Creator Culture

An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment

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Wanghong

Liminal Chinese Creative Labor

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The evolution of social media platforms in China has witnessed the blossoming of vernacular creativity online. From bulletin boards and blogging to microblogging and online video platforms, social media entertainment has become a mainstay of the cultural repertoire and propelled a diverse range of online creators to heightened visibility. Many have gone from obscurity to fame—or notoriety. Some are transient; others are more enduring. *Wanghong*, literally "internet famous," has featured prominently in both media and industry discourses in recent years. The term made the top-ten buzzwords list in China in 2015 in the linguistics periodical *Yaowen Jiaozi*.

Wanghong is a polysemic term not only because it embodies a diverse range of individuals who attain fame native to the internet with various possibilities for commercialization and different levels of sustainability but also because it is celebrated and stigmatized at once. The economic potential of the *wanghong* economy has attracted growing attention. Advertising and virtual gifts have become the main revenue sources for *wanghong*. The technology company Alibaba used the phrase "*wanghong* economy" for the first time in 2015 to highlight the economic potential of *wanghong* in converting internet traffic into revenue through e-commerce integration. According to CBNData (2016), a commercial data company affiliated with Alibaba, the *wanghong* economy was worth RMB 58 billion in 2016, exceeding China's movie box-office revenue in 2015. Top-tier *wanghong* have reportedly outperformed showbiz A-listers in China (Tsoi 2016). Meanwhile, negative connotations of *wanghong* abound in journalistic and regulatory discourse, dismissing them as frivolous, silly, bizarre, vulgar, morally questionable, or socially menacing.

Generations of *wanghong* have come under the spotlight with the evolution of internet infrastructure and affordances. The history of *wanghong* can be traced back to the late 1990s, following China's connection to the internet in 1994. With little professional training and financial ambition, literary enthusiasts found a path to fame on internet forums, which offered an alternative space beyond the state-controlled publishing system for amateurs to express their creativity and address popular taste (Hockx 2015). The space became more formalized in the early 2000s, with the freemium business model, micropayment system, and tiered contracting mechanism (Zhao 2011). Since then, a growing number of more entrepreneurially minded writers started to produce genre fictions online in the hope of reaping financial gains from the fan economy. Many writers are, however, caught in "ambivalent identities between writers and writing hands, between professionals and amateurs, between glamorous creative class and low-level labourers as promises of democratization and empowerment of creativity are adulterated by precarious conditions" (Zhao 2017, 1249).

As the internet became more visual, photo sharing has offered an avenue to quick digital fame. *Wanghong* started to tap into the opportunities in lookism (Berry 2007) and gender performativity (Butler 1988) to attract large followings. Shi Hengxia (widely known as Sister Furong), for example, became widely known in 2004 for her photos, which showed her awkward attempts to appeal to the male ideal of female beauty (Roberts 2010). Zhang Zetian (popularly known as Sister Milk Tea), in contrast, became an overnight sensation in 2009 for her innocent and sweet looks in an online photo of her holding a cup of milk tea. Oftentimes such instant and seemingly accidental fame is facilitated by much less visible agents designing and executing social media promotion.

With the availability of faster broadband and the increasing adoption of smartphones, video sharing has become a prominent space where creators rise to fame. While earlier generations of creators distributed content mainly on various internet forums, digital platforms have become a prominent site of content distribution and monetization. From spoof and parody videos that are connected to China's *shanzhai* culture (often associated with copycat production, creative remix, grassroots entrepreneurialism, and antiestablishment ethos) to the recent reincarnation of user-generated content in livestreaming and short videos, a

growing number of professionalizing amateurs have seen their creative energies find purchase among their fan base and advertisers (Craig, Cai, and Lv 2016; Zhao 2016).

