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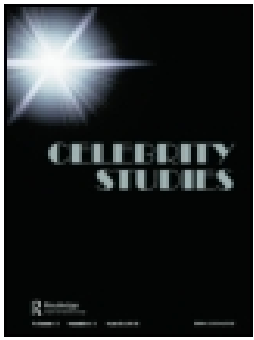
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ARTICLE



Governing entertainment celebrities in China: practices, policies and politics (2005–2020)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the practices, policies and politics of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) governance of entertainment celebrities from 2005 to 2020. We identify and critically analyse four principle governing approaches with related examples: 'banning celebrities', 'governing through professional associations, laws and notices', 'platform governance' and 'co-opting stars'. We argue that celebrity governance should be understood within the broader framework of the CCP's 'cultural governance' and encompasses two dimensions: 'governance of celebrity' and 'governance through celebrity'. We conclude the increasing governance of this elite group has shaped the formation of a 'neoliberal subjectivity' with Chinese characteristics, which allows them to navigate the complex trade-off between the intertwined neoliberal market ideology and Party ideology in China's cultural and entertainment industry. The article sheds vital light not only on the understanding of China's celebrity and entertainment politics, but also on the logic, approach and politics of the CCP's celebrity and cultural governance.

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The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a long tradition of utilising mass entertainment to mobilise and educate to fulfil its political and ideological purposes (Cai 2016). From the 'yangge drama' in the Yan'an area during the Anti-Japanese Resistance War (Liu 2010) and the 'loyalty dance' and 'model opera' during the Cultural Revolution (Lu 2004, McGrath 2010), through to the anti-corruption TV drama and the Chinese New Year Gala run by China Central Television (CCTV) in the reform era (Bai 2015, Zhao 1998), the CCP has enlisted and co-opted almost all possible cultural and artistic forms to promote Party ideology, innovate official propaganda and educate people about socialist values and ethics, all in the name of entertaining the masses. Mao Zedong's famous speech at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, which stressed that art and cultural work should serve the socialist state and socialism, has shaped China's mass cultural and entertainment practices, and guided the CCP's art and cultural policies in Mao and post-Mao China (Fu 2015).

Since China's economic reform in the late 1970s, increased individual prosperity, leisure activities, transnational cultural flows, and the dramatic development of market-driven mass media have supported the rapid growth of mediated mass entertainment

and China's cultural and entertainment industry (Xu and Zhao 2019). The ever increasing number of entertainment celebrities, as the public face of the industry and as a new type of sociocultural elite in post-socialist China, has demonstrated an enormous impact on young people's style, cultural values and consumption through their artistic works, commercial endorsements and lifestyles (Yue and Cheung 2019). To harness the influence of these cultural icons, the state proactively incorporates entertainment celebrities into the CCP's publicity work, such as in its television melodramas, public service advertising, cultural ambassadorship, and legal and educational campaigns (Yu 2012). Celebrities have also become a focus of state governance to ensure they pursue 'professional excellence and moral integrity' (德艺双馨), a lofty ideal promoted by the CCP for socialist artists and cultural workers. The instrumental role of mass entertainment and the legacy of China's socialist 'role model' determine that because idols should play an 'edutainment' role or, at the very least, be harmless to socialist values, ethics, Party policies and ideology, they require the constant guidance and supervision of the CCP.

Research literature on the governance of China's mediated mass entertainment has expanded over the last decade. Scholars, mainly in Chinese media and cultural studies, have studied media policies, regulations and censorship of TV drama, reality shows, imported foreign TV programmes, films, popular music, and the cultural and creative industry in general (Schneider 2012, Bai 2013, Chan 2016). By examining the legitimacy, practices, policies and politics of governing diverse types of popular media and cultural products, these studies have collectively revealed the dilemma confronting China's mediated mass entertainment in the reform era, that is, to simultaneously pursue market success and play an 'edutainment' role within the CCP's cultural, moral and political framework. However, research on the governance of entertainment celebrities who are the public face of these entertainment products is needed. In celebrity studies, scholars have focused on the transformation, roles and politics of celebrities and celebrity practices in contemporary China (Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, Jeffreys 2015, Sullivan and Kehoe 2019). In a recently published paper, Lin and Zhao (2020) examine 'celebrity as governmentality' in China by tracing the history of celebrities in Confucian, Maoist and post-Maoist governmentalities. However, celebrity as subject of governance in the Chinese context remains understudied. This article aims to fill the gap by identifying and critically analysing the principle approaches utilised by the CCP to govern entertainment celebrities since 2005.

