sing what I like on livestream is also happiness. (Lion S., quoted in [Tianxia Wangshang, 2016](#))

Even though the popularity of specific mailing list posters, webmasters, discussion forum users, bloggers, and microblog accounts has always been an integral aspect of the development of the internet in China, it is only recently that the word *wanghong* (a shortening of *wangluo hongren*, literally “person popular on the internet”) has come to the forefront of public discourse, moral debates, media panics, and marketing hypes. As Zheng Ming, Chief Strategy Officer of China’s largest e-commerce platform Alibaba, has recently observed, the rise of Chinese online celebrities could be sensed as early as 2014, but the term spiked dramatically in usage in late 2015, establishing *wanghong* as a social phenomenon ([Zheng, 2017](#)). Most coverage of the *wanghong* phenomenon in news media and market reports focuses on the success stories of online celebrities and the promising growth of the celebrity economy, usually portraying female “fashionistas” such as Zhang Dayi ([Meng, 2016](#)) who use their massive following to promote sales on their own online stores, at times outperforming traditional fashion icons like movie star Fan Bingbing ([Tsoi, 2016](#)). The online celebrity economy is embedded in a larger ecosystem including social media platforms (increasingly linked through integration), fans (who participate as both supporters and consumers), and e-commerce companies (that happily invest in both celebrities and social media platforms). Moreover, *wanghong* themselves are increasingly reliant on “celebrity incubators” ([Li, 2017](#)) that help them manage supply chains and operate their online shops, less visible yet time-consuming tasks that are essential to their entrepreneurial efforts ([Abidin, 2014](#)).

Despite the high failure rates of incubated celebrities, most discussions of *wanghong* center on a rather limited sample of successful online influencers and massively popular social media personalities. As evidenced by Baidu search term analytics, this sociolinguistic usage is keyed to a specific moment in time when the abbreviation *wanghong*, after its appearance in 2012, overtook its extended form *wangluo hongren*, which was gradually declining in currency; in the background, the word *mingxing* (star) remains consistently used to refer to showbiz celebrities across TV, cinema, and pop music, but is surpassed in popularity by *wanghong* between 2015 and 2016 ([Fig. 1](#)). The various ways of referring to being known by many other people in Chinese do not necessarily map to the English-language distinction between concepts like notoriety, popularity, celebrity, famousness, or stardom, and the subtleties introduced by new media practices (video-making, microblogging, livestreaming¹) demand a closer examination in order to understand the role of *wanghong* in contemporary Chinese society.

¹In China, the creation and sharing of amateur videos begun in the early 2000s within budding file-sharing communities, and grew exponentially with the advent of video hosting websites Youku and Tudou in 2005. The boom of microblogging started in 2007 with the website Fanfou and peaked after the launch of Sina Weibo and similar websites in 2009. Livestreaming started in the mid-2000s with services such as YY and 6.cn, but only gained commercial momentum in the mid-2010s, with the launch of platforms like Douyu, Inke and Meipai.



Fig. 1: A Query to the Baidu Search Engine Data Evidences How *Wangluo Hongren* (1) Is a Declining Search Term While Its Abbreviation *Wanghong* (2) Is Rarely Used Prior to 2012. *Mingxing* (3) Is Consistently More Popular Than *Wangluo Hongren*, but in 2015–2016, the Popularity of *Wanghong* Surpasses *Mingxing*.

Modeled on terms such as *mingren* (literally “famous person”) and *mingliu* (literally “famous flow,” celebrity), the word *mingxing* (“star”) entered popular usage from a direct translation of the English “movie star” as *dianying mingxing* in the early 1920s (Zheng, 2013). It is not by chance that one of the three largest Chinese movie production companies of the 1920s and 1930s was called *Mingxing* Film Company, tying the notion of stardom to the emerging entertainment industry of the time. Conversely, *hongren* (popular person) belongs to a repertoire of compound words related to the color *hong* (red), which in China is traditionally associated with notions of wealth, success, and popularity (Chau, 2008). *Wanghong* is just one of the latest iterations of *hong*-ness, along with other contemporary locutions as *zouhong* (to become popular), *baohong* (to “explode” in popularity) and *honghuo* (flourishing, booming) (Huang & Liu, 2016). In post-Mao China, where public personae such as artists, writers, intellectuals, athletes, and performers are required to negotiate their public identities under the capricious interplay of economic development and official censorship (Barmé, 1999, pp. xvii–xviii), all these terms hint to a layered history of celebrity that has only recently started to be examined (Jeffrey & Edwards, 2010).