While coevolving with internet infrastructure and affordances, *wanghong* operate in the broader context of China's approach to digital creative economy. The state's will to develop the internet as a new engine of economic growth is evident from its elevating the role of the ICT industry as a pillar of the Chinese economy in the early 2000s to the "Internet Plus" blueprint unveiled in 2015. This interest parallels the state's cultural logic of tight regulation over the internet. Meanwhile, the state has started to promote the development of creative industries since the turn of the century, with the hope of accelerating economic growth and innovation (Cunningham 2009; Keane 2013). In this context, celebratory discourses about creative labor abound. Meanwhile, in 2015, the state released a strategy to stimulate "mass entrepreneurship and innovation" in the hope of revitalizing the economy. This strategy further promotes an entrepreneurial ethos as a desirable quality, adding to the romanticized image of creative labor, often featuring freedom, flexibility, autonomy, self-actualization, and economic prosperity. Such celebratory discourse manifests a strong influence of proponents such as Richard Florida (2003) and John Howkins (2001) in the Western context. Literature on creative labor has, however, seen growing critique regarding precarity in creative labor under neoliberalism (Gill and Pratt 2008; Ross 2009; de Peuter 2011; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Importantly, China's adoption of the creative industries discourse does not come without a cautionary aspect. In other words, creativity has its boundaries under the state's gaze.

This chapter focuses on online video production as a part of the broader *wanghong* phenomenon, not only for its scale in China's social media entertainment but also for the insights it affords into various aspects of creative labor experiences, where multiple platforms, modalities, and business models coexist in the broader context of the state agenda of developing and disciplining the internet and the creative economy. In the following section, I provide a brief history of China's online video space and the fluctuating place of amateur creativity in it. Then I draw on the concept of liminality (V. Turner 1967) to analyze creator experiences. Specifically, I discuss how creators occupy a liminal

space in several aspects: (1) between the professional and amateur, (2) between authenticity and performance, (3) between public and private, and (4) between being harnessed and being disciplined. The discussion reveals the diversity and contestation in the process of navigating these ambiguous borders, involving both agency and precarity. In doing so, I aim in this chapter to address a gap in the emerging scholarship on internet-famous creators in cultural production, where studies in Anglophone contexts dominate the discussions (Marwick 2013, 2015; Abidin 2015; Duffy 2017; Burgess and Green 2018; Cunningham and Craig 2019), and to enhance understanding of the way aspiring creators experience multiple layers of liminality as internet fame is gained, lost, or transformed in China.

Locating Amateur Creativity in Video-Sharing Platforms in China

While an important distinction exists between the two approaches in the new screen ecology outside China—namely, the Hollywood-like intellectual-property-centric approach and the platform strategy connecting content creators with advertisers and other intermediaries, or "SoCal" versus "NoCal" culture (Cunningham and Craig 2017, 2019)—the picture in China is different. With a few exceptions, platforms in China initially showed initial enthusiasm toward user-generated content, which was quickly dampened, leading to a more suspicious view, before a revisionist approach emerged (Zhao 2016). More recently, vernacular creativity has not only returned to the strategic map of online streaming sites but also witnessed a new generation of platform players.

When video-sharing sites such as Tudou, Youku, 56, and ku6 emerged between 2005 and 2006, they championed the vision of facilitating and profiting from a thriving community of amateur creators. Google's acquisition of YouTube in 2006 further boosted the industry's confidence in user-generated content. Platforms were quick to discover and recruit creators, who became well known for their works circulating in the online forums and on file-sharing sites. Among this generation of *wanghong* are Backdorm Boys, known for their lip-synching performances; Hu Ge, known for his spoof videos mocking official and elite culture; and Jiaoshou, known for his satire and self-mockery. Initial fame

launched Backdorm Boys into the music industry, with a five-year contract from China's top label, Taihe Rye Music, although they struggled later. Monetization became possible for Hu Ge with a turn to custom-made advertising. Jiaoshou became a cofounder of a start-up dedicated to online video production, UniMedia (Wanhe Tinyi).

