


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Celebrity Public Relations in China: Power, Politics and Pop Propaganda

Jian Xu¹  and Ling Yang²

¹School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Burwood, Victoria, Australia, and ²School of Film, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China

Corresponding author: Ling Yang; Email: lyang7273@126.com

Abstract

The article uses the scandal surrounding Jackson Yee, a state-endorsed celebrity and household name in China, as a case study to critically examine how the “government–industry–fan–platform” alliance co-conducts what we call “collaborative celebrity PR” to rescue co-opted stars from scandal. We find that the relationship between the four agents is symbiotic but that the government plays the most important “arbiter” role. We argue that the state-endorsed celebrities face an inherent dilemma of “power(lessness)” in which they have to dedicate more effort towards propaganda and behave in a moral and exemplary way to please the government to gain more political capital and power and minimize their own precarity. We also highlight the uncertainty and risks using celebrities in its pop propaganda can bring to the CCP: if a state-endorsed celebrity cannot be saved, the scandal can damage the legitimacy and reliability of the Party propaganda.

摘要

本文以流量明星易烊千玺考编事件为个案，批判性地审视了“政府-娱乐业-粉丝-平台”联盟如何共同实施我们所谓的“协作式名人公关”来挽救陷入负面舆论的被官方认可支持的名人。我们发现，联盟中的四个行动者虽然处于共生关系，但政府在这一过程中扮演着最重要的“仲裁者”角色。官方认可支持的名人身处一种“权力(无力)”的固有困境，他们必须更多地致力于宣传，更加谨言慎行，以便获得更多的政治资本和权力，减少不稳定性。政府利用名人所做的流行宣传是一个蕴含不确定性和风险的悖论。一旦官方认可支持的名人“塌房”，有可能损害宣传的合法性和可靠性。

Keywords: celebrity PR; celebrity scandal; state-endorsed celebrity; celebrity power; celebrity politics; pop propaganda

关键词: 名人公关; 名人负面新闻; 官方认可支持的名人; 名人权力; 名人政治; 流行宣传

Since Xi Jinping 习近平 came to power, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been tightening its regulation and control over celebrities. Central governmental organizations have issued a series of regulations, notices and laws that require celebrities in the film, radio, television and entertainment industries to abide by rules, respect social norms and mainstream values, establish a positive social image and disseminate “positive energy.”¹ The China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (*Zhongguo wenxue yishu jie lianhehui* 中国文学艺术界联合会) and China Federation of Radio and Television Associations (*Zhongguo guangbo dianshi shehui zuzhi lianhehui* 中国广播电视社会组织联合会) have established professional ethics promotion committees (*zhiye daode jianshe weiyuanhui* 职业道德建设委员会) at central and local levels, initiating a nationwide ethics education campaign among artists and cultural workers to encourage them to pursue “professional excellence and moral integrity” (*deyi shuangxin* 德艺双馨), a slogan last directed at socialist artists and cultural workers in the Mao era.²

1 Jeffreys and Xu 2023.

2 “Zhongguo wenlian chengli wenyi gongzuozhe zhiye daode jianshe weiyuanhui” (China Federation of Literary and Art Circles establishes professional ethics promotion committee for literary and art workers). *People’s Daily*, 21 October 2016,

Set against this background, since 2014, a series of exposed celebrity scandals relating to drug abuse, tax evasion, the soliciting of prostitutes, illegal surrogacy and rape, among other things, has led to the associated celebrities, including, for example, Fan Bingbing 范冰冰, Zhou Libo 周立波, Wu Yifan 吴亦凡, Zhang Zhehan 张哲瀚, Zheng Shuang 郑爽 and Li Yifeng 李易峰, being disciplined and blacklisted as negative examples. Naming, shaming and punishing celebrities who transgress moralities and laws can help the CCP to exercise disciplinary power not only over social and cultural elites but also over ordinary people who actively consume celebrity culture in everyday life. At the same time, the CCP has become more proactive in co-opting influential celebrities into its propaganda projects (for example, government advertising, ambassadorship, “main melody” films and celebration galas) and in promoting their “ideotainment” role,³ thereby cultivating more “socialist-minded and professionally competent” (*youhong youzhuan* 又红又专) state-endorsed celebrities.

This article examines what happens when these state-endorsed celebrities are caught up in a scandal. Does the government unconditionally save or decisively punish them? And, if the star is to be rescued from a crisis, how does the state conduct its celebrity public relations (celebrity PR hereafter)? By focusing on the celebrity PR used to save one state-endorsed celebrity, Jackson Yee 易烊千玺, this article reveals who participates in the PR campaign, what role each agent plays and the relationship between these agents to shed light on China’s celebrity politics and ecology.

Born in 2000, Yee is one of the first and most popular “traffic stars” (*liuliang mingxing* 流量明星) in China, with approximately 90 million followers on Weibo 微博 in 2023.⁴ After being spotted by a talent manager at a children’s talent competition, Yee signed to Time Fengjun Entertainment (*Beijing shidai fengjun wenhua yishu fazhan youxian gongsi* 北京时代峰峻文化艺术发展有限公司) and, in 2013, became the youngest member of TFBoys, the most popular boy band to date in Chinese history. The three boys’ wholesome schoolboy image, boy-next-door personalities, and uplifting and inspiring music have not only won the adoration and support of millions of millennials but also the endorsement of the government. They featured in the annual Spring Festival Gala run by China Central Television (CCTV) from 2016 to 2022 and performed in the music video for the Young Pioneers of China anthem, “We are the heirs of communism.” According to cultural critic Zhu Dake, the example of TFBoys demonstrates both how idols and their companies can achieve huge success by championing the values of the CCP and how the CCP evolves its propaganda by strategically incorporating stars and pop culture.⁵

Yee is arguably the most popular member of the band and has received more government resources than his bandmates. In addition to featuring in a recruitment video for the Chinese Air Force and a promotional music video for the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games, he also starred in the blockbuster war epic, *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (*Changjin hu* 长津湖, 2021), which was commissioned by the propaganda department of the CCP to celebrate the Party’s 100th anniversary. Yee has also taken on various ambassador roles and actively engages in philanthropy and public affairs. For example, he was chosen as a WHO China Tobacco Control Champion by the World Health Organisation in 2017. He also represented China at the United Nations Economic and Social Council Youth Forum in 2019. Such highly esteemed and selective

http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-10/21/c_129331439.htm; “Zhongguang lianhehui chengli zhiye daode jianshe weiyuanhui changyi guangbo dianshi congyezhe dizhi chaoxi piaoque deng xingwei” (China Federation of Radio and Television Associations establishes professional ethics promotion committee and calls for radio and television professionals to resist acts such as plagiarism). *Xinhuanet.com*, 30 March 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/local/2021-03/30/c_1127274837.htm. Accessed 17 July 2024.

