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Becoming Wanghong: How Foreigners Achieve Internet Celebrity in China

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Abstract

The burgeoning internet celebrity industry in China has encouraged the emergence of foreign wanghong (洋网红) as active content producers on the Chinese internet. Achieving online fame and constructing a resonant personal brand while staying within Chinese state's permissible boundaries is a challenge for all internet influencers in China. Foreign *wanghong*, for their part, also have to deal with Chinese publics' ambivalence and fluctuating perspectives on engaging foreign culture, expectations around "being foreign" and cultural nationalism fed by the currents of geopolitics. This study focuses on the performance and personas of foreign wanghong and investigates how these creators navigate the complexities of the Chinese internet to achieve substantial followings. Going beyond treating foreign participants in Chinese digital media spaces as co-opted instruments of propaganda, we take seriously foreign creators' articulations, constructions and self-presentations of foreignness and acculturation in their efforts to earn social, cultural and economic capital in the competitive Chinese internet celebrity sphere. A mixed-method content analytical study of several hundred Douyin videos generated by 33 foreign wanghong reveals the adoption of calculated self-presentation and cross-cultural communication skills alongside a constant negotiation of an individual's own foreignness and local constructs of the "typical foreigner".

Keywords Internet celebrity · Wanghong · Foreign · Cross-cultural communication · Douyin

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Introduction

The popularization of Chinese social media and video sharing platforms for content-creation and dissemination has created a vibrant and under-exploited site for examining the interaction between foreign creators and Chinese publics. China's thriving internet-celebrity (*wanghong* 网红) scene provides an opportunity to observe how foreign creators present themselves to engage and cultivate the Chinese audiences they need to achieve cultural and financial capital as a wanghong. For anyone operating in Chinese communication spaces, creating appealing content and constructing a resonant personal brand while staying within the prescriptive boundaries of what the state's information regime deems acceptable is not straightforward. It is even more complicated for foreign creators, who are also obliged to navigate Chinese publics' ambivalent and fluctuating attitudes towards engaging foreign culture and expectations about foreignness in Chinese cultural and social spaces. Foreign wanghong (*yang wanghong* 洋网红) must navigate the complex political, social and cultural contexts of the Chinese internet, and accommodate Chinese digital cultures and platform mechanisms, by adopting appropriate modes of communication, including self-censorship.[1] In this paper, we treat foreign wanghong as cross-cultural communicators seeking to establish themselves through strategic self-branding, selectively emphasizing and de-emphasizing topics, arguments and frames in their self-presentation and content creation. Naturally, we recognize that the full range of communicative actions is not open to foreign wanghong. For example, commentary on the Communist Party or political system is strictly policed and any perceived criticism of China, which the state and Chinese publics can interpret in broad and unpredictable ways, can be problematic [1]. Foreign wanghong must accept these proscriptions as a prerequisite for entry into the wanghong cultural economy. Foreign wanghong thus self-select into a milieu where the parameters of communicative and creative behaviours are inherently circumscribed. Among some outside observers, this willingness to submit to such constraints is interpreted as a normative decision that qualifies these actors as propagandists or sympathizers, encapsulated in international discursive spaces by pejoratives like "tankie", "pinko" or "panda hugger". Recent analyses have identified numerous foreign defenders of Chinese interests active on platforms like YouTube and X and have situated such efforts in the context of the Chinese state's broader propaganda apparatus and external information campaigns [2]. This is an important research agenda with consequential substantive implications, but it is not the focus of this paper. Our motivation is not to normalize these actors or to challenge criticism of their choices, but we will show that they do not represent the full range of foreign wanghong active on Chinese platforms. Eschewing a normative lens, we foreground the methods foreign wanghong

[1] In this article, we define a foreign wanghong as someone who is mostly based in China and operates predominantly on Chinese platforms. They are distinct from influencers from other countries who simply reproduce their content on Chinese digital media. The former are explicitly actors within Chinese cyberspace, for whom cultivating Chinese audiences is the predominant focus. The latter may be looking to market their "product" to a new market, but these actors already tend to have successful internet celebrity careers outside China and communicating to Chinese audiences is of secondary importance to them.

employ to appeal to Chinese audiences, amid the intensification of systemic geopolitical rivalries and the hostile cybernationalism flourishing in many Chinese cyberspaces. Among a repertoire of cross-cultural communication skills, we find a demonstration of carefully curated self-presentation and negotiations of individuals' foreignness against expectations of self-exotification and local constructs of the "typical foreigner" [3]. Some of the wanghong we study have attracted very substantial cohorts of Chinese fans, which we interpret for what it says about foreign actors operating in China's distinctive digital cultural economy.