Despite these high-profile examples, the uneven quality of user-generated content and the potential risk of copyright infringement made advertisers wary. In the meantime, increasing traffic incurred high costs in bandwidth for video-sharing platforms. This scenario led Tudou's founder, Wang Wei, to refer to user-generated content as "industrial waste water" in 2008, indicating its disappointing capacity to generate revenue while exacerbating cost pressure (Zhao 2016, 5447). Meanwhile, the state's licensing regulations and the crackdown on copyright infringement led video-sharing platforms to become more like portals, investing in licensed professional productions (Zhao and Keane 2013). The competition for content resulted in soaring licensing costs and a significant industry shakeout.

In this context, exclusive rights to popular content became more prohibitive in terms of cost, resulting in a limited catalogue of content for any one platform. For surviving platforms, this raised yet another challenge: enhancing viewers' loyalty. Therefore, the professionalization and commercialization of user-generated content became a strategic move to elevate the originality of content at relatively lower costs. Aspiring creators experimented with different genres, such as sketch comedies and made-for-web series. For some, digital platforms became a springboard to the incumbent media industry. Subsequent years have seen further attempts among platforms to launch advertising revenue-sharing plans and to promote an entrepreneurial ethos to attract aspiring creators (Zhao 2016).

In contrast to platform portals, which approach amateur creativity with fluctuating attitudes, livestreaming and short-video platforms are more determined to professionalize and commercialize amateur productions. Prominent players in livestreaming have emerged in various verticals, such as showrooms (for example, 9158 and YY), gaming (for example, Douyu and Huya), and e-commerce (for example, Taobao Live); performers or creators receive a share of the revenue from virtual gifts, advertising, or sales. Moreover, amateur creativity, and its

professionalization, has gained further momentum with the emergence of smartphone apps such as Miaopai (embedded in the 4.0 version of Sina Weibo as a result of its acquisition in 2013); Kuaishou (known as Kwai internationally), launched in 2012 and now backed by Tencent; and Douyin (known as TikTok internationally), launched by ByteDance in 2016. Video lengths are usually from around ten seconds to under a minute. Creators can easily use filters, special effects, and editing tools to create and share videos online. These creative tools, together with fun challenges that the platforms present to users, lower the barrier to entry for content creation and facilitate a sense of community among users. The mediating role of platforms lies not only in creating challenges for users to respond to but also in algorithm-driven content distribution. This is a crucial difference from previous generations of video-sharing platforms. Apart from platform players, incubators and training camps have mushroomed, hoping to taking a slice of the *wanghong* economy. These intermediaries add complexity to creators' experiences.

Liminal Creative Labor

In order to analyze aspiring creators' experiences in China's online video space, I draw on the concept of liminality. Initially introduced in anthropology by Arnold van Gennep (1909) in his classic analysis of the middle stage in ritual passages in traditional societies, the notion of liminality has opened up new lines of inquiries in various fields through the writings of Victor Turner (1967). According to Turner's interpretation, liminality refers to any "betwixt and between" state or experience, where individuals "are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere" (1967, 97). Media scholars have found liminality a useful concept to analyze the consumption of media messages, the production of media events, and the role of media in historical transition (Dayan and Katz 1992; Couldry 2003; Coman 2008; Moore 2009).

In critical accounts of contemporary creative labor, researchers have drawn inspiration from the concept of liminality to illuminate the ambiguous space and experiences in creative industries (Borg and Söderlund 2014; O'Brien 2018). By bringing the concept to the emerging line of inquiry into internet-famous creators, the following section focuses

on *wanghong* in China's online video space and analyzes how they experience several aspects of liminality as they seek fame and fortune on social media.

Between the Professional and the Amateur

As entrepreneurial creators cultivate their own brands, many are strategically crafting and enacting their personae. This often involves navigating the ambivalent line between the professional and the amateur. While user-generated content is usually associated with the ordinary, as Patricia Lange (2008) reminds us, it is lazy to assume that people who post videos on YouTube were, are, and always will be "ordinary" with regard to professional training, aspirations, and reputation. Similarly, Ramon Lobato, Julian Thomas, and Dan Hunter (2011) point out that user-generated content moves between the formal and informal over time.