The study of celebrity is an established and resourceful academic field that offers multiple possible approaches for the analysis of how notoriety, fame, and stardom are constructed, debated, and practiced in societies around the world. Jeffrey and Edwards (2010) identify three major phases in the analysis of celebrity, which has moved from a critical theory-inspired dismissal of celebrities as mere products of mass media, through a fandom-oriented praise of talent and authenticity, to a more prudent scholarly attention to the processual construction of celebrity across cultural industries and everyday life (5–6). In the past 10 years, the large-scale adoption of digital media in many contemporary societies has demanded celebrity researchers to come up with new concepts and categories in order to better understand how “being known about by many other people” changes when it is

chiefly mediated by the internet. Theresa Senft's coinage of the term "micro-celebrity" (2008) to describe the new form of Web-mediated popularity she observed among camgirls has proved elastic enough to envelop a decade of following research, including the shifts of microcelebrity on social networking platforms (Marwick, 2015) and the entrepreneurial lives of East Asian social media influencers (Abidin, 2015).

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the specificity of *wanghong* to celebrity studies and to highlight how the interplay between local digital media platforms, infrastructural histories, and modes of performativity contribute to the articulation of a peculiar kind of microcelebrity. While the proliferation of *wei* (micro-) platforms and media genres in China (de Seta, 2016) would seem to warrant a straightforward adoption of the term microcelebrity, we propose to instead analyze *wanghong* in terms of ephemerality, transience, and failure. After outlining a short typological history of online celebrity in China, we present examples of small-scale, struggling, and failed *wanghong*, emphasizing the precarious nature of this coveted social role, the labor involved in its pursuit, and the blurring of the boundary separating it from the traditional *mingxing* fame. As hinted in the opening quote by Lion S., a small-time celebrity live-streaming on the Inke platform for a few thousands of devoted viewers, popularity on social media platforms might also be crafted through the joy of intimate performance, the pursuit of communal happiness, and modest aspirations to material wealth.

A Brief History of Internet Celebrity in China

The Baidu Baike² entry *wangluo hongren* (2017) provides some compelling interpretations of the phenomenon of "internet celebrity." According to its most recent version at the time of writing, "the difference between *wangluo hongren* and traditional *mingren* is ultimately the platform on which they become famous." As the wiki entry explains, *wangluo hongren* can be divided into three "generations," each connected to specific platforms: the first generation was rooted in the textual interactions happening across discussion forums, IRC chatrooms, and QQ messaging windows; the second came together around image-centric platforms like blogs and microblogs; the third generation emerged from video-centric platforms such as video streaming services and livestreaming apps. A recent market report on the *wanghong* economy similarly divides the phenomenon in three periods: a 1.0 beginning of "grassroots" entertainment-oriented amateurism, a 2.0 popularization of online identities, and a 3.0 reinvention of self-branded and marketized communication (Qingbo Dashuju, 2016). This common linkage with specific online platforms is instrumental in understanding the historicity of *wangluo hongren* and how the meaning of the term mutated over time up to the recent shift to *wanghong*. However, in order to avoid oversimplifying the multilayered histories of generations of celebrities and audiences transitioning between

²The online Wiki-style encyclopedia maintained by Chinese internet company Baidu.

platforms, we adopt Thomas Lamarre’s articulation of “platformativity” or “performativity via platforms” (Lamarre, 2017, p. 285) as a theoretical lens through which we outline a brief history of internet celebrity in China.

According to Lamarre’s understanding of platformativity, “the platforms and infrastructures play an active role, or more precisely, an intra-active role, as they iterate, over and again” (Lamarre, 2017, p. 286). The intertwined relationships between platforms and *wanghong* are one example of the intra-actions between the agential power of platforms, the workings of infrastructure, and the participating individuals: a platform can be the indispensable stage of a *wanghong*’s performance, infrastructure can determine how platforms are designed, adopted, and performed, but a *wanghong*’s popularity can also determine whether a specific platform survives its fierce competition. Before articulating a succinct history of internet celebrity in China in terms of intra-actions between infrastructure, platforms, and modes of performativity, we need to clarify that our analysis does not exclude the three-generation periodization outlined above, since different kinds of platformativity overlap in terms of temporality and individual adoption. Our brief history of internet celebrity in China is based on ethnographic research conducted by both authors from 2012 to 2017 (grounded on online data, participant observation, and interviews) and is compounded by relevant research literature drawn from various academic fields. It should be noted that our history is not strictly chronological: even if platforms and infrastructures are often remembered at their heyday of popularity, the practices of their users often overlap in temporality. In the four following subsections, we outline how shifting intra-actions between infrastructures, platforms, and modes of performativity have shaped the construction of internet celebrity in China.