Celebrity governance in China: 2005 as a turning point

The CCP's governance of entertainment celebrities started with the emergence of Chinese popular culture in 1978. Soon after China's opening, Taiwanese singer Deng Lijun (Teresa Teng) became the first banned entertainment celebrity in mainland China. Her songs, hugely popular among Chinese urban youth, were denounced by the CCP as a 'decadent sound', conveying poisonous 'bourgeois values' and consequently banned as a part of the Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign in the early 1980s (Lin 2017). From 1978 to the early 2000s, when China's cultural and entertainment industry was taking shape, the governance of entertainment celebrities mostly involved the ad hoc and top-down ban of 'harmful' artists like Deng Lijun.

Since 2005, the governance of entertainment celebrities has gradually become an explicit policy or legal framework because of the dramatic expansion of China's media, cultural and entertainment industry in the post-WTO era, as well as the consequent rise of entertainment celebrities in type, number, market value and social impact. This has seen not only the increase of official notices, regulations and laws that regulate and control the production and ethics of entertainment celebrities and their associated cultural products, but also the participation of diverse social actors beyond the Party-state in the governing process, including media platforms, the public, fan groups and professional associations. Accordingly, our study timeframe, 2005–2020, importantly examines key turning points – industrial, technological and ideological – that have significantly transformed the landscape of China's entertainment celebrities, its industry and culture in the 21st century.

First, this period witnessed what Turner (2010) describes as the 'demotic turn' of celebrity culture in China. In 2005, Li Yuchun, a 21-year-old college student from Sichuan Province, won the *Super Girl Contest*, a reality television singing competition run by Hunan Satellite TV, with the support of more than 3 million viewer text message votes (Jeffreys and Xu 2017). The phenomenal success of the show soon made reality talent shows the most popular genre on Chinese television and created thousands of talented and aspirational 'ordinary-person-turned-idols' over the following decade. With the rapid development of China's online video industry, the main platform of reality talent shows has since moved from traditional TV to popular online video platforms, such as Tencent Video, IQiyi and Youku. The rise of idol-training shows on these platforms since 2016 opened the 2.0 era of China's reality talent format. These idol-training shows make full use of the platforms' online resources to mobilise the participation of fan communities into idol incubation, and have created idols with huge fan bases, online traffic, and consequent market value.

Aside from reality show celebrities, more demotic celebrities, '*wanghong*' (网红), have attained increasing fame and influence online and offline. The Chinese term *wanghong* refers to 'micro-celebrities' who use digital media platforms to develop, maintain and influence their audience through various 'self-branding' strategies (Senft 2008, Khamis *et al.* 2017), equivalent to digital and social media influencers. The year 2016 is widely dubbed as 'the beginning year of China's *wanghong* economy' in Chinese media (Ye and You 2016). Riding the wave of China's booming short-video and live-streaming industries, the total size of China's *wanghong* economy is expected to reach 300 billion CNY (about 43.8 billion USD) in 2020 (Kuailai zhibo 2020). Leading *wanghong*, such as Papi Jiang, Li Jiaqi, and Feng Timo, have become 'a new generation of stars' (Stokel-Walker 2019) and can compete with A-list stars in China in terms of fan base, income, market value and social influence. Some of them attempt to move mainstream by pursuing the promotional practices of traditional entertainment celebrities, such as releasing singles, appearing on variety shows and in films, and via advertising endorsements (Xu and Zhang 2020). In the era of social media entertainment, *wanghong* have become a new type of entertainment celebrity and thus a target of state governance.

Second, China has become noticeably more authoritarian since Xi Jinping took power in early 2013 (Brown 2016, Lam 2016). This trend has been demonstrated in various aspects, from tightening control of the mass media (Brady 2017), greater regulation of China's civil society and private sector (Schiavenza 2018), to the strengthening moral demands on CCP members and entertainment celebrities. In October 2014, Xi Jinping

delivered a speech targeting Chinese artists, writers and cultural workers. He stressed that literature and arts should promote 'core socialist values' (社会主义核心价值观),¹ be creative and people-orientated, and serve the CCP's political agenda at home and abroad (China Copyright and Media 2014a). The speech reemphasised the integration of artistic values and ideology – key characteristics of China's socialist art and cultural work. The speech was widely compared to Mao Zedong's landmark talk at the Yan'an Forum in 1942. Under Xi's administration, official notices, regulations and laws implemented to govern the media, cultural and entertainment industries and their associated celebrities have increased.