Amateurism can serve the purpose of building an approachable persona, which helps build and monetize a personal brand. More importantly, easy-to-emulate performance, often associated with amateurism, helps drives participatory culture in the context of algorithm-driven distribution. Consider Daikula K, a university student from northeastern China who became famous on Douyin and accumulated over ten million fans within a month. Best known for her dancing, she has received no professional training in dancing. Yet the video featuring her signature performance received over one hundred million views, over ten million likes, over two million forwards, and two hundred thousand comments by October. Her girl-next-door image, with a sweet smile, is perceived by her incubator company as crucial to her rise of fame. As Nie from that company, Onion, said, "There are so many professional dancers on Douyin, but Daiguka K is different. For viewers, she is like their friend. There's not that much of a distance between her and the viewers" (personal communication, 2018). More importantly, the easy-to-emulate dance moves in the amateurish performance have led to mimetic production on Douyin, which in turn boosts their popularity in the context of algorithmic distribution.

Other creators harbor more aspirations to be recognized for professional expertise. Feng Ya'na(n), known online as Feng Timo, was one of the most popular performers on the livestreaming platform Douyu. Her

cover of pop songs and adorable looks won her over sixteen million subscribers on Douyu, over twenty-two million on Douyin, and nearly nine and a half million on Weibo. Her internet fame further opened doors for her to China's leading entertainment shows, including *Happy Camp* and *Day Day Up*, both produced by Hunan TV. The attempt to extend her fame beyond the internet is evident. Feng is a signed performer at Douyu, and her reach out to incumbent media is part of the platform's initiative to promote contracted *wanghong* across multiple media and to elevate their visibility. This in turn enhances the perceived capacity of the platform to nurture talent, which helps maintain and attract more creators. In this sense, the move toward the incumbent media is both an individual aspiration and a platform strategy.

Feng's negotiation with her *wanghong* status in relation to the professional-amateur axis is particularly evident in a singing game show broadcast by Jiangsu Satellite TV, *The Masked Singer* (*Mengmian changjiang caicaicai*). The show followed the format of a South Korean show, where celebrities perform songs while wearing masks on stage. Feng referred to the mask as a protector for her. As she said onstage, "Since I wear the mask, the audience forms their opinion of my performance by listening to me instead of judging me based on who I am." She alluded to the fact that some audiences did not think highly of her because she is only a *wanghong* instead of a professional singer. While *wanghong* like her can monetize their content, some audiences still draw a clear line between *wanghong* and professional performers. Thus, for her, the mask offered an opportunity to prove her singing skills and untag herself as *wanghong*, a notion carrying perceived inferiority. The aspiration to achieve perceived professional status, however, does not mean distancing herself from online platforms. In fact, despite her expanding career boundaries, Feng did not reduce the frequency of her performance online.

For other creators, liminality between amateurism and professionalism can be artfully mobilized in self-branding. Jiang Yilei, better known as Papi Jiang, serves as a good example. Papi Jiang started posting original short videos online in September 2015, when she was still a graduate student at China's Central Academy of Drama. She quickly rose to fame owing to her satirical style, with brutal honesty and deep cultural resonance, as well as her low-maintenance image in 2016. She is known for

her tagline, "I am Papi Jiang, a woman who has both brains and beauty." In her videos, she comments on everyday social and cultural issues, sometimes playing a variety of characters in a single video. She wears minimal makeup, and the videos are usually shot in her home with little regard to its messiness. Such gestures of amateurism, however, are only part of the picture. Her professional training in directing underpins her work in script writing, performance, and postproduction, all done by herself. The amateurish setting and the everyday look are strategically combined with professional skills, attracting a large following.

Between Authenticity and Performance

The ideal of authenticity is pervasive in contemporary brand cultures (Banet-Weiser 2012). For influencers or microcelebrities on social media, authenticity allows them to cultivate a sense of intimacy, accessibility, and relatability, which is fundamental to establishing affective relationships with followers (Marwick 2013, 2015; Abidin 2015; Cunningham and Craig 2017; Duffy 2017). The use of authenticity as a strategic advantage distinguishes these creators sharply from the branding logic of traditional media and celebrities.