3 Zou 2019.

4 “Traffic star” refers to hyped celebrities who drive high digital traffic, especially through their highly organized Weibo-based fan groups. They emerged in China around 2014 with the rise of China’s domestic idol industry and the “data-ization of online fandom” (Yin 2020). Traffic stars have enormous market appeal and commercial value and, therefore, have been widely used by brands and entertainment firms for marketing purposes. Their heavy influence on young people has also made them the focus of China’s celebrity and fandom governance.

5 Kan 2017.

opportunities would not be possible for a young idol without official endorsement. Yee has benefited enormously from government resources and has publicly pledged his allegiance to the CCP in a short article published in the Party mouthpiece, *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报), entitled “Sing for the new age and new ethos,” further proving his standing as a CCP-endorsed celebrity and his eagerness to be co-opted.⁶

This extraordinary success was threatened, however, by a scandal that came to light during the pandemic. On 6 July 2022, Jackson Yee and two other young idols, Hu Xianxu 胡先煦 and Luo Yizhou 罗一舟, who are not members of TFBoys and do not enjoy the same degree of fame, were reported to have successfully passed the exam to join the National Theatre of China (*Zhongguo guojia huaaju yuan* 中国国家话剧院, NTC hereafter), a state-run drama troupe. The NTC's recruitment of the three young idols demonstrates the mentor–protégé relationship between the CCP and its endorsed stars. On the one hand, the fame and popularity of the young idols can increase box office sales for NTC's political theatre and expand its reach to younger audiences. On the other hand, the idols' admission to the NTC is official recognition of their popularity, impact and political correctness, which can boost their political capital and bring them more economic gains in the competitive entertainment industry.

Recruitment to the NTC meant that they had secured a highly competitive *bianzhi* 编制 post, with job stability and a generous benefits package from the government. *Bianzhi* refers to state-funded positions within government agencies or public institutions, such as public schools, colleges, scientific research institutes, cultural and art units, etc. Such positions come with guaranteed job security, earning them the moniker “iron rice bowl” (*tie fanwan* 铁饭碗), and are highly sought after, especially by China's millions of university graduates. In 2023, more than 1.52 million people sat China's annual civil service recruitment examinations, but only one in 41 was successful.⁷

During the pandemic, the competition for *bianzhi* positions had become even more fierce owing to China's soaring youth unemployment.⁸ The news that three young idols, who were already rich and famous thanks to their own established careers, had secured the competitive *bianzhi* positions provoked a huge backlash from millions of internet users who themselves were facing a shrinking job market and rising income inequality. Yee, as the most popular of the three, bore the brunt of the social media storm. Internet criticism focused on why such a high earner as Yee would want to compete against ordinary, unemployed people, whether he went through the proper recruitment channels, and whether the selection process was fair and transparent. Suspicions that he had abused his celebrity privilege to gain a place in the NTC damaged the carefully crafted image of Yee as a hardworking and inspirational young man and could have led to the demise of his career if the crisis was not handled correctly. More importantly, if the NTC's recruitment procedure was found to be rigged, the fairness and legitimacy of China's public service examination system would have been in question, which would consequently harm the image and reliability of the CCP and the government. In this context, defending Yee was not just a case of saving a state-endorsed celebrity but of defending the state itself.

This article uses Yee's scandal as a case study to examine how the “government–industry–fan–platform” alliance co-conducts what we call “collaborative celebrity PR” to save a state-endorsed celebrity. First, we critically review our theoretical framework and the key concepts of “celebrity scandal,” “celebrity PR” and “celebrity power” to identify research trends and gaps. This is followed by an explanation of our research methods. We then present the findings of our case analysis to demonstrate the detailed practices of each agent involved in the campaign and their interrelations. Finally, we discuss the dilemma inherent in the power accrued by China's state-endorsed celebrities and the paradox of the CCP harnessing celebrities for its propaganda.

6 Yi and Wang 2022.

7 “1.52 m people sit China's civil servant exam.” *China Daily*, 9 January 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202301/09/WS63bb7fc2a31057c47eba8758.html>. Accessed 7 November 2023.

8 Nunley 2023.

Celebrity Scandal, Celebrity PR and Celebrity Power

Celebrity culture, as Pramod Nayar argues, is caught in the “paradox of deification that renders [celebrities] perfect and godly, and humanisation that makes them more human.”⁹ The paradox is clearly evident in celebrity news in mass media, which not only highlights their success, wealth and power, but also their transgressions, misconduct and scandals. The term celebrity scandal refers to the disclosed transgressions of moral norms, by a celebrity, that make media headlines and can encompass extra-marital affairs, domestic violence, drug abuse, corruption, extravagant spending and privilege, as well as inappropriate remarks and behaviour. Celebrity scandals are transformative social dramas that breach norm-governed social relations and order and negotiate a society’s moral codes.¹⁰ Yee’s scandal relates to celebrity privilege and the covering up of potential corruption. It touched the sensitive nerve of “social inequality” during the pandemic and aroused a public sense of “relative deprivation.” This social psychological phenomenon occurs when people perceive unfairness and disadvantage as they compare themselves with those who have more power, resources and opportunities, and in the Yee case, it triggered a backlash from the public.¹¹

Celebrity scandals are “mediated scandals,”¹² driven in part by their sensationalization by news media that follow the logic of the attention economy and are intrinsic to celebrity culture.¹³ In the pre-internet era, celebrity scandals were usually exposed by the paparazzi or journalists and widely reported in tabloid newspapers, gossip magazines or mainstream media. However, in the digital era, the celebrity system is transforming from a “representative regime,” which relies on mass media’s representations of celebrities, to a “presentational culture and regime” in which celebrities actively present themselves and interact with the public through online communication.¹⁴ Digital communication is not always empowering for celebrities’ promotion, however, and can leave them vulnerable. Following the exposure of misconduct, a celebrity’s visibility can be “weaponized” as the public challenges the celebrity’s established persona and moralities, leading to a celebrity scandal that arouses strong moral outrage and which may even result in the “cancelling” of the concerned celebrity.¹⁵ The participation of the digitally savvy public in the exposure, dissemination and consumption of celebrity scandals has made scandals more frequent and less controllable than before and poses new challenges for celebrity PR.