This article examines the practices, policies and politics of the CCP's governance of entertainment celebrities since 2005 as follows. It first examines the CCP's main governing strategies along with relevant regulatory policies and examples. Based on reading of government policies and regulations relevant to celebrity governance and the state media's coverage on this topic from 2005 to 2020, as well as our long-term observation of China's celebrity industry, culture and politics, we unravel in detail four main governing strategies: 'banning celebrities'; 'governing through professional associations, laws and notices'; 'platform governance'; and 'co-opting stars'. We then theorise the governance of entertainment celebrities as an important part of the CCP's cultural governance and discuss its influence on the formation of a 'neoliberal subjectivity' with Chinese characteristics in China's entertainment celebrities.

Banning celebrities

'Banning celebrities' literally translates into '*fengsha* (封杀) celebrities' in Chinese. The first character '*feng*' means 'ban' and the second character '*sha*' means 'kill', connoting the deadly blow of a ban on the careers of celebrities. In China, '*fengsha*' is often used as an extra-legal means to prohibit stars and artists from gaining public attention if they breach legal or ethical obligations or openly express politically incorrect viewpoints in their professional work (e.g. in artistic works or media interviews) or everyday life (e.g. on social media). The internally distributed ban notice of a celebrity is usually top down from one or more central governmental organisations that regulate China's cultural production and ideological work, such as the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA),² Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the Publicity Department of the CCP. It is issued to state-funded media organisations, cultural and propaganda departments at multiple levels, and further down to commercial music apps, online video platforms, internet portals, social media sites, television, film and advertising companies and other media outlets. The notice usually requires relevant departments and organisations to blacklist the banned celebrities, remove their artistic works from various broadcasting platforms, and stop any cooperation with them. The notice is not openly published on official media. However, embodying the 'interlinked commercial, legal and political structure' of China's celebrity industry (Sullivan and Kehoe 2019, p. 5), news of the ban is usually leaked in celebrity gossip or entertainment news on popular media and the internet.

The deterrent force of a ban lies in its unpredictability and uncertainty and its devastating effect on a celebrity's career. The length of the ban is usually uncertain and not clearly indicated in the notice. It could range from a few years to a lifetime, depending on the nature and impact of the specific case. Celebrities banned for touching on political

taboos find it more difficult to come back to public sight than those who are banned for moral misconduct or other reasons. A banned celebrity might be unbanned after being restricted for a period on account of their repentance or a push from the market and their audience. However, for returned artists it is almost impossible to regain their previous popularity due to the stigma of having been a tainted artist. A typical example is the ban of Cui Jian, the so-called 'godfather of Chinese rock'. His recordings and performances were not allowed to be played on state-run radio, television, and galas for over 20 years because he sang his signature song, *Nothing to My Name*, to inspire students on hunger strike during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and it subsequently became an unofficial anthem of the student movement (Sebag-Montefiore 2014). His return debut on a variety show on local satellite TV in 2012 marked the revocation of the 20-year official restriction on him. However, his rebellious rock icon status and impact on contemporary youths had almost disappeared by this time.

Since 2005, instances of celebrity bans have grown because of the state's increasing vigilance of the rapid development of China's entertainment industry and evolving celebrity culture. In September 2014, SAPPRT issued a Notice concerning Strengthening Management of the Production and Dissemination of Radio, Film and Television Programmes, Television Dramas and Online Audio-visual Products (关于加强有关广播电视节目、影视剧和网络视听节目制作传播管理的通知). The notice was the first one in history to publicly command all broadcasting platforms, including radio, TV, audiovisual sites and cinemas, to block 'tainted artists' (劣迹艺人) and the entertainment products they are involved with (China Copyright and Media 2014b).

In order to highlight the main reasons that are given for an official celebrity ban, we searched the Chinese term '*fengsha mingxing*' (translated as 'banning stars') in Baidu, China's most popular search engine, and retrieved 29,000 news items. We examined the first 50 pages (500 news items in total) to reveal the various moral, political and artistic reasons that have provoked a ban (See Table 1). The table includes celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan, because celebrities across Greater China are subject to the same governance framework if they access the PRC entertainment market. Highlighting the main reasons offered for a celebrity ban rather than a complete list in a certain period of time, it is notable that the bans listed are ongoing, without a clear timeframe of being lifted.

A celebrity banning is typically accompanied by publicly 'naming and shaming' the artist in the central state media, such as CCTV and *People's Daily*. 'Naming and shaming' has a long tradition in the CCP's Communist political campaigns and continues to exert a powerful influence over its political governance today (Xu 2016). By 'naming and shaming' these household names, the government aims to demonstrate its disciplinary power over social and cultural elites and create a 'chilling effect' among celebrities and the public. For example, Li Daimo, a celebrity singer from the 2012 *Voice of China*, and Ko Chen-tung, an A-list Taiwanese actor who is popular in the PRC, confessed on CCTV's national news programmes after being arrested for drug use in 2014 (China Daily 2014). The television confessions, as 'staged spectacles outside courts of law', suggest 'a return to Mao-era praxis' in Xi Jinping's political governance (Fiskesjö 2017, p. 1).