Wanghong: Subjects and Tools of Governance

All Chinese celebrities, including the emergent category of wanghong, are subject to close oversight and regulation by the state. Embedded in broader frameworks of cultural and ideological governance that prevail over all aspects of the public sphere, celebrities are subject to a dense network of laws, institutions and norms [4], p.205. Celebrities are required to follow the principles of "professional excellence and moral integrity" (*deyi shuangxin* 德艺双馨) as de facto inheritors of the legacy of societal role models charged with "moral education" (*daode jiaoyyu* 道德教育). Since the emergence of a domestic entertainment industry in the 1980s, the Party and state have actively incorporated celebrities into propaganda work [5]. Framing the relationship between celebrity and the state as a form of governmentality, Lin and Zhao argue that celebrity in the Chinese context is equivalent to "a set of knowledge, discourses, and techniques used primarily by those who govern" [6] p.7. Much work in the field of Chinese celebrity studies understandably privileges "traditional" sectors like film, music and sports [7]. However, since the mid-late 2010s, a large cohort of content creators, influencers, streamers and performers has emerged to join film actors, athletes and pop stars in the public consciousness. Initially, these new entrants to the public sphere operated outside the carefully managed parameters of the entertainment and media industries, producing a freewheeling and inherently diffuse internet celebrity marketplace. Since then, the state has progressively extended the logics and regulatory mechanisms governing traditional celebrities into the realm of wanghong, reasserting control of the internet celebrity scene.

Supplementing new regulatory frameworks, state-led discourses have re-set informal norms around wanghong conduct. Many internet celebrities, from simpering young female livestream hosts (*nvzhubo* 女主播) to Jackass-style pranksters (*zhenghuo* 整活) and gluttonous "social eaters" (known by the Korean phrase *meokbang*), do not embody core socialist values or behaviours suitable for mass emulation. State media commentaries have thus raised a litany of complaints about the wanghong oeuvre, from malicious sensationalism (*eyi chaozuo*恶意炒作), vulgar gossip (*disu bagua* 低俗八卦) and conspicuous demonstrations of wealth (*keyi xuanfu* 刻意炫富), to fretting about the impact on Chinese society of people who ignore social values in the quest to become famous (*buyao sanguan zhi weihong* 不要三观只为红), neglect their social responsibility (*shehui zeren* 社会责任), fail to uphold social morality (*shehui daode* 社会道德) and do not spread positive energy (*zhengnengliang* 正能量). Responding to such concerns, the Cyberspace Administration of China

(CAC), the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the State Administration of Radio and TV (SART) have issued various regulations to discipline the internet celebrity industry. The multitude of regulatory and policy responses includes Provisions on the Management of Internet Live-Streaming Service (*hulianwang zhibo fuwu guanli guiding* 互联网直播服务管理规定), Strengthening the Management of Cyber Performance (*jiaqiang wangluo biaoyan guanli* 加强网络表演管理) and Strengthening the Management of Online Audio–Video Programmes and Live-Streaming Services (*jiaqiang wangluo shiting jiemu zhibo fuwu* 加强网络视听节目直播服务) [8].

Notwithstanding its strenuous efforts to govern the wanghong space, the state is mindful of the sector's contribution to the economy and its potential contribution to social governance. The wanghong and associated e-commerce sectors constitute the most vibrant areas of a private economy struggling to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic. The state also perceives utility in wanghong for social control as an "upgraded propaganda tool" for the digital age [9]. In the spaces where young Chinese people are present en masse, wanghong are potentially useful vehicles for propaganda work and online public opinion guidance, as explicitly acknowledged in recent CAC reports encouraging the co-optation of key online opinion leaders [10]. Equally significant, state and Party actors, from the Communist Youth League to *People's Daily* and local officials, have begun adopting and experimenting with the platforms, tools and performance dynamics of internet celebrity [11]. There is preliminary evidence that the state has recognized the utility of harnessing foreign wanghong for externally facing propaganda work. Ryan et al. [2] present evidence of foreign influencers being co-opted by the state to defend the regime against foreign criticism and proactively shape global narratives consistent with CCP positions and China's interests in the battle for global discourse power. However, Ryan et al. acknowledge that most foreign wanghong are not "political" [2], p.6.