Since the early 20th century, public relations industries have played a pivotal role in the “production and sustainment of celebrity.”¹⁶ They have significantly contributed to “the growth and pervasiveness of celebrity in contemporary society” and therefore have become an “integral part of celebrity culture.”¹⁷ However, celebrity PR, as an interdisciplinary field across celebrity studies and public relations research, has been largely neglected by scholars in both areas. The lack of interest in celebrity PR is owing to two main reasons according to Kate Fitch.¹⁸ First, traditional celebrity studies scholarship focuses on the text and audience rather than the promotional work for celebrities. Second, the dominant paradigm in public relations research distances public relations practices from press agency, publicity and other promotional activity. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural intermediary” and Lee Edwards’s theorization of PR as a “cultural industry” and its role as “cultural intermediary,”¹⁹ Fitch calls attention to the cultural intermediary role of celebrity PR in

9 Nayar 2009, 127.

10 Turner 1982; Alexander 1988; Kantola and Vesa 2013.

11 Runciman 1966.

12 Kantola and Vesa 2013.

13 Nayar 2009.

14 Marshall 2010.

15 Trottier 2017.

16 Ciszek 2020, 135.

17 Fitch 2017a, 511.

18 Fitch 2017b.

19 Bourdieu 1984; Edwards 2012; 2015.

the production, maintenance and consumption of celebrity in order to identify the “meaning-making” in the processes and its societal impacts on celebrities and beyond.²⁰

The very limited celebrity PR literature focuses on the role of celebrity publicists as cultural intermediaries while significantly neglecting other intermediary actors who also play important roles in celebrity PR. In the digital era, either during a scandal or in an everyday situation, multiple actors beyond celebrity publicists actively participate in celebrity PR for various purposes and goals, including, for example, networked fan groups, digital platforms, traditional media and even government agencies. It is therefore necessary to update celebrity PR research by taking these other intermediary actors into consideration. Moreover, existing celebrity PR research in scandalous contexts mainly focuses on the response strategies of celebrities and their agents as they try to repair celebrity images.²¹ There is a lack of nuanced and comprehensive research into how the multiple actors interact with each other and co-construct celebrity PR in crisis. The Jackson Yee scandal offers an excellent case study in the Chinese context to delve into the complexity of “collaborative celebrity PR” involving multiple intermediaries.

Critical examination of the celebrity PR exercised to save a state-endorsed celebrity is also conducive to our understanding of celebrity power and politics in China. C. Wright Mills included celebrities in “the power elite” group in post-Second World War society in the United States, subordinate only to the political, military and corporate elites.²² They are capable of exercising their “referent power” through their “power of persona,” which could transform their “parasocial relationship” with the public to “love, adoration, emulation, and support from an audience.”²³ Thus, celebrities can generate enormous profits through advertising and branding and can influence public and political affairs at domestic and international levels using their mediatized “star power,”²⁴ for example, through celebrity philanthropy, diplomacy and advocacy.²⁵

In China’s political system and celebrity ecology, the legacy of socialist role models casts a long shadow over contemporary Chinese celebrities requiring them to serve the nation and be a positive influence over people’s minds and souls while seeking profits in the entertainment industry. Celebrities have to “meticulously navigate the complex trade-off between neoliberal market ideology and Party ideology” in order to gain economic success and official recognition.²⁶ They are, therefore, “indentured celebrities” whose symbolic and economic powers are subject to the intertwined market and Party logics in China’s socialist market economy.²⁷ The more successful they are in the market, the more likely they are to be co-opted by the government as state-endorsed celebrities for propaganda. The more political capital they accrue from serving the government, the more opportunities they can access in the market and, possibly, the more protection they can expect when they are in trouble. Using TFBoys as an example, Dan Chen and Gengsong Gao point out that celebrities who express “political loyalty” can be rewarded with more “professional opportunities,” suggesting that “celebrities who propagate the government’s ‘positive values’ are rewarded professionally and financially.”²⁸ Jackie Chan 成龙 is another pertinent example. He has incorporated “patriotism into his star image by overtly promoting Chinese nationalism and supporting official ideology.”²⁹ In return, he was awarded the prestigious title of “National first-class actor” (*Guojia yiji yanyuan*

20 Fitch 2017b.

21 Champion 2015; Waymer, VanSlette and Cherry 2015.

22 Mills 2000[1956].

23 Harvey 2017, 55.

24 Rojek 2014.

25 Cooper 2008; Brockington and Henson 2015.

26 Xu, Jian, and Yang 2021, 213.

27 Jeffreys and Xu 2023.

28 Chen, Dan, and Gao 2023, 473.

29 Yu 2012, 235.

国家一级演员) and received the State Council “special allowance” (*guowuyuan teshu jintie* 国务院特殊津贴).

State-endorsed celebrities tend to be more “powerful” and resilient than those without official endorsement in terms of market competition and critical incidents. But from another perspective, this also means they are dependent and “powerless” as they have to rely on both their political and market capitals for career success and survival and enjoy little autonomy to exercise their agency. This dilemma, which we call a “power trap,” endows a state-endorsed celebrity with “power(lessness),” a term we coin to depict the enabling and limiting power of the state-endorsed celebrities in China. By scrutinizing the celebrity PR exercise to save Yee, we gain a deeper understanding of the “power(lessness)” of the cohort of celebrities in China’s Party-controlled, but market-oriented, celebrity industry.

Method

To understand how the celebrity PR exercise was conducted in Yee’s case, we collected primary data from Sina Weibo, China’s most popular micro-blogging site, for content analysis in the two subsequent months after the scandal broke in July 2022. Weibo was selected because it has become “a timely and effective channel of communication” for corporates and celebrities for marketing and promotion,³⁰ and a key platform for government agencies and central media outlets to publicize official messages,³¹ as well as the primary site for online fandom.³² Hence, all agents involved in the Yee PR campaign used Weibo as the primary platform for their PR practices. We collected 23 posts related to the scandal, all published between 6 and 30 July, from the official Weibo accounts of 38 “central news units” (*zhongyang xinwen danwei* 中央新闻单位).³³ Central news units are widely recognized as state-level official media. They function as the Party’s mouthpiece and represent the standpoints of the central government. Thus, analysing these posts enables us to identify the attitude of the government and its role in the PR campaign.