Infrastructure: Personal computers, digital cameras, dial-up internet connections

Platforms: BBS (SMTH, Tianya, Maopu), blogs (Sina, Blogcn, Blogbus)

Performativity: Identity play, derision, publicity stunts

The earliest examples of “internet celebrity” in China can be traced back to the late 1990s, when bulletin board systems (BBSs) were the primary platform of public discussion online. Roberts (2010) chronicles the rise of Furong Jiejie (literally “Sister Lotus”) since the year 2003, an online personality famous (or notorious, depending on the perspective) for her boastful performances as a successful and good-looking woman despite being harshly disparaged for the vacuity of her blog posts. Roberts traces the origins of her character to BBSs, but notes that the consolidation of her fame largely coincided with the rise of the Chinese blogosphere, as massive blogging platforms like Sina and Sohu encroached upon the popularity of online forums. Furong Jiejie appeared “in the right place at the right time” (228), as China’s online media was heavily impacted by forum wars and intensifying censorship (Pang, 2008; Tao, 2001), and audiences were therefore attracted by lighter content. The lightness of early Chinese internet

celebrities does not diminish their personal efforts and tenacity in updating their blogs, orchestrating publicity stunts, and maintaining peculiar identities that subtly pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable on local platforms (Jacobs, 2012, p. 30). Emerging from the identity experimentation of BBS culture and flourishing on the self-presentation venues provided by blogging websites, the celebrity of Furong Jiejie and other early *wangluo hongren* is “the culmination of a series of circumstances and events that in many ways highlight the illiberality and capriciousness of the internet” (Roberts, 2010, p. 220).

Infrastructure: Mobile phones, Bluetooth sharing, wangba, broadband internet access

Platforms: Video-sharing sites (Youku, Tudou, 56.com), editing software, piracy, ACG video communities (AcFun & Bilibili)

Performativity: Egao satire, amateur spoof videos, unwitting fame

In parallel to the rise of the Chinese blogosphere in the mid-2000s, local video cultures were also coalescing at the intersection of broadband internet access, peer-to-peer sharing software, and video-hosting websites. In this context, popular content creators emerged in a way not dissimilar from what happened on platforms like YouTube (Jerslev, 2016). Nina Luzhou Li (2016) provides a refreshing perspective of the origins of *egao* (“making bad” humor, satire) by looking at the political economy of video spoof production and linking it to earlier media such as pre-broadband pirate VCDs. Hu Ge, the creator of the infamous video *A Murder Caused by a Steamed Bun* (a spoofed remix of Chen Kaige’s *wuxia* movie *The Promise*) mentions the important influence that pre-broadband pirating practices had on his participation in the newborn scene of *egao* video-makers (p. 398). The work of Paola Voci (2010) records several examples of *egao* videos that were widely circulated around 2006, turning unsuspecting video-makers such as the “Back Dorm Boys” duo into overnight celebrities on a national scale. Voci makes a critical point about this early internet fame: the circulation of popular amateur videos primarily relied on early internet infrastructure such as *wangba* (internet cafes), cellphone Bluetooth transmissions between copresent users, and limited peer-to-peer online sharing constrained by the bandwidth available at the time. Perhaps due to the infrastructural limitations and the amateur-oriented nature of these forms of creativity, the makers of these videos were not able to immediately monetize their content, and profit-making was rarely their original intention. For example, it took years for Hu Ge’s online fame as a producer of spoof videos to lead companies to hire him to produce web-based viral commercials. With the growth of large online communities gathering around ACG (Anime, Comics, and Games) video-streaming platforms like AcFun and Bilibili, the unwitting fame experienced by early online celebrities was extended to growing lineups of “Allstars” – former movie stars, TV personalities, and protagonists of news reports rediscovered by video remixers and thrown back under the spotlight by enthusiastic viewers. For example, Billy Herrington, a minor softcore gay porn actor rediscovered by Chinese audiences through humorous remix videos originally posted on the Japanese website Niconico since 2007,

became an actual online celebrity in both China and Japan, was invited to commercial fan events as a special guest, and signed advertising contracts simply in virtue of his unwittingly gained fame.