Though the top-down celebrity ban is not new, a prominent feature of governance since 2005 has been the increasing involvement of the digitally equipped public as voluntary supervisors in the governing process (Xu and Jeffreys 2020). Digital media

Table 1. Main reasons given for an official celebrity ban in the PRC.

Reason banned	Representative examples	Category	Area	Year banned
Tax evasion	Fan Bingbing	Actress	PRC	2018
Prostitution	Huang Haibo	Actor	PRC	2014
	Wang Quan'an	Director	PRC	2014
Drug abuse	Li Daimo	Singer	PRC	2014
	Jaycee Chan	Singer and actor	Hong Kong	2014
	Ko Chen-tung	Actor and singer	Taiwan	2014
Hong Kong independence supporters	Denise Ho Wan-see	Singer and actress	Hong Kong	2014
	Chapman To Man-chak	Actor	Hong Kong	2014
Taiwan independence supporters	Bobby Chen	Singer	Taiwan	2014
	Chow Tzu-yu	Singer	Taiwan	2015
Outspoken views on Chinese politics in artistic works	Li Zhi	Singer	PRC	2019
Allegedly involved in high-ranking government officials' corruption cases	Tang Can	Singer	PRC	2013
Vulgar artistic works involving drug use, violence, insulting women, etc.	Li Tianyou	Internet celebrity	PRC	2018
	PG One	Singer	PRC	2018
Extramarital affairs	Wu Xiubo	Actor and singer	PRC	2019
	Li Xiaolu	Actress	PRC	2018
Religious reason	Yuan Li	Actress	PRC	2020

visibility, as a 'double-edged sword' (Thompson 1995), not only allows celebrities to self-promote but also risks provoking controversy and outrage if any improper speech or behaviour is captured by sharp-eyed netizens. An online outcry condemning 'tainted celebrities' can even set the agenda from the bottom up for a ban if it is too loud to be ignored. A few celebrities listed in Table 1 were banned this way, including Zhai Tianlin (for academic misconduct) and Chapman To Man-chak (for pro-Hong Kong independence speech). Government intervention in response to an online public outcry also helps create a positive image of an actively listening and responsive government.

Governing through professional associations, laws and notices

To respond to Xi's guiding thought on the arts and cultural work, professional associations in the media and cultural sectors have successively initiated self-discipline and self-education campaigns. On 15 September 2015, 50 professional associations in China's press, publishing, television, radio and film industries signed a Pact on Self-Disciplining the Professional Ethics of Personnel (新闻出版广播影视从业人员职业道德自律公约). As the main platforms that provide the Chinese people with popular culture and entertainment products, signatories proposed 'Ten Dos and Don'ts' (十提倡, 十不为) and set up specific requirements for personnel to follow around political stance, professional ethics, personal quality and image, and cultural taste (Canaves 2015). Based on the pact, the SAPPRFT is preparing to establish the 'Professional Ethics Promotion Committee for China's Television, Radio and Film Industry' (中国广播影视职业道德建设委员会). A key task of the committee is to guide professional associations to gradually integrate the pact

into the rules of professional associations, as well as the employment and cooperation contracts of employees (People.cn 2016).

The Federation of Literary and Art Circles (FLAC) took even swifter action to establish its Professional Ethics Promotion Committee (文艺工作者职业道德建设委员会) at both central and local levels. As a nationwide association of artists and cultural workers, FLAC has thousands of celebrity members, especially in a few affiliated sub-associations, including the China Film Association (e.g. Jackie Chan, Zhang Ziyi), Chinese Television Artists Association (e.g. Yang Lan, Jin Dong) and Chinese Musicians Association (e.g. Han Hong, Song Zuying). Membership in FLAC is widely seen as an official recognition of the artists' achievement and is a goal of many aspiring singers, actors and directors. In October 2016, FLAC established its central Professional Ethics Promotion Committee and initiated a nationwide ethics education campaign. At the provincial and municipal levels, FLAC successively set up committees and launched a campaign. The campaign aimed to raise the ideological and moral level of the artists, propagandise role model artists for emulation, construct a high-spirited atmosphere in literary and art circles, and call on all artists and cultural workers to pursue 'both professional excellence and moral integrity' (Zhao 2016).