Foreignness in China

Foreign wanghong operate in an environment charged with the contradictions of Chinese attitudes towards engaging foreign people and culture. Historical episodes of foreign intervention in China, and perceived contemporary corollaries, retain their salience through representations in school curricula, the media, the creative industries, official discourse and their absorption into the popular and cultural nationalism prevalent in Chinese cyberspaces [12]. The question of how to handle foreigners, notably Westerners, has stimulated intense and fluctuating national discourses since the first traumatic encounter with European imperialism almost 200 years ago. The first decades of PRC history were characterized by hostile anti-Western rhetoric and strict restrictions on entry to the country. Yet, those foreigners who demonstrated utility to the new regime in terms of practical contributions to nation building or serving the aims of the Party were celebrated and harnessed for propaganda purposes. Idealized "foreign friends" were used by the CCP to advance China's outside interests and "as an example to the Chinese population" [13], p.252. The reform

era represented a new openness to the world and the enthusiastic embrace of many foreign ideas and products. Yet, exposure to global economic and cultural markets also prompted political campaigns and intellectual debates relating to modernity and tradition, national identity and China's place in the world. Despite widespread manifestations of China's embrace of globalization, contradictions continue to manifest, such as the campaign against promoting "western lifestyles" in 2016 and recurrent defences of Chinese spiritual culture and "core socialist values" purportedly under threat of erosion by outside influences [14].

The traumatic denouement of the Democracy Spring movement in and around Tiananmen Square in 1989 prompted the CCP to fundamentally reassess the impact of opening up policies. The reactive orientation adopted then—openness to foreign economic interaction and resistance to "foreign ideas" like liberalism—has prevailed to varying degrees in the decades thereafter. Even in the aftermath of Tiananmen, the ambiguities of engaging with foreignness continued to play out in Chinese media and cultural spaces. One often-cited example is the Canadian performer Mark Roswell. Dashan (大山), Roswell's professional persona, made his first appearance on Chinese TV in 1988. Appearing on CCTV's Spring Gala show, China's major televisual event of the year, he became a national sensation for his mastery of the northern-Chinese comedic form crosstalk (*xiangsheng* 相声). While most western residents departed China in the summer of 1989, Roswell remained. Brady argues that his continuing media appearances amid international isolation and condemnation provided succour to Chinese publics and the CCP, signifying that "despite Western criticism of its political system China still had foreigners willing to support its regime" [13], p.221. Roswell, who enjoyed a long career in China, is candid and perceptive about his reception post-1989. Acknowledging outside criticism of his decision to stay as "the original sin of Dashan," he locates his appeal to a generation of Chinese people in the tangible demonstration of friendship in the wake of trauma and ostracism [15], np.

Transformations across the media and commercial cultural sectors, coinciding with China's entry to the WTO in 2001, created many new opportunities for foreign performers. The relative relaxation of controls over the media and increasing demand for innovative content from commercial formats led to diversification in news and entertainment, significant expansion of China's cultural markets and potential for foreign engagement with China's media industry. One obvious result was the increasingly routine appearance of foreigners on Chinese TV, including participation in nascent Reality TV shows. In the mid-2000s, talent shows like Avenue of Stars (*xingguang dadao* 星光大道), China's Got Talent (*Zhongguo darenxiu*中国达人秀) and Sinophiliac (*Tongle wuzhou* 同乐五洲) showcased foreign contestants. Mandarin speakers like the American Charlotte MacInnis (Ai Hua爱华), described by CCTV as "a white-faced Chinese" purportedly embodying the extent to which "foreigners admire and want to learn from Chinese society,"[2] became staples on the Chinese TV show circuit.

[2] http://english.cntv.cn/program/learnchinese/20110316/109205.shtml

Analytical Framework

The popularity and longevity of Mark Roswell and Charlotte MacInnis' careers suggest that foreign performers who demonstrate language skills, cultural competencies and friendship can thrive in China. However, to address the question of how foreign wanghong engage and appeal to Chinese audiences, we need a more systematic framework to guide our analysis. To that end, we have drawn on insights from three complementary theoretical approaches to cross-cultural communication: social identity, communication accommodation and framing. By employing these approaches, we seek to complicate the reductive motivations (e.g. money), modes (e.g. propaganda) and methods (e.g. flattery) popularly ascribed to foreign wanghong operating in China. While not rejecting financial or other incentives, we prefer to see foreign wanghong and Chinese publics as engaging in symbolic interactions in a multicultural setting where verbal and nonverbal acts facilitate or obstruct the co-construction of meaning. Given the specific context of foreign-Chinese interactions described above, accommodating communication behaviours to the expectations and preferences of receiving audiences appears crucial, hence our recourse to social identity theory, communication accommodation theory and framing theory to help us understand the strategies employed by foreign wanghong.