Authenticity is a highly nuanced concept. In China, while using filters to beautify *wanghong* faces or livestreaming from studios turned into home-like rooms is not unusual, performed authenticity is a strong currency in the market. It carries significant weight in many ways, and creators constantly negotiate the boundaries with their followers in content production and commercialization.

For internet-famous creators, maintaining authenticity means being consistent with their image before the fame. Take Jiaoshou, for example, who has turned himself into an entrepreneur and cofounded UniMedia. His rise to fame has coevolved with the need for online video platforms to professionalize and capitalize on amateur production in the emerging field. The journey saw Jiaoshou producing made-for-web series and movies, earning himself a name in the incumbent media industry. It remains crucial for him to maintain an unpretentious image and maintain connectedness with audiences. When the story of UniMedia was written into a book, Jiaoshou's only request was not to turn him into a pretentious figure (Zhang 2014).

Despite the conscious effort to maintain consistency in the staged persona, the creator's aspiration to venture beyond the comfort zone can trigger the paradox of authenticity. Jiaoshou was known for spoofing, and his attempt to go beyond his well-known style encountered push-back from audiences. While hesitating at first, Jiaoshou decided to compromise and sharpen his signature style of spoofing and self-mocking. Thus, although the entrepreneurially minded creator may hope to experiment with content creation and brand extension, the risk lies in the perceived inauthenticity as a result of inconsistency. In other words, the effort of seeking a possible future self as a creator is discouraged. This paradoxically challenges the notion of being authentic, as many selves are yet to be found.

As a diverse range of revenue including advertising deals becomes possible, persona-brand alignment is crucial for creators to maintain authenticity. Papi Jiang's popularity and commercial prospects, for example, do not come without backlashes. Notably, her partnership with the luxury brand Jaeger-LeCoultre was perceived as a misalignment between the brand and her persona. Her professional image and tone in the advertising does not align with her persona, which is known for humorous and sharp online rants. Moreover, the brand was perceived by many people as reserved for "real" celebrities and stars. Here, *wanghong* are caught in the hierarchy of fame.

Further, when the staged persona is overly or carelessly edited, authenticity becomes questionable. As the *wanghong* economy becomes a burgeoning phenomenon, agencies and incubators play an important role in producing *wanghong* in China. This often involves persona design, which guides creators' performance. For aspiring creators contracted with agencies, their looks, personality, talent, and life experience allow incubators to establish their online persona. This possibility, however, does not often turn out to be a carefully considered approach in reality. Oftentimes it involves only simplified tags such as "innocent and cute," "cool," or "comedic." These tags work with the playbooks, which inform how creators should enact the persona from content production to viewer engagement. Moreover, persona design provides guidelines about whom the creator should network with in the creator community. Such instrumental sociality with both viewers and other creators serves the purpose of maintaining the persona. As one creator previously working

with an agency revealed anonymously, "Being a *wanghong* means being ready to mingle with other creators who you don't like or not even know well. The agency may even assign a best friend or a boyfriend to a creator, and we need to interact frequently with these people and perform intimacy to attract traffic" (personal communication, 2018). For creators, this is a part of their job that they have to live with. When incubators are too much in the way, some creators have demonstrated their agency out of the concern over loss of autonomy. For example, @Anna_ZhuXuan, a creator previously contracted with PapiTube, quit the incubator within a year. As she explained on her social media (WeChat) account on August 22, 2018, "Now I am on my own again, mainly for more freedom, more control over what I want to do, and over content creation."