Governmental organisations also released laws and notices to govern celebrity misbehaviour. The amended Advertising Law (广告法), implemented in September 2015, sets restrictions on celebrities' product endorsements and stipulates that 'where a false advertisement for the product or service concerning consumers' life and health causes harm to the consumers, the advertising spokesperson(s) shall bear joint and several liabilities with the advertiser' (Shu 2015). Celebrity endorsements linked to false advertising is punishable by prohibiting endorsements of other products for three years (Shu 2015). The amended law aims to improve the commercial advertising ethics of celebrities due to an increase in celebrity endorsement scandals, such as the tainted infant milk formula incident in 2008, in which a celebrity-endorsed product resulted in multiple infant deaths (Ramzy and Yang 2008). The film industry was the first to legalise the requirement on the morality of celebrities. In the Film Industry Promotion Law (电影产业促进法) implemented on 1 March 2017, Article 9 of Chapter 1 stipulates that the film industry should enhance ethics education. Actors and directors should pursue both professional excellence and moral integrity, obey laws and regulations, respect social morality, abide by professional ethics, enhance self-discipline, and establish a positive public image (China Law Translate 2016).

Compared with other laws, which usually take a long time from drafting and discussion to implementation, regulatory notices can be quickly drafted, distributed, and implemented to cope with urgent issues associated with celebrities, such as stars' perceived high pay. In recent years, astronomical pay to celebrities has not only impacted the benign development of China's TV industry, but also has been widely criticised as promoting 'money worship' and 'overnight fame' among young people. In November 2018, NRTA issued a Notice Concerning Further Strengthening Management of Radio and Television Programmes and Online Audio-visual Products (关于进一步加强广播电视和网络视听文艺节目管理的通知). The notice stipulates that the salaries of actors and guests cannot exceed 40% of the production cost of a programme and salaries of feature stars cannot exceed 70% of the total salaries of all actors or guests on a programme. The notice also bans the children of famous entertainers from appearing on reality shows and prohibits

star worship and hype for the purpose of increasing audience ratings (NRTA 2018). In November 2020, NRTA issued an Opinion Notice Concerning Promoting Radio and Television Broadcasting Organisations to Become More Superior and Stronger in the New Era (关于推动新时代广播电视播出机构做强优的意见). The notice further stipulates these organisations should strictly control the salaries of actors and guests, encourage them to prioritise 'social responsibility' and 'sense of mission', and participate in public service programmes for free (NRTA 2020a). Issuing regulatory notices is also the main measure used by the government to regulate various entertainment media programmes and platforms that produce and promote celebrities as discussed in the next section.

Platform governance

Celebrity culture is changing along with radical shifts in media formats and channels (Marcus 2015). To govern this changing celebrity culture, the government is tightly controlling the evolving media platforms where celebrities are produced, promoted and consumed. In platform studies, platform governance refers to the governance of global digital platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube (Gorwa 2019). However, we here adopt a broader sense of the word 'platform' to include popular electronic and digital media that are closely bonded to the celebrity industry and promote celebrity culture in China, including traditional television, online audiovisual sites, and the latest short-video and live-streaming platforms. In China's Party-controlled but market-oriented media system, these platforms must strategically adjust to the government's regulatory policies to sustainably pursue profits. The government and platforms have formed a 'state-capitalist alliance' (Lagerkvis 2011), though sometimes with disputes and negotiation, to regulate various issues associated with media and pop culture.

The rise of reality talent shows and stardom since 2005's *Super Girl* made reality TV the first target of governance. Since 2006, China's TV regulator has imposed a series of restrictions to regulate the production, content and broadcast of talent shows, from the age, performance and dress of contestants, prohibition of out-of-studio voting, and cancellation of prime-time broadcasts, to the allocation of production quotas to TV stations (Qu 2018). Regulation of other types of entertainment programmes in which celebrities are the main selling points for high audience ratings has also been tightened. Since 2011, SARFT issued a series of notices to 'curb TV entertainment' (限娱令), requiring satellite TV channels to cut back the number of prime-time entertainment programmes and reserve time for serious news and 'ethics-building programmes' (道德建设节目) (Huang and Martina 2011).