The body of work under social identity theory formalizes the intuition that when people want to receive positive social identification while interacting with other social groups, they adapt themselves to the desirable and approved standards of their counterpart's social setting [16]. The approach discriminates between behaviours embodying personal identity (guided by individual psychological factors) and social identity (guided by category-based processes at the collective group level) [17] and has demonstrated considerable utility in the study of multicultural interactions [18], p.765. In multicultural contexts, communication behaviours subconsciously or consciously manifest four types of identification relationship with home and host cultures. Integration depicts high levels of identification with both home and host cultures, while marginalization describes the opposite. Assimilation depicts a higher level of identification with the host culture, while separation is the opposite [19]. It is the potential for the conscious or performative adoption of integrative and particularly the assimilation orientation that leads us to describe foreign wanghong as *strategic* cross-cultural communicators. Further strategic choices are suggested by communication accommodation theory, an intercultural communication theory covering both inter-group and inter-personal interactions that explicitly incorporates cultural variation. It recognizes both individual factors such as knowledge, motivation and skills, as well as macro-level contextual factors and power relations [20], p.127]. It assumes that groups and individuals adjust their communications to enhance their personal and social identities [21], p.123], create positive impressions [22] and achieve communicative efficacy [23]. This work identifies two broad strategic choices available to communicators—convergence and divergence—denoting adaptation to audiences or emphasizing distinctiveness. Given the preceding discussion, it would seem

logical for foreign wanghong to adapt, yet the wanghong scene is a highly competitive attention economy, where foreignness is a resource, and potential comparative advantage, for standing out from the crowd.

The concept of framing explains how a communicating text influences an audience through the way it transfers information [24]. The two fundamental aspects of framing are selection and salience. To frame is to selectively emphasize and de-emphasize aspects of a perceived reality in order "to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" [25], p. 52]. Framing can occur at four junctures in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. In this paper, foreign wanghong are communicators whose social media productions are texts. Their framing intentions in the text influence the audience as receivers, while both parties are subject to the influence of culture, which is the set of common frames exhibited in the common discourse and thought of a social group. The dual cultural context that foreign wanghong are subject to, i.e. their home and host cultures, complicates the communication process since the conscious framing of an issue requires an accurate understanding of which frames will resonate with audiences.

Methods and Data

Combining insights from social identity, communication accommodation and framing theory, we seek to provide an account of the communication strategies foreign wanghong employ in their self-presentation to Chinese audiences. To explore this question empirically, we selected Douyin (抖音) as our research site. Douyin is a Chinese video-sharing platform and the progenitor of the internationally popular TikTok. Our assumption is that videos published on Douyin, rather than TikTok or foreign platforms like YouTube, were deliberately posted for the consumption of Chinese audiences. We choose a video-sharing site because the medium is recognized as an appealing and information-rich format that is less dependent on linguistic fluency than textual applications like microblogging [26], and thus entry barriers are lower for foreign creators. A final consideration was that Douyin enjoys a more generalist user base than platforms like Kuaishou (快手) or Bilibili (哔哩哔哩), which have similar functionality but appeal to more niche demographics distinguished by class or location [27].

To identify foreign creators on Douyin, we searched for variations of "foreign blogger" (外国博主), "foreign wanghong" (外国网红), etc., by which we identified and manually verified 46 foreign wanghong accounts. Ryan et al. [2] identified 126 foreign wanghong across numerous different platforms, including foreign sites inaccessible in China without using a VPN. Cross-referencing with the users identified by Ryan et al., we are confident that our sample accurately captures the foreign wanghong active on Douyin at the time of data collection in September 2023. We are interested in foreign wanghong who are active in China and seeking to cultivate a following among Chinese audiences, not influencers who have established careers outside of China and whose presence in Chinese cyberspace involves reproduction