Misalignment with the designed persona in online performance can lead the creator into the danger zone of inauthenticity. A Yi, a livestreamer specializing in playing *League of Legends* (*LOL*), is a telling example. Working on the video-game livestreaming platform Douyu, she is branded as a sophisticated female gameplayer, which provides a niche positioning and helps her to stand out from the crowd. The persona draws attention, as it refutes the common perception that female players are weak in the male-dominated space. However, the persona collapsed when she was found to be cheating by using a shadow player in 2016. Initially she responded with an adamant denial, only to see mounting evidence published online by internet users. The evidence resulted from a "human-flesh search engine," where internet users devoted significant amounts of time and labor in extensive online and offline collaborations to piece information together and verify findings. The evidence included various inconsistencies between A Yi's posture and her gaming performance, identification of the gaming account, and her unbelievably quick rise to the high rank. This eventually led A Yi to livestream, with the camera capturing her operation on a keyboard to prove her gaming skills, on May 30, 2016, only to face five consecutive failures with obvious mistakes. Facing live comments from users who felt disappointed and betrayed, A Yi said, "I know what I should do, but I have no option." Before she ended the livestreaming session, A Yi left a quick remark: "I cannot fake it anymore."

A Yi confessed on Sina Weibo on June 9, 2016, that she had purchased the account from a sophisticated player for use in livestreaming and had

been using a shadow player. Two hours after her confession, the statement from *LOL* regarding the investigation appeared on its official website and Sina Weibo account, announcing the decision to freeze involved accounts for ten years, stop the collaboration with A Yi, and prohibit her from entering any official *LOL* competition.

As well as viewers, many livestreamers also expressed their indignation. It was the dishonesty, and more importantly the inequality, that irritated many gameplayers. In the broader context of social inequality in China (Sun and Guo 2013), such indignation is augmented. While many players face only a slight chance of winning contracts from digital platforms despite their hard work, a performer earned huge amounts of money from fans by working with a shadow player. As one viewer said in a comment, "We all work hard to improve our skills and rank, but we lose to a cheater. This is so disappointing!" Another rightfully questioned, "If it were not for her public persona of a sophisticated female player, can she attract so many fans? Can her Taobao store deliver the revenue?"

The penalty enforced on A Yi by *LOL* was perceived as weak by many internet users. What was surprising to some viewers was that A Yi restarted her livestreaming at Douyu. The performance continued to lure audience, be they adamant supporters or indignant detractors. Evidently, the economic logic of the platform in the context of an attention economy was a strong motivator to tolerate creators' misbehavior. This was, however, short-sighted. As many users published negative comments on the app store, the rating of the app significantly dropped. Transgressions on the part of creators not only tarnish their fame but also hurt the reputation of hosting platforms when such transgressions are tolerated.

Creators can, however, be resilient, hoping to relocate their fame by reconfiguring their persona and reconstructing authenticity. After A Yi finished her contract with Douyu, she left for another platform, Quanmin TV. As she revealed in a post on Sina Weibo, she wanted to start a new journey and "just be an entertainment show host." Evidently, this was an attempt to reconfigure her persona by moving on from the image of a sophisticated gameplayer. Whether such attempts to relocate or transform fame will work is, however, uncertain.

Between Public Personae and Private Selves

As social media collapse contexts (Marwick and boyd 2010), *wanghong* operate in a liminal space where the line between public personae and private selves is blurred. "Celebritisation of the ordinary" (G. Turner 2013) in China means that *wanghong* are subject to scrutinization in the context of the Chinese public's preoccupation with the moral virtue of prominent individuals (Jeffreys and Edwards 2010). The human-flesh search engine in China is a relentless force in collapsing the boundaries between public personae and private selves.

Powered by collaborative internet users, the human-flesh search engine can target individuals ranging from officials to celebrities. Oftentimes, suspected immorality and injustice trigger the crowd-powered engine into operation, as private information is hunted down and disclosed online. Through this form of cyber vigilantism, internet users often seek to enforce social norms and moral values (Ong 2012; Gao and Stanyer 2014). DIY justice is, however, only part of the story. The dark side of the human-flesh search engine is manifest in privacy infringement and cyberbullying (Cheung 2009).

Wanghong are easily targeted in the human-flesh search engine, subject to public shaming, humiliation, and harassment. One comment from a creator who had quit the business is revealing: "It's no easy job. To be a *wanghong*, you need to bear the risks of being targeted in the human-flesh search engine" (personal communication, 2018). A Yi's case, as discussed previously, is also a telling example. In this context, some creators/performers have resorted to hiding their faces in videos to maintain anonymity.