The restrictions on TV entertainment have encouraged the rise of talent shows on China's other audiovisual platforms. Compared with traditional broadcasting, over which the NRTA monitors 'the entire process of production from preproduction to post-production', the relatively less-controlled online video industry usually relies on a self-censorship mechanism, supplemented by 'ex post facto censorship' (Li 2015, p. 137). Capitalising on loopholes in the regulatory policies, these platforms have produced extremely popular idol-training shows since 2018, including iQiyi's *Idol Producer* and Tencent Video's *Produce 101*, and have cultivated superstars with huge popularity among China's youth. The NRTA responded quickly to this new star-making phenomenon and issued a notice to start applying those same regulatory standards and measures to

online programmes. The notice further stipulates that audiovisual platforms should 'profoundly recognise the severe danger of star-chasing, star-hyping, and excessive entertainment on a political height', 'forcefully abandon the wrong way of using stars as selling points', and 'strictly control idol-training shows' (NRTA 2018).

The burgeoning short-video and live-streaming platforms that produce and host thousands of *wanghong* have become a new target of governance and self-censorship. In late 2016, the Cyberspace Administration of China, the Ministry of Culture, and SAPPRFT respectively issued three regulatory policies aimed at sanitising live-streaming platforms and live-streamers, namely, Provisions on the Management of Internet Live-Streaming Service (互联网直播服务管理规定), Notice of the Ministry of Culture Concerning Strengthening the Management of Cyber Performance (文化部关于加强网络表演管理工作的通知), and Notice Concerning Issues of Strengthening the Management of Online Audio-Video Programmes and Live-Streaming Services (关于加强网络视听节目直播服务管理有关问题的通知). Responsively, major platforms like YY, Huajiao, Yingke, and Douyu quickly conducted self-censorship, shutting down 90,000 broadcast rooms and black-listing over 30,000 live-streamers (Cyberspace Administration of China 2016). In January 2019, the China Netcasting Service Association (中国网络视听节目服务协会), subject to the guidance and supervision of NRTA, released the Online Short-Video Platform Management Guide (网络短视频平台管理规范) and Standard Rules for Censoring the Content of Online Short Videos (网络短视频内容审核标准细则), implementing a standardised self-censorship mechanism for the booming short-video industry (People.cn 2019). The increasing regulations and censorship at government and industry levels have shaped the performance and persona of *wanghong* and influenced China's *wanghong* economy.

Many established celebrities have also harnessed the *wanghong* trend and utilised live-streaming platforms to promote celebrity-fan interaction and gain more online popularity. Some banned celebrities who lost access to the traditional broadcasting platforms started to stage a comeback on these relatively less regulated platforms and make profit through live-streaming commerce. NRTA soon released a notice in November 2020 to curb the trend, commanding all live-streaming platforms not to provide exposure opportunities for the 'tainted celebrities' and shut down their accounts (NRTA 2020b). This means the rollover of the 'tainted celebrities' is very tiny once officially banned as the administrative power of the media regulatory bodies is able to block the access of the banned celebrities to almost all possible media platforms for a comeback.

Co-opting stars

Besides direct governance measures, the CCP also utilises more subtle techniques to govern celebrities through co-optation. In his classic work, sociologist Philip Selznick defines co-optation as 'the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence' (1949, p. 13). Selznick believes coercion is not always effective, so authorities must also attempt to win the consent of the governed. One means of winning consent is to co-opt into the leadership elements 'which in some way reflect the sentiment or possess the confidence of the relevant public or mass and which will lend respectability or legitimacy to the organs of control' (*ibid*). Adapting Selznick's definition

of organisational management, we use the word 'co-optation' to refer to the cultural management strategy used by the CCP to incorporate and manipulate entertainment celebrities working 'outside the system' (体制外), innovate the CCP's ideological and publicity work, win popular consent, and reinforce its cultural hegemony and leadership. In return, the co-opted and Party-endorsed stars, who are offered exclusive access to state-owned resources (e.g. CCTV, cultural ambassadorship on behalf of governmental organisations and national interests), can boost their visibility and fame among the national audience, and further enhance their commercial value in the competitive entertainment industry.