To understand the crisis management tactics adopted by Yee’s celebrity agency, we collected posts published between 6 July and 9 September by 12 marketing accounts (*yingxiao hao* 营销号) in entertainment on Weibo. All of the 12 accounts were awarded the title of “Top ten most influential entertainment accounts” (*shida yingxiangli yule da V* 十大影响力娱乐大V) by Weibo between 2019 and 2022. These commercial accounts work closely with entertainment companies or celebrity agencies to conduct marketing campaigns for celebrities and their associated cultural products. When a scandal breaks, the celebrity involved and the staff in their agencies are extremely difficult to access for interview. Therefore, the most feasible way to examine the practices of their marketing collaborators on Weibo, which constitute the most important part of the PR practices of celebrity agencies, is through their posts. In total, 235 posts relating to Jackson Yee were collected.

To understand the PR practices and strategies of Yee’s fans, we identified nine Weibo accounts run by Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in Yee’s fan groups through online observation. These accounts have a total of two million followers and actively produced and circulated pro-Yee information, which guided and mobilized other fans to participate in the PR campaign after the scandal was exposed. We collected 975 posts relating to the scandal that were published by the nine fan KOL accounts from 6 July to 31 August for analysis.

To understand the intervention of Weibo in the PR campaign, we purchased membership to *weibo.zhaoyizhe.com*, a site that has kept a record of all hashtags on the Hot Search List (HSL) and its

30 Xu, Zhanghong, and Li 2020, 52.

31 Chen, Dan, and Gao 2023.

32 Yin 2020.

33 See the list of internet news information source units (*Hulianwang xinwen xinxi gaoyuan danwei mingdan*), issued by the Cyberspace Administration of China in October 2021, at https://www.cac.gov.cn/2021-10/18/c_1636153133379560.htm. The list includes 38 “central news units,” with ranking.

recent spin-off, Entertainment List, on Weibo since October 2019. The HSL is a list of the top 50 keywords/hashtags being searched on Weibo in real time. It has become a barometer of Chinese society as hot-button topics on the HSL trigger widespread discussion. Its enormous agenda-setting function has made it a popular PR tool for celebrities, as well as a target for government surveillance.³⁴ The HSL does not only rely on algorithms but also on interventions from the market, government and Weibo itself. Using the search engine provided by the website, we conducted a day-by-day search of hashtags related to Yee's NTC scandal from 6 July to 25 July, during which time the topic was heatedly discussed on Weibo. We collected 117 NTC-related hashtags from the two lists in order to identify Weibo's position and role in the PR campaign.

To complement our content analysis of the Weibo posts and HSL hashtags, in January 2024 we conducted online or offline in-depth interviews with seven veteran fans/fan KOLs and three publicists who had worked in or were working in the entertainment industry at that time. We selected informants who were not directly involved in Yee's PR campaign but who have rich experience and knowledge in celebrity fandom, marketing and management. This is because of our concerns that those directly involved in Yee's case would be reluctant to be interviewed and would not wish to divulge the sensitive and concealed celebrity PR practices that were undertaken. As "practitioners" and "insiders" in China's celebrity-fandom ecosystem, our informants' insights on the general practices of celebrity PR can shed important light on our understanding of the Jackson Yee case. All ten interviewees were recruited through personal networks built up through our previous research projects on celebrity and fandom in China. In the following, we present the findings of our content analysis, online observations and interviews, and discuss how each of these actors participated in the PR campaign to save Yee's career.

Strategic Support of the State-level Official Media

As some of our interviewees informed us, the tone and attitude of the state-level official media towards a celebrity scandal are crucial, especially the top three official media, *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency and CCTV. Their position is often taken as representative of the government's attitude and determines if a PR campaign to save an impacted celebrity from a scandalous incident is worth doing and has a chance to succeed.³⁵ Compared with the state-level official media's swift and straightforward condemnation of the misdeeds of some disgraced celebrities over the last few years, such as PG One (drug use and vulgar lyrics), Fan Bingbing (tax evasion) and Zheng Shuang (surrogacy), both their coverage and commentary on the Yee controversy were strategic and protective.

China Newsweek, the lowest ranked of the 38 "central news units," published a commentary on its official WeChat account on 8 July soon after the controversy topped Weibo's HSL. Published under the headline, "Why can't Jackson Yee take the exam for *bianzhi*? And why did he do so?" the piece was clearly supportive of Yee's career choice.³⁶ It attributed the cause of the controversy to growing public anger about celebrities' bad behaviour and their exorbitant earnings in recent years, as well as the increasing competitiveness of the *bianzhi* exam during the pandemic, which left millions of unsuccessful applicants feeling frustrated. Instead of responding to public concerns regarding the transparency and fairness of the NTC recruitment procedure, the piece instead pointed the finger at the "sour grape" mentality of those who questioned Yee, and justified Yee's qualification and right to sit the exam. The article provoked such an immediate online backlash that *China Newsweek* was forced to quickly delete the article.

34 Jia and Han 2020; Liu 2020.

35 Online interview with Y, a fan KOL of TNT, another boy group with Time Fengjun Entertainment, 20 January 2024; online interview with J, a former fansite administrator of another member of TFboys, 22 January 2024; online interview with C, a former publicist of a talent agency, 30 January 2024.

36 Yang 2022.

The top-ranked state-level official media chose to keep silent for about a week following *China Newsweek's* controversial commentary. Then, on 16 July, *People's Daily* reposted the NTC's official response on its Weibo account at 8:47am, two minutes after the NTC had posted the original.³⁷ About ten minutes later, *People's Daily* posted the tweet: "NTC claims that all shortlisted candidates attended the interview" and attached the NTC's statement again. Reposting the NTC's statement twice clearly demonstrated that *People's Daily* supported the view that the NTC's recruitment procedure was fair and correct. The timing of the posts was also strategic. First, it was not appropriate for the top-ranked state media to air its opinion before the NTC had issued a statement and provided evidence of its good conduct. Second, *China Newsweek* is a popular magazine but not as official and authoritative as *People's Daily*, and allowing it to publish a pro-Yee commentary permitted the state to test the climate of public opinion before *People's Daily* became involved. Neither Xinhua nor CCTV posted any related information, a rare occurrence when it comes to prominent celebrity scandals. Twelve other lower-ranked state-level official media posted a total of 21 related posts in the period after the *People's Daily* reposting of the NTC statement, but none of these posts commented on the incident. In comparison with other state-level official media responses to prominent celebrity scandals in the past, the responses in this case seemed to be "low-key" and unified in action and tone. By remaining silent, the state-level official media could avoid fomenting further public anger and also avoid risking the counterproductive propaganda effect of all of them actively defending Yee.