For livestreamers, the challenges double, as they have to muster the courage to carry on while facing attacks or harassment by viewers through live comments. As one livestreamer mentioned, "When negative comments flash right in front of me across the screen as I am livestreaming, I have to stay calm and appear unaffected. I find it the hardest part of being a live streamer" (personal communication, 2018). Another echoed, "Live comments can be unfriendly attacks. Some are more vehement than others, but I have to move on" (personal communication, 2018).

Some creators hope to maintain the right to privacy in order to circumvent the challenge in relation to authenticity. Feng Timo, one of the most popular performers on Douyu, experienced a difficult situation when her marital status stirred up a storm. She was accused of keeping her marriage a secret while cashing in on a public persona of a cute, innocent, single girl with singing talent. When hinting at her single status, she often emphasized the importance of fans in her livestreaming: "I haven't met someone I can be in a long-term relationship with, but I have my friends and fans. I'll accompany you for as long as I can." When the details of her identification, her marriage, and her divorce were disclosed as a result of the human-flesh search engine, Feng was put under great pressure. She stayed offline for almost a month before resuming her livestreaming and coming up with a response: "This is my privacy, and it's none of your business."

Clearly, Feng hoped to draw a clear line between her private self and her public persona. However, the revenue model of showroom livestreaming added complexity to the risk arising from the liminal space between the public and the private in this case. Given that livestreaming has earned the nickname of "the industry of virtual girlfriends" (Aynne Kokas, quoted in Kaiman and Meyers 2017), which relies on virtual gifts for revenue, hiding one's marital status while profiting from fans' contributions is perceived as morally questionable. In Feng's case, she reportedly pulled in RMB 30 million from her fans in 2017 (*Sina* 2018). When her carefully crafted public persona was found to be misleading, her followers started to question her inauthenticity and morality. Thus, creators' experience in the liminal space between the public persona and the private self is entangled with platform affordances, business models, and community culture.

Disciplined and Harnessed at Once

Wanghong are situated in a liminal space as they are both disciplined and harnessed by the state as well as by corporate platforms. Apart from digital platforms, incubators, and creators themselves, the state is a force that cannot be neglected in producing *wanghong*. This dynamic mirrors China's broader celebrity culture, which is marked by the influence of the party-state (Jeffreys and Edwards 2010). Moreover, the state's approach

to *wanghong* governance mirrors its broader approach to internet governance in China, in which economic, political, and cultural logics are all at work (Zhao 2019).

On the one hand, multiple government agencies have started to regulate the market by targeting transgressing creators. A warning sign in this previously loosely regulated space emerged when the state targeted Papi Jiang. Soon after Papi Jiang rose to fame and attracted venture-capital funding of RMB 12 million (around US$1.84 million) and sold a spot in her video ads for RMB 22 million (around US$3.4 million) at an auction, she was singled out by the national regulator. In April 2016, China's media watchdog, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) (2013–2018), ordered some videos of Papi Jiang containing "foul language and vulgar content" offline and demanded that the content be deleted before the videos could be put back online.

Clearly, with fame comes money and influence but also increasing scrutiny from the state. An editorial published by *Global Times* argues that Papi Jiang's elevated status in the *wanghong* economy has turned her into a role model and that she has to take some "social responsibilities" (Yu 2016). In response to the state's rectification requirement, Papi Jiang quickly published a statement on her Weibo account, stating that she would make amendments to her videos accordingly, pay more attention to her use of language, and convey *zhengnengliang* (positive energy) in the future.

The regulation has since become systemic. The Ministry of Culture (MoC), for example, released "Measures for the Administration of Online Performance Operating Activities" in December 2016 to regulate showroom livestreaming activities (*Xinhua News* 2016). The measures require that all online live-performance operators apply for a permit from the relevant provincial cultural affairs authority, with performers to register their real names. Both Cyber Administration of China and MoC have stressed the regulatory responsibility of platforms (*China Daily* 2016; *Xinhua News* 2016). The growing scrutinization by the state has prompted more intense industry self-regulation. China Netcasting Services Association, the national-level industry association in the streaming sector, published "Management Regulations for Online Short Video Platforms" and "Detailed Standards for Content Review of Online Short Video" in January 2019 (*People's Daily* 2019).