Infrastructure: Smartphones, tablets, 3G mobile internet access

*Platforms: Microblogging services (Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo),
online communities (Tieba, Douban)*

*Performativity: Self-fashioning, opinion-making, contention, paid
posting*

Blog usage gradually declined in the late 2000s, as users moved their everyday online interactions to *weibo* (microblogging) platforms such as Sina Weibo or Tencent Weibo, and to social media services like Baidu Tieba and Douban. This shift in platform usage was supported by the popularization of mobile devices like smartphones and tablets in conjunction with the rollover of 3G internet connectivity across large parts of the country, which allowed users to remain constantly engaged with social media feeds and granted them the capability of uploading and consuming multimedia content on the go. Just like many other kinds of platforms before them, microblogging services host specific kinds of celebrities – individual users with widely-followed accounts and virally reblogged posts, who regularly post original creations, carefully curated content, or captivating opinions. Following repeated governmental pushes for real-name registration of microblog accounts in the early 2010s, various *weibo* providers have introduced the option to verify accounts, granting popular ones the status of “Big V.” While verified Big Vs remain an important form of celebrity on microblogging platforms, shaping public discussions around news events and social concerns with their opinions while trying to navigate the sensitive waters of censorship (Zhang & Negro, 2015), another kind of internet celebrity has been more recently identified by market research: the KOL, or “Key Opinion Leader,” a social media personality capable of influencing a large number of followers. Not necessarily public figures as the Big Vs, KOLs range from popular mass media stars to self-made influencers, and brands hire them as testimonials to sponsor products and services through their social media activities.

*Infrastructure: Prosumer-grade audiovisual equipment, celebrity
incubators, talent agencies*

*Platforms: WeChat, livestreaming services (Douyu, Inke), micro-
video apps (Miaopai, Kwai)*

*Performativity: Shock value, commercial endorsements, affective
mundanity*

Around the mid-2010s, both mass media industries and smaller actors alike started realizing the importance of understanding internet celebrity and becoming actively involved in its crafting. In the same years, new apps and websites were also flooding the increasingly ubiquitous infrastructures of the Chinese internet: largely inspired by the app-centric ecology of functions pioneered by WeChat,

mobile-oriented social networking platforms have largely reshaped the local digital media landscape, while the exponential growth and diversification of livestreaming services and *weishipin* (micro-video) platforms have pulled the industry toward synchronous engagement with audiences and regularly uploaded snippets of mundanity. If various actors such as service providers, social media platforms, amateur and content producers were still searching for reliable channels to monetize their activities throughout the 2000s, this is no longer the case in the late 2010s. Media entrepreneurialism has become the default motivation for a large majority of individuals to set up their own video channels, build live-streaming home studios, produce attention-grabbing content, pursue uniqueness and shock value, nurture intimacy with their fans and sponsors, and maintain an overall image of what has come to be defined as *wanghong*. The most widely discussed examples of successful *wanghong*, such as Taobao influencer Zhang Dayi and Sina Weibo personality Papi Jiang (Robin8, 2016), testify to the transformation of early online celebrities' amateur practices of vernacular creativity into carefully orchestrated combinations of stylized performances, personal branding, professional production, and delegated management.

The *Wanghong* Economy: Entrepreneurism, Lookism, and Transience

Marketing professionals and media critics have recently started referring to China's "*wanghong* economy," as an emerging industry based on the attention economy revolving around internet celebrities (Qian, 2016). These buzzwords and catchphrases have propelled the *wanghong* phenomenon toward the forefront of news reporting and market hype, often reducing it to generalizations about its most successful or visible protagonists. In this climate, the term *wanghong* has moved past being a simple abbreviation of *wangluo hongren* and has come to signify a desirable, replicable, and profitable economic model that at the same time entails the morally problematic (or even scandalous in actual practice) occupation of internet celebrity. The primary moral criticisms of *wanghong* within China target the ubiquity of (quasi-)pornographic content: *Wanghonglian* (*wanghong* face) has become a derogatory term to disparagingly describe a (usually female and Asian-looking) face that has undergone cosmetic surgery, stylized makeup, and in-app camera filters in order to meet a certain standard of beauty. Derisive gendered remarks on the prototypical *wanghong* face are symptomatic of a generalized "lookism" linked to the common perception of female internet celebrities in contemporary China. Interviews with several *zhubo* (livestreamers) and livestream viewers consistently confirm widespread feelings of discrimination against *wanghong*, who are regularly characterized as "promiscuous attention whores" (Interview with Yinyi, 2016).