However, netizens were not satisfied with the perfunctory response from *People's Daily*, which was expected to exercise its "supervision by public opinion" (*yulun jiandu* 舆论监督) role rather than simply trusting the NTC statement. They wanted evidence that Yee had attended the NTC exam and interview. They soon began to inundate the comment section of the *People's Daily* retweet with critical comments. Three critical comments topped the comment section and received 240,000, 160,000 and 137,000 likes, respectively, but these critical comments were soon deleted by *People's Daily*. In the meantime, Yee's fans also flooded the comment section in response to the negative posts and to reiterate that the retweet of the NTC statement by *People's Daily* was proof of Yee's innocence. Deletion of the critical comments soon pushed the fan-produced pro-Yee comments to the top and they were read and liked the most. *People's Daily* later closed the comment section to stop further fighting between netizens and Yee's fans.

From following the actions of the state-level official media in this case, it is clear that there is no uniform state response to celebrity scandals. Instead, we find there are different "permutations and combinations" of strategies that are followed when official media report on major celebrity scandals. The government has to consider various factors when deciding if a state-endorsed celebrity is worth saving and can be saved. The most crucial of these include the importance of the celebrity to the CCP's propaganda (for example, the celebrity's fan base, national influence, achievements, etc.), the nature of the scandal (for example, is it recoverable, is there solid evidence, does it involve illegal actions?), public opinion on the scandal, the attitude of the disgraced celebrity, and the "gain and loss" incurred by defending or punishing the celebrity. This means that the government may take a different stance and action regarding a state-endorsed celebrity who is enveloped by scandal. For instance, Fan Bingbing, one of China's best-known actresses, openly endorsed the "Public pledge of professional ethics and self-discipline for personnel in press, publications, radio, film, and television" (*xinwen chuban guangbo yingshi congye renyuan zhiye daode zilü gongyue* 新闻出版广播影视从业人员职业道德自律公约).³⁸ Yet she was decisively shamed by the state-level official media,

37 On 16 July, after the "public notice period" (*gongshiqi*) of 7 working days, the NTC published an explanation on its official website and Weibo account that categorically denied any irregularities in its recruitment process. See "Zhongguo guojia huajuyuan guanyu 2022 nian yingjie biyesheng zhaopin youguan qingkuang de shuoming" (NTC's explanation about the recruitment of fresh graduates for the year 2022), 16 July 2022, <http://www.ntcc.com.cn/zggihjy/jyxw/202207/e3fc179e38fd4f538214b73e0304838f.shtml?continueFlag=d0f37e39>. Accessed 7 November 2023.

38 "Fan Bingbing zai xinwen chuban guangbo yingshi congye renyuan zhiye daode zilü gongyue zuotanhui shang de jianghua" (Fan Bingbing's talk at the Public Pledge of Professional Ethics and Self-Discipline for Personnel in Press,

fined and banned from working after evidence was found of her illegal tax evasion. The gain of abandoning Fan outweighed its loss; her punishment not only had a “chilling effect” on other celebrities when set against the background of the Party clampdown on sky-high pay for stars, it also drew attention to China’s tax reforms and encouraged the lawful payment of income tax via a celebrity cautionary tale.³⁹

Yee’s case, however, would be different. First, Yee has a much larger fan base than Fan and more influence among young Chinese people. He has also been more thoroughly co-opted into the CCP’s propaganda work than Fan. Second, his scandal was considered recoverable as long as there was no higher-level investigation and the state-level official media did not probe further into the NTC statement. More importantly, further investigation and punishment would have been untenable because if it were found that he had bypassed the usual admission procedures, it would undermine the justice and equity of China’s civil service recruitment system and the CCP’s reliability, and even lead to political instability. Therefore, the government had no other option but to protect and save Yee. This logic is reflected in the government’s protection of CCP-endorsed revolutionary heroes according to China’s Heroes and Martyrs Protection Law (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo yingxiong lieshi baohufa* 中华人民共和国英雄烈士保护法). Any spoofing or challenge to the image of these heroes is deemed harmful to the CCP’s ideological legitimacy and the authenticity of its propaganda about heroes and role models.⁴⁰ It is important to note, however, that we have no direct proof that the propaganda department of the CCP directly intervened in the actions of the state-level official media in Yee’s scandal, although we contend that intervention was unavoidable, given the high stakes involved in the case as well as the routine media practices used when covering emergencies and disasters of high importance.⁴¹

The Visible and Invisible Hand of Celebrity Publicists

When the official pro-Yee attitude, reflected in the leading official media’s tone and coverage, became apparent, other actors involved in celebrity PR sprang into action. Yee and his PR team embarked on their PR strategy once the NTC had released its official statement and *People’s Daily* had reposted it. Yee posted a 900-character statement on his Weibo account on 17 July that proclaimed his innocence in the alleged NTC scandal:

I always want to influence people in a positive way. Unfortunately, people feel offended and unhappy with me this time. The National Theatre of China, of which I have long been a fan, has also been affected, which is the last thing I want to see. After careful consideration, I have decided to give up the job, but I will continue to study and improve myself in the theatre.⁴²

The openness of Yee’s response and his declining of the NTC job offer were aimed at placating the netizens and ending the negative public opinion crisis. However, the strategy was not as effective as expected because, almost simultaneously, Hu Xianxu, one of the other celebrities caught up in the scandal, also responded on Weibo. He posted concrete evidence of his participation in the exam and interview, including the NTC’s interview notice, a screenshot of the online interview and his train ticket to Beijing to attend the exam. He decided to accept the job. Yee’s quick rejection of the job offer and the evasiveness of his response regarding the exam and interview made him look even more suspicious. The situation now required his agent to deploy some “invisible” PR strategies

Publications, Radio, Film, and Television forum), 6 November 2015, <http://www.carft.cn/2015-11-6/a9235f8e-118c-ec72-c9cf-91fe66a97ac8.html>. Accessed 17 July 2024.

39 Jeffreys and Xu 2023.

40 Xu, Jian, Gong and Yin 2022.

41 Chen, Lidan 2008.

42 Chen, Nan 2022.

to manage the crisis. The most prominent of these strategies, as we observed, included working with social media platforms to censor posts and working with influential entertainment marketing accounts on Weibo to sway public attention.