Co-opting stars for the CCP's political purposes is not a new phenomenon. CCTV's yearly Chinese New Year Gala, which attracts huge attention from a domestic and overseas Chinese audience, has selectively invited stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan to perform on the show since 1984 to symbolise the togetherness and unity of Greater China. Since 2005, the rise of new types of entertainment celebrities has posed a new challenge to the CCP's cultural governance. On the one hand, the CCP has swiftly governed emerging celebrity cultures and their representative icons using measures discussed earlier. On the other, it has also attempted to co-opt them for its own use. For example, the state initially cracked down but later co-opted representative rappers to discipline hip hop artists and culture after hip hop culture gained nation-wide popularity through the reality talent show, *The Rap of China* (2017-). The co-winner of the first season, Wang Hao (known as PG One), was banned for encouraging drug abuse and misogyny in his songs and his involvement in a cheating scandal with famous actress Li Xiaolu (Amar 2018). However, Dong Baoshi (known as Gem), who gained national fame in the 2019 season with his viral song 'Wild Wolf Disco', was co-opted by the state and promoted as a 'role model' rapper. CCTV invited Gem to perform his hit song at the 2020 Chinese New Year Gala to harness his influence to attract a larger young audience. Nevertheless, to obtain this rare opportunity he had to change the song's title (into 'Chinese New Year Disco') and lyrics to accommodate official requirements. His compromise to mainstream cultural expectations helped establish his status as a mainstream rapper. To maintain this status, he not only donated the royalties of 'Wild Wolf Disco' to medics in Wuhan, but also wrote an anti-COVID-19 charity single, in which he cleverly combines well-known classic patriotic poems with official rhetoric. The MV of the song was released on the official Weibo account of *People's Daily* (Zhong 2020), reinforcing Gem's image as a state-endorsed rapper who can pass on 'positive energy' (正能量)³ to the youth and society.

To resist the impact of Korean and Japanese pop culture on Chinese youths and effectively guide the direction of youth culture, the state has been tirelessly deploying its official resources to promote TFBoys, a three-member boy band, as patriotic, filial and diligent idols for China's post-00s generation. Launched by Time Fengjun Entertainment in 2013, the positive schoolboy image and skyrocketing fame of the band soon caught the government's attention (Kan 2017). The band has not only been accorded the rare opportunity to appear consecutively on the CCTV Chinese New Year Gala every year since 2015, and many other CCTV programmes, but also has been granted numerous opportunities to represent China at youth forums and charitable activities organised by the United Nation (UN) and appeared extensively in post-event state media headlines. The push of the Party-state and TFBoys massive fandom reinforce each other, making the

group a state-endorsed icon for the CCP's 'pop propaganda' (Law 2019). By publicly cracking down on a few iconic figures and selectively co-opting and endorsing others, the CCP aims to implicitly guide the performance of celebrities and the direction of emerging celebrity cultures.

Celebrity, cultural governance, and the 'neoliberal subjectivity' of Chinese entertainment stars

Entertainment celebrities are cultural icons who mark the rise of popular culture and consumer society in post-socialist China. Their associated media, cultural products and commercial activities have constituted an important part of China's burgeoning media, cultural and creative industries. Therefore, we argue that the governance of entertainment celebrities should be understood within the broader framework of China's 'cultural governance'. Influenced by a series of critical theories that critique the relations between culture and governance, such as Gramsci's 'cultural hegemony', Foucault's 'governmentality' and Bennett's work on 'culture and governmentality', as well as definitions of cultural governance in various cultural policies made by the European Union and the UN since the late 1990s (Psychogiopoulou 2015), cultural governance is usually understood via two interrelated approaches in Chinese academia: 'governance of culture' and 'governance through culture' (Liao 2015, Wang 2015).

'Governance of culture' emphasises the innovation and capacity of the government to adapt to 'changing paradigms' in 'modern cultural practice' in cultural policy making and administration (Čopič and Srakar 2012, p. 6). With the deepening modernisation of China's state governance in the post-socialist era, the decentralisation of administrative power and collaboration between the state, market, and civil society in doing cultural governance have become as prominent as commonly seen in the West (Liao 2015). The tendency towards a multi-stakeholder model of cultural governance is vividly demonstrated in the governance of celebrity (culture). As discussed, beyond the state and its apparatus of departments, professional associations, media organisations and the public increasingly participate in the process of governing entertainers. However, due to the authoritarian power of the state, political logic invariably outweighs market logic (the media) and civil society (professional associations and the public), as these remain subject to the regulation and control of the state. This imbalance between state, market and citizen discourses in the governance process reflects the structural contradiction of cultural governance in China's socialist market economy.

'Governance through culture' stresses the importance of ideological education, moral cultivation, and the incorporation of the function of culture into social management (Liao 2015). Doing cultural governance ultimately aims to consolidate the CCP's 'cultural hegemony' through various ideological and cultural means. Elizabeth J. Perry argues that China leans heavily upon such 'cultural governance' through the 'deployment of symbolic resources as an instrument of political authority' (2017, p. 29). Florian Schneider argues that Chinese TV entertainment, such as 'main-melody' dramas, and state-produced spectacles, such as the Beijing Olympics, play the role of 'cultural governance', through which the CCP innovates propaganda and indirectly regulates society by involving non-state actors in cultural practices (2012, 2019). Entertainment celebrities, as public faces of the cultural and entertainment industries, possess huge symbolic and persuasive power