Apart from disciplining creators' performance and content, the state is promoting and harnessing the influence of *wanghong*. Instead of blatant propaganda, *wanghong* on corporate social media platforms are being mobilized by the state to wield their influence among youth in everyday entertainment. The fact that Papi Jiang's videos are not completely censored or removed altogether is testament to this intention of the state. A more telling example is Feng Timo. As well as the expansion of her career boundaries in the entertainment industry, her influence among Chinese youth has led Chongqing Municipal Committee of the Chinese Communist Youth League (CCYL) to appoint her as its ambassador. This is one of many initiatives by CCYL to command the online space to enhance its influence among youth. In an interview with *Chongqing Daily*, Feng Timo pledged to unconditionally advocate for Chongqing Municipal Committee of CCYL, to transmit positive energy to youth, and to inspire young people with her own stories. Since then, Feng has started to repost or comment on content published by CCYL as well as the state media *People's Daily* to spread positive energy on social media. Politics thus becomes increasingly infused into everyday social media entertainment.

As the state adopts this two-pronged approach to *wanghong* governance, platforms implement the state logic and launch self-regulatory initiatives. In the context of the intense debate on how platforms should be governed, platforms often adopt self-regulation to preempt state regulation or stronger approaches (Zhao 2019). Governance by platforms ranges from guidelines to terms of use to much less transparent algorithms (Gillespie 2018). All these mechanisms influence content visibility and potential monetization for creators. Douyu, for example, has released very detailed guidelines regarding livestreamers' dress code, with corresponding penalties in case of violations. Many of these guidelines are designed to discipline female streamers. Such guidelines paradoxically entrench the already stigmatized image of female creators. This is a major reason why some female *wanghong* do not like to be addressed as such, as female *wanghong* are often crudely equated with showroom performers, whose productions are reduced to appealing to male viewers and chauvinist aesthetics. In fact, some female creators manifest agency in challenging conven-

tional tropes (Zhang and Hjorth 2017). Moreover, algorithmic distribution pushes aspiring creators to adopt an aspirational mind-set in the hope of placing themselves in a good position in the hierarchy of visibility—another challenge for creators.

Conclusion

As social media become a breeding ground for internet celebrities, *wanghong* as both a cultural and economic phenomenon flourishes in China's own social media ecology. As a prominent part of this broader phenomenon, video sharing is a space where multiple platforms, modalities, and business models coexist in the broader context of the state agenda of developing and disciplining the internet and the creative economy. This chapter has discussed the liminal experiences of creators on video-sharing platforms in China as a case of the broader *wanghong* phenomenon in the country.

By bringing the concept of liminality (V. Turner 1967) into dialogue with critical creative labor studies, I have discussed how *wanghong* and *wanghong* aspirants experience the liminal space in several ways—between the professional and the amateur, between authenticity and performance, between public and private—as they are being harnessed and disciplined at the same time. While approached separately in the analysis, these four layers of liminality can become infused with each other, influencing creators' experience. Together, they constitute an explanatory framework to achieve a more textured understanding of creators' experiences as they negotiate individual aspirations with platform affordances and constraints, sociocultural resonance, and governance approaches by both the state and platforms. The ambiguous borders carry both opportunities and challenges for creators. The process of navigating the liminal space is a process in which creators mobilize agency and experience precarity as fame is gained, lost, relocated, or transformed in the process.

Given the broader ecology of the *wanghong* economy, the four layers of liminality can be used as an explanatory framework to investigate creators' experiences in different sectors of social media, where technoeconomic and cultural characteristics may engender differen-

tiated experiences. This may add complexity to the existing research that addresses the intersecting space of creative labor and internet fame.

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