First, according to our online observations, posts related to the NTC controversy were greatly circumscribed on various social media platforms. For example, all NTC-related posts were deleted from *douban.com*, a website that hosts thousands of fandom groups. In July, when the scandal was at its height, the mention of Yee's name, or puns of his name, in WeChat groups and QQ groups was enough to trigger a suspension of the whole group. On Weibo, hashtags against Yee were barred from entering the Weibo HSL, which we will discuss later. Owing to Yee's status as a traffic star, his agent maintains very close relations with the leading social media platforms where his fandom practices are based, and he has the power to intervene in the moderation of their content.

Second, Yee's agent enlisted influential marketing accounts on Weibo to maximize positive publicity of Yee. This strategy has become a standard celebrity PR practice in China. According to one publicist interviewee, it is common for celebrity agents to pay influential marketing accounts on Weibo to publish positive content and/or delete negative content concerning their contracted celebrities. The cost of doing so ranges from 1,000 yuan to over 10,000 yuan per post, depending on the traffic and reputation of each account. Some marketing accounts are reluctant to publish negative content about the celebrities represented by their collaborative agents and companies for fear of damaging relations with them.⁴³

Among the 12 marketing accounts we observed, three apparently worked for Yee: *Jiaofu yule* 教父娱乐, *Quannei jiaofu* 圈内教父 and *Keguazi meiri zhuanyong* 嗑瓜子每日专用. These accounts boosted circulation of Yee's and the NTC's responses to the scandal. At the same time, they also produced dozens of promotional tweets about Yee, such as information about his new film, his music and endorsements of his acting skills, to shift public attention. In China, such distraction tactics are a commonly used crisis communication strategy and are even deployed by government organizations to deal with crises and scandals.⁴⁴ Of the remaining marketing accounts, eight either omitted any mention of the NTC controversy or else just reposted Yee's or the NTC's responses without making any comment, a highly unusual response for such paparazzi-style marketing accounts seeking traffic and profit.

The Fans' Battle to Defend Yee

A major goal of celebrity PR is to maintain the celebrity's positive image among fans and keep their support. Fan groups are not only a target of celebrity PR but also play a vital collaborative role in celebrity PR work. With the growth of data-driven online fandom in China, networked fans can now take advantage of Weibo's algorithmic mechanism to generate positive data to enhance and protect the reputation of a beloved idol.⁴⁵ These amateur fan publicists are usually more sensitive than professional publicists to online public opinion, and they often react faster than celebrities and their agencies to rumours or scandals.⁴⁶ When a celebrity scandal breaks, fan KOLs usually take immediate action to mobilize fan groups to voluntarily help sway any negative online public sentiment aimed at their idol. According to our fan interviewees, when an idol is caught up in a crisis, heads of the official fan clubs (*houyuanhui* 后援会) usually consult with the celebrity's PR teams and submit their publicity scripts for review. However, these fan KOLs are not necessarily affiliated with any celebrity agents, nor do they receive payment or direct orders from them.⁴⁷

⁴³ Online interview with C, 30 January 2024.

⁴⁴ Cheng and Lee 2019.

⁴⁵ Yin 2020; Zhang, Qian, and Negus 2020.

⁴⁶ Jiang 2022, 16–17.

⁴⁷ Online interview with S, the former head of the official fan club of an idol survival show participant, 20 January 2024; online interview with J, 22 January 2024; offline interview with W, a fan KOL of a lesser-known actor, 23 January 2024.

Natalie Brown and Andrew Billings show how sports fans become “surrogate crisis communicators” for their favourite teams on Twitter when the teams are waiting for the outcome of a third-party investigation and are not in a good position to respond to the public before that.⁴⁸ Likewise, Yee’s fans also became crisis communicators on his behalf before and after he and the NTC responded to public concerns. The nine fan KOLs we identified overwhelmingly deployed rumour-rebuttal and “conspiracy theory” strategies in their defence of Yee. For example, immediately after the release of the NTC’s official explanation, @Qiushan momo 丘山嬷嬷 characterized the previous ten days’ online cancellation of Yee as a “farce” and angrily asked, “what crime has Yee committed? Why did rumours spread so fast? Is there anyone who really cares about the truth?” Following these rhetorical questions, she offered a succinct rebuttal of popular rumours about Yee’s alleged abuse of his celebrity privilege (16 July 2022, 10:55). This post garnered about 22,000 reposts, 2,400 comments and 37,000 likes. When the news of Yee’s success in the NTC exam first began to degenerate into a scandal, @Yi ge mao 易个猫 aired a “conspiracy theory” to explain the incident. She argued that Yee was targeted by his competitors because he was too outstanding; Yee’s competitors had fabricated the rumour to ease the anxiety of ordinary candidates during the provincial civil service examination period. She also called on fellow fans to defend Yee with the words: “You don’t have anything, if you lose the right to speak, you will become the meat on the chopping board, ready for slaughter” (6 July 2022, 23:56). This post received over 6,600 reposts, 2,000 comments and 32,000 likes.

Moreover, fan KOLs also organized fellow fans to exercise “comment control” on Weibo. However, following the government’s crackdown on “chaotic” celebrity fan culture in 2021,⁴⁹ they had to observe the government’s attitude towards the controversy and gather behind, and comment on, the tweets of the state-level official media and other influential media outlets that supported Yee to gain more legitimacy. By repeatedly liking and replying to the comments prepared by KOLs, fans could push those pro-Yee comments to the front rows, allowing them to be seen by more people. Fans also used this tactic to drown out negative comments. They also reported negative remarks about Yee on Weibo to the platform’s moderation team and, similar to marketing accounts, tweeted Yee’s achievements and positive news to shift public attention. The comment control exercised by fans resembles that used by the “water army,” the online commentators hired by the Chinese government to promote pro-government discourse and sway public opinion in times of crisis.⁵⁰ The main difference is that online commentators are paid trolls, whereas fans, with the exception of allegedly “professional fans” hired by celebrity agencies, are volunteer supporters. Fans’ comment control is aimed at uniting fellow fans, swaying public opinion and maintaining a positive image of their idols in times of crisis. However, our fan interviewees admitted to us that their actions could only play a supportive rather than a decisive role. They agreed that nobody could save their idols if they crossed the legal and political “red lines” and were targeted by the government for being a negative example.⁵¹