for the CCP's propaganda and ideological work. Therefore, governing this elite group and their associated cultural products is not only an integral part of the 'governance of culture', but also, more importantly, 'governance *through* culture'. The celebrity governance we discuss similarly has two dimensions, that is, the 'governance of celebrity' (as shown in 'banning celebrities' and 'platform governance') and 'governance *through* celebrity' (as shown in 'co-opting stars'). In other words, governing entertainment celebrities is an important part of the CCP's 'cultural-moral governance' in the era of cultural globalisation (Qu 2018) to consolidate the state's cultural hegemony, national cultural identity, and security in the pursuit of maintaining the CCP's political legitimacy and stability.

By detailing the four main governance measures, we demonstrate that the governance of entertainment celebrities has evolved from the ad hoc and ex post ban of 'harmful' artists to a more holistic, systematic, and preventative governance to manage the ever-changing celebrity industry and culture. Besides the increasing regulatory policies and legal frameworks issued by the state, non-state players now actively participate in the governing process. Although some measures are not new, such as banning celebrities and co-opting stars, the intensity, frequency, and techniques of their employment has been enhanced and updated. For example, the use of online public sentiment to legitimise celebrity bans, and the branding of state-endorsed pop teen idols for youth education and soft power competition, are innovative techniques that demonstrate the CCP's ability to adapt to new challenges for resilient celebrity (cultural) governance.

The tightening grip on entertainment celebrities has forced them to adjust their everyday practices to obtain and sustain success in the state-controlled entertainment industry. As a result, a 'neoliberal subjectivity' with Chinese characteristics has formed among China's entertainers. In China's socialist market economy, which integrates neoliberal principles in economic development with state authoritarianism (Brenner and Theodore 2002), the celebrity industry is equally subject to the 'disingenuous neoliberal logic' (Yu 2011, Xu 2017). This requires it to follow neoliberal market ideology to please audiences but also adhere to the socialist ideology, values and moralities to please the Party. This disingenuous neoliberal logic has arguably been gradually internalised by Chinese stars as a 'neoliberal subjectivity'. This subjectivity allows them to meticulously navigate the complex trade-off between neoliberal market ideology and Party ideology, and to discipline themselves for 'neoliberal self-government' (Catlaw and Sandberg 2018) within the CCP's political and ideological spectrum. This subjectivity is prominently seen in the growing ideological vigilance of Chinese stars because of and in response to the government's increased celebrity governance in recent years. To ensure survival and success in an increasingly precarious industry, entertainers are ever more anxious to be officially recognised and co-opted by the state and join the competitive 'mainstream' entertainment circle.

Stars' willingness to cater to the Party call (e.g. for patriotism) in their artistic works, openly support the CCP's political stance on social media (e.g. about Hong Kong protests), and proactively participate in activities that help build a persona of spreading 'positive energy' (e.g. philanthropy) constitutes a new norm of celebrity culture in the Xi era. From the perspective of the governing authority, this new norm shows the effectiveness of the CCP's celebrity governance but, from the perspective of the governed, it demonstrates the 'star vulnerability' (Yu 2012) of Chinese entertainment celebrities. They are 'powerless

elites' Alberoni 2006 [1962]) whose success and power (symbolic and economic) are conditional and indented to the intertwined market and Party logics in China's socialist market economy. The CCP's discipline and cultivation of celebrity and celebrity culture complicates and extends Penfold-Mounce's assertion that celebrity and celebrity culture are neither 'unprompted' nor 'spontaneous', but formed 'through a careful cultivation', and function as a form of 'social control through freedom' (2009, p. 38) in the liberal and democratic context. By examining China's celebrity governance with a focus on the government's initiatives, our paper sheds vital light not only on the understanding of China's celebrity and entertainment politics, but also on the logic, approach and politics of the CCP's celebrity and cultural governance.

Notes

1. 'Core socialist values' were first defined at the 18th National Congress of the CCP in November 2012 and set up moral principles for nation, society and individuals to follow in the Xi era, including prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship (Du 2016).
2. The NRTA was formerly named the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT 2013–2018), and the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT 1998–2013). Under the direct leadership of the State Council, its main tasks are to administrate and supervise China's television and radio industries.
3. Disseminating 'positive energy' is a political slogan widely promoted under Xi's administration. It is frequently adopted into Chinese political discourse and aims to build consensus among Chinese people to spread hope and optimism, love the country, Party, society, people and life, with an emphasis on individual's uplifting attitude, social responsibility and morality.

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