In contrast with the stereotyped depictions of commercial *wanghong* backed by celebrity incubators and talent agencies, the example of Papi Jiang is often offered as "a breath of fresh air (in the filthy waters of *wanghong*)" (Guo, 2016). The extremely successful Beijing-based micro-video celebrity relies on her acting talent and marked Shanghainese identity, uploading a constant stream of carefully

scripted comedy sketches dealing with Chinese everyday life that her millions of fans find immediately relatable and untainted by the stigma of third-party management. As the case of Papi Jiang testifies, negative feelings about *wanghong* go beyond the mere moral condemnation of their standardized lookism and stigmatize the long tail of countless online performers who are manufactured by third-party celebrity incubators, which are often offshoots of more conventional modeling agencies. During an interview with one of the authors, a manager working at a *wanghong* agency suggested that, according to the examples she was familiar with, the professionalization of online celebrities in China is rarely built upon a foundation of early self-earned fame.³ Moreover, she also observed how the profession of *zhubo* is rarely related to the livestreamer’s personal interests: “(the industry of) livestreaming is showing us a process of professionalization. It is just like how we work in our (conventional) jobs: does everybody work on something because they are passionate about it?” (Interview, 2016). Assuming her experience to be representative of the larger *wanghong* ecosystem, these insights confirm the wholesale professionalization of internet celebrities, as well as the layered conceptions of performed authenticity and branded amateurism that characterize the profession (Hall, 2015).

The success stories of well-known celebrities overshadow the transient nature of the popularity achieved by the majority of small-scale *wanghong*. On the industry side of the phenomenon, there are countless *zhubo* agencies and celebrity incubators that try to replicate the success of top-tier *wanghong* on a mass scale. It is not uncommon for third-party talent agencies to hire performers and have them perform in livestreaming studios set up in compartmentalized office buildings designed to look like domestic spaces. With low success percentages and high turnover rates, these agencies need to constantly switch from one platform to another according to the profits they manage to squeeze from audience donations and occasional sponsors. On the amateur side of small-scale *wanghong*, there are the many independent aspiring performers trying their luck on a multitude of platforms ranging from obscure livestreaming apps to international websites. For example, Yinyi is a small-scale *wanghong*, and her interview responses highlight the transience and precarity of online celebrity. Yinyi meticulously maintains a semipornographic Tumblr blog on which she posts updates on her daily life and, occasionally, sexually explicit images or videos of herself. She also runs a WeChat group which requires the payment of an entry fee, where she sells her own photos for a small price. However, the lack of a reliable financial income and the recurring waves of personal attacks make her work very difficult: “Some people are ‘red eyed’ (jealous), so they reported me on WeChat and my account got suspended... these things are demoralizing” (Interview, 2016).

Between the lure of self-made entrepreneurship, the superficial condemnation of lookism, and the less discussed backstage of transience and failure, the phenomenon of *wanghong* has emerged as a drastic shift in the understanding of online

³A common trajectory among the many YouTubers who progress from amateur content creators to online celebrities supported by professional crews.

celebrity in mid-2010s China, moving away from the simple being “red” (popular) on the internet, toward a booming profession that is both celebrated and loathed. What *wanghong* has come to mean today has its roots in a history of online celebrity that is as long as that of internet development in the country: the intra-actions between infrastructures, platforms, and modes of performativity have resulted in a variety of celebrity figures – from amateur content creators and unwitting spoof video stars to popular opinion leaders and commercial influencers. These intra-actions will continue to shape the form and role of celebrities in the near future, and *wanghong* will continue to exist among the aspirations and contradictions of internet users to come. In the words of Sissi, a small-scale celebrity who uploads micro-videos of her singing on Miaopai and short image essays on WeChat:

Me... I count as an up-and-coming *wanghong*. There are a lot of people that started following me, and of course I want to become influential, but I still haven't become popular, I don't know if I can become popular, because the songs I make, my goal is not... my goal is to write music every day, sing songs, make videos, publish them. I'm already happy with this life, I want to keep performing, this is my wish, I don't want to get a lot of money and become a celebrity... (Interview, 2016)

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