HSL Manipulation of Weibo

As seen above, Weibo has become a must-occupy arena for all parties involved in celebrity PR owing to its importance in hosting public discussion and shaping public opinion. Weibo’s cruciality to celebrities and their agents was repeatedly underscored by our publicist interviewees. One former publicist informed us that most celebrity agents have collaborative agreements with Weibo. Weibo requires celebrities managed by these agents to post a certain number of posts every

48 Brown and Billings 2013.

49 Liao and Fu 2022.

50 Han 2015.

51 Online interview with S, 20 January 2024; online interview with Y, 20 January 2024; online interview with J, 22 January 2024.

month to attract more Weibo users and to prioritize commercial collaboration with Weibo. In return, Weibo offers their celebrities some privileges, such as helping them to “dash into HSL” (*chong resou* 冲热搜) to increase their visibility.⁵²

Lize Zhang and Weiyu Zhang’s interview with staff from Weibo’s operational department reveals that Weibo can remove certain negative entries from the HSL “at any time behind closed doors” if offered enough money or put under pressure by the government.⁵³ The HSL’s power in manipulating public attention has made it an important PR tool for enterprises, celebrities and even the government, and has become a lucrative business. In both 2018 and 2020, the HSL was suspended by regulators for spreading illegal information and interfering with the order of online communications.⁵⁴ To accommodate government regulations, Weibo revamped the HSL interface and set up a few separate search lists, including “recommend,” “entertainment,” “key news” and “within the same city,” alongside the original HSL. The installation of a separate “entertainment list” is aimed at the on-trend topics within the entertainment industry that generate profit and to ensure that the HSL contains sufficient political and civic news to satisfy its political requirements. However, Weibo still has the power to manipulate the entry of top-ranked entertainment tags into the main HSL, allowing space for pecuniary exchange between Weibo and celebrity agents.

In Yee’s case, 57 Yee-related hashtags had made their way into the entertainment list, whereas only 25 out of the 57 had shown up on the HSL. Our comparison of the two sets of hashtags about Yee in the two lists suggests that those on the HSL are overwhelmingly in support of the NTC and Yee, whereas the tags on the entertainment list appear to be more diverse and demonstrate public sentiments. For instance, on 7 July, when the controversy was exposed, 14 related hashtags appeared on the entertainment list; only seven of them made it onto the HSL. #Unfollow Yee (*tuofen* 脱粉) and #Jackson Yee Senior High School Entrance Exam (*Yi Yangqianxi zhongkao* 易烊千玺中考),⁵⁵ two tags which generated the highest popularity index of 4,935,575 and 4,907,824 respectively, were intentionally blocked from entering into the HSL.⁵⁶ In contrast, #Hunan Province Education Sunshine Service Centre Responds (*Hunan sheng jiaoyu yangguang fuwu zhongxin huiying* 湖南省教育阳光服务中心回应),⁵⁷ a tag which generated a low 149,561 on the popularity index, the lowest among the 14, made it onto the HSL and stayed there for a long time.

Weibo’s pro-Yee stance became even more evident when the NTC released its public statement on 16 July. The hashtag #NTC’s Explanation of its Recruitment of Fresh Graduates in 2022 (*guojia huajuyuan 2022 nian yingjiesheng zhaopin qingkuang shuoming* 国家话剧院 2022 年应届生招聘情况说明) entered the HSL ten minutes after its release and stayed on the list for 516 minutes, even occupying the top spot for some time. When Yee issued his personal statement the next morning, the related hashtag, #Jackson Yee Speaks Out (*Yi Yangqianxi fasheng* 易烊千玺发声), again immediately topped the HSL and remained there for 771 minutes.

As a commercial social media platform, Weibo always needs to juggle its market and Party propaganda priorities to survive in China’s market-oriented but Party-controlled digital media industry. However, in the celebrity PR campaign for Yee, Weibo was able to satisfy both the Party and the market and reaped both economic profit and political capital. Weibo does not always

52 Online interview with C, 30 January 2024.

53 Zhang, Lize, and Zhang 2018, 207.

54 Song and Zhao 2020.

55 For years, Jackson Yee has been dogged by the rumour that he was unfairly admitted to a top senior high school in 2015, despite his low scores in the entrance exam. The rumour resurfaced during the NTC controversy.

56 According to the algorithm publicized by Weibo in 2021, popularity index = (searches + discussions + views) x interaction ratio. See “Weibo shoufa resou guize yinzhān yaoyan deng shangbuliao resou” (Weibo publishes HSL rules for the first-time and trolling, rumour, etc. are barred from the HSL). *CNR News*, 23 August 2021, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1708868543236420051&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Accessed 7 November 2023.

57 Hunan Province Education Sunshine Service Centre is a public service provider under the education department of Hunan province. Their response to the complaint about Yee’s admission to high school was vague and failed to satisfy public concerns.

speak up for celebrities caught up in scandals, even though manipulating the HSL can earn it more money. Instead, it cautiously observes the government's view of a scandal to ensure its practices align with the official stance. This explains why pro-Yee hashtags can enter the HSL while the anti-Yee hashtags that garner even more attention do not make it. This also clearly demonstrates the “symbiotic and collaborative” relationship between the platform and state in China.⁵⁸

The collaborative celebrity PR exercise to support Yee proved effective and, after a few months of discreet absence, he successfully returned to public view with his market value and status as a state-endorsed celebrity intact. He continued to be the face of many global brands in China, such as Armani, Tiffany and BMW, and was among the top ten most popular celebrity endorsers in China in 2023.⁵⁹ CCTV's *News Network* (*Xinwen lianbo* 新闻联播) zoomed in on Yee in its reporting of the 11th National Congress of the China Film Association, which was held in Beijing in January 2024.⁶⁰ Yee's attendance at this high-end congress was as a representative of China's youth film workers. The focus on Yee, among all the delegates in the star-studded congress in China's most important propaganda programme, suggests that his status as a state-endorsed “red idol” has not been impacted by the scandal.

Conclusion

In this article, we use the scandal surrounding Jackson Yee as a case study to examine how the “government–industry–fan–platform” alliance conducts “collaborative celebrity PR” to help a co-opted celebrity overcome a publicly embarrassing incident. By tracing the roles played by multiple actors in the PR campaign, we reveal that the government holds the most important “arbitrator” role, as its attitude towards the scandal directly influenced the tone and coverage given to the scandal by the state-level official media. The celebrity agent and Weibo platform had to make certain that they were aware of and on the right side of the official stance, as embodied in the state-level official media, before they implemented their PR plan, otherwise their PR efforts would have been useless or even provoke a backlash. For the fan groups who began the PR work even before it was clear what the official view of the scandal was, it was crucial to closely monitor the official attitude to determine how their supportive PR work should be conducted. There is no evidence of any top-down administrative instruction from the government imposed on the other three actors during the campaign. We did, however, identify connections between the celebrity agent, fan KOLs and Weibo marketing accounts and the HSL.

Yee's image and reputation would not have been so successfully restored if the PR activities of any agent in the process were missing. The four actors work symbiotically not only in creating and promoting state-endorsed celebrities but also in the PR campaigns to save them when things go wrong. The tacit alliance among the four actors is only possible and able to achieve the expected outcomes if all these actors understand China's celebrity politics and their roles within China's celebrity and entertainment ecology. We conclude that the collaborative PR model we found in Yee's case is likely to be applied in the crisis management of recoverable scandals of state-endorsed stars in the future.

Yee's case offers an intriguing example that illustrates both the “power(lessness)” of state-endorsed celebrities in China and the paradox of pop propaganda harnessing celebrities. As Yee's case illustrates, state-endorsed celebrities appear to have “power” because the political capital they accumulate by participating in the CCP's propaganda projects tends to protect them in times of crisis, making them more powerful and resilient than those stars without official endorsement. However, they may be abandoned at any time if the government thinks there is more to gain by

58 Zhang, Lin 2020.

59 “Yanyuan 2023 daiyanbang qianshi! Yi Yangqianxi Yang Mi diandi, Wu Lei diliu, Yang Yang shu Wang Yibo” (Top ten actor endorsers of 2023! Jackson Yee and Yang Mi tie for the 10th place, Wu Lei ranks 6th, Yang Yang loses to Wang Yibo), 9 June 2023, https://www.sohu.com/a/692846204_121687421. Accessed 17 July 2024.

60 “Yangshi xinwen lianbo jingtou xia chuxian le Yi Yangqianxi, yuanlai zhenxiang ruci!” (Jackson Yee appears in the shot of CCTV *News Network*, so this is what's happened!), 29 January 2024, https://www.sohu.com/a/755057068_121738121. Accessed 17 July 2024.

punishing them rather than saving them, as witnessed in the case of Fan Bingbing. If the state decides to punish these celebrities, they are likely to lose their fame, power and market overnight. Thus, celebrities have to dedicate more of themselves to propaganda and maintain a moral and exemplary lifestyle to protect their careers and minimize the precarity of their status. This has resulted in more cooperative and disciplined celebrity behaviour as well as increasing state power within China's celebrity and entertainment industries. The CCP's mechanism of reward and punishment in celebrity governance and the varying strategies it deploys to handle the scandals of state-endorsed celebrities have further enhanced the instrumental role of celebrities in serving the government's agenda. Such governance has also intensified the precarity and self-discipline of celebrities, who are expected to always behave in a morally upright manner.

Yee's case also allows us to rethink the CCP's "pop propaganda" involving celebrities. Alex Edelstein's concept of "new propaganda," by which he refers to the fusing of propaganda with entertainment, advertising, sports, the arts and other forms of popular culture to generate synergies and new energies to make "total propaganda" greater than the sum of its parts,⁶¹ is characterized by the use of the "participatory elements" of "a more embracing popular culture" to promote inclusiveness, individual consumption and participation, and therefore the effectiveness of propaganda.⁶² The resilient CCP has been adopting popular culture to create "new propaganda" since the emergence of popular culture in China in the early 1980s. In the Xi era, the "pop propaganda" trend is more evident than ever, with works such as a cartoon series to promote the thoughts of Karl Marx,⁶³ the use of rap and virtual idols to laud China's achievements and promote patriotism,⁶⁴ the co-option of influential celebrities to promote the Party's political objectives via their everyday Weibo posts,⁶⁵ as well as the incorporation of traffic stars, such as Yee, for propaganda. The rationale behind the CCP co-opting traffic stars for propaganda is straightforward: these stars have millions of supportive fans who consume their artistic works. The CCP anticipates that traffic stars can convey political and ideological messages to young people more subtly and effectively through everyday pop culture consumption. This could be seen as part of what Maria Repnikova and Kecheng Fang call "authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0." Digitally savvy fans are not only receivers of pop propaganda, they can also share, re-post and re-create the propaganda content to influence more netizens in the name of loving and supporting their idols.⁶⁶

Theoretically, this could assist the CCP in achieving its persuasion and propaganda aims in the digital era. However, in practice, it may not always work effectively, or could even provoke a backlash, if the endorsed celebrities become enveloped in scandal. The high online traffic of these stars also means more public scrutiny by netizens and "supervision by public opinion." The carefully crafted "perfect" personas of celebrities also mean that the public is less tolerant when faults are exposed. There is no guarantee that every state-endorsed celebrity will be successfully saved: state-endorsed celebrities who commit immoral or illegal acts risk damaging the legitimacy and reliability of the Party propaganda. Therefore, co-opting celebrities for pop propaganda work can be a double-edged sword, bringing with it a degree of uncertainty and risk.

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61 Edelstein 1997.

62 Heintz-Knowles 1997, xiv.

63 Johnson 2018.

64 "Y'all know it's time for Chinese miracle³: Beijing uses an English rap song to praise the achievements of the Communist Party amid intensifying propaganda push." *Daily Mail*, 6 March 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6776859/China-rolls-rap-songs-pump-parliament.html>. Accessed 7 November 2023; Fok 2020.

65 Chen, Dan, and Gao 2023.

66 Repnikova and Fang 2018.

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Jian XU is an associate professor in communication at Deakin University, Australia. He researches Chinese digital media and celebrity studies with critical approaches. He is the series editor of *Asian Celebrity and Fandom Studies* with Bloomsbury Academic. He is the lead editor of *Asian Celebrity Cultures in the Digital Age* (Hong Kong University Press, 2025) and *The Sage Handbook of Chinese Digital Media and Communication* (Sage, 2025).

Ling YANG is an associate professor in the School of Film at Xiamen University, China. Her research examines the significance of gender and sexuality in contemporary Chinese popular culture. She is the co-editor of *Boys' Love, Cosplay, and Androgynous Idols: Queer Fan Cultures in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan* (Hong Kong University Press, 2017) and *Chinese Love Stories: The Politics of Intimacy in the Twenty-first Century* (Routledge, 2019).