of content available on outside platforms. Removing these accounts, we were left with a sample of 33 foreign wanghong. User profiles, including nationality, followers and likes, are shown in Table 1. From these users, we selected the pinned videos, i.e. those chosen by the creator as the most representative, effective or popular, plus nine randomly selected from the past 12 months for a total of 333 videos. Videos were content analysed using a coding framework that recorded information on verbal, visual and production aspects following established practice in the field [28–30]. Multiple viewings were conducted to compile supplementary qualitative observations. We also recorded normatively valanced verbal and textual messaging, such as praise for China, refutation of foreign criticism of China or criticism of foreign nations. Based on our analysis of the content and presentation strategies in their videos, we have categorized four types of foreign wanghong that we label transnational couples, cultural ambassadors, cultural experiencers and political commentators. The first three types are explicitly focused on cultivating Chinese audiences. Political commentators post on Douyin, but their content seems more geared for consumption outside China on websites like YouTube. This is reflected in the near complete absence of Mandarin in their videos (as shown in Chart 3). The creators we label political commentators are the type often characterized outside of China as co-opted propagandists. Although not the primary focus of the paper as discussed above, political commentators are active in Chinese communication spaces and thus we include them in the analysis. However, our focus remains on what their communications reveal about the mechanics of cross-cultural communication, rather than their propaganda potential. Our searches on Douyin also identified some foreign beauty and gaming influencers who have established reputations outside China and whose content we ascertained was reproduced from platforms like YouTube and Instagram with minor or no modification for Chinese consumption. This class of foreign creators appeared indifferent to China and made no effort to tailor their content to appeal to specifically Chinese audiences. Their use of Chinese social media platforms is utilitarian and per follow-up investigation managed by multi-channel networks (MCN), i.e. third-party firms that work with content producers provide them with assistance services such as video editing and translation. Since these creators do not illuminate the cross-cultural communication dynamic that motivates this paper, we excluded these actors from the analysis. However, we acknowledge that the Chinese market has begun to attract major western influencers like YouTuber Mr Beast [31] and thus analysing how they respond to the requirements of the Chinese state and Chinese audiences is worthy of separate inquiry.

Findings

We begin with a descriptive overview of the videos in our sample. As shown in Chart 1, videos emphasizing Chinese culture account for around one-third of all content (35%), followed by personal content (28%). Explicitly political content accounts for the smallest proportion of videos at 16%. In terms of resonating with Chinese fans—using the crude metric of likes—videos that focus predominantly on foreign culture are the most popular, generating more than 400 thousand likes,

Table 1 Sample of foreign wanghong on Douyin

Account	Country	Type	Follower	Likes	Posts	Account	Country	Type	Follower	Likes	Posts
李格 Greg	France	CE	1.1	5.9	565	安老师	US	CE	5.7	43.8	292
老外克里斯	Norway	CE	20.9	280	239	田纳西Jay和Ari	US	TC	1.4	5	279
桑德在荷兰	Netherlands	CE	6.9	110	507	伏拉夫	Russia	CE	13.4	180	420
Jason在中国	UK	PC	2.2	12.2	238	我是郭杰瑞	US	CE	7.2	13.7	178
伯妮夫妇	Italy	TC	12	210	531	歪果仁研究协会	Israel	CE	8.1	130	855
Barrett看中国	UK	PC	1	3.4	398	火锅大王	US	PC	0.1	0.1	55
王德中	US	PC	0.5	5.8	157	安娜在海南	Russia	CE	3.9	48.2	506
假老外Dan	US	CE	0.4	0.2	140	混血兄弟姐	Russia	CE	1.9	22.7	293
Linni和Falki	Germany	TC	1	24.6	460	路卡和瑞丽	Italy	TC	2.4	22	208
环环	Russia	CE	1.3	12.3	269	萌叔大卫老师	Australia	CE	1.7	17.6	685
珊珊和阿康	Russia	TC	0.1	0.4	92	Real麦克老师	US	CE	0.8	1	241
印度胖娃	India	CE	1.3	22.2	260	Noel苏诺伊	Spain	CE	1.1	18.2	151
加油马特	US	PC	1.1	7.5	330	我是阳离子	US	CE	0.6	5.7	113
K酱の日常	Japan	TC	1	16.9	779	外媒看中国	NZ	PC	0.5	1.8	122
日本小姐姐	Japan	CE	0.2	2.8	199	纽卡斯尔老田	UK	CE	0.1	0.1	168
美国老张	US	CE	1.4	2.6	152	亚亚亚呀当	UK	CE	0.1	7.9	130
司徒建国	UK	CE	0.8	12.4	779						

Source: Authors. Data collected from Douyin. Figures correct as of Sept. 2023. Follower and like counts in millions. Type abbreviations: *TC*, transcultural couple; *CA*, cultural ambassador; *CE*, cultural experiencer; *PC*, political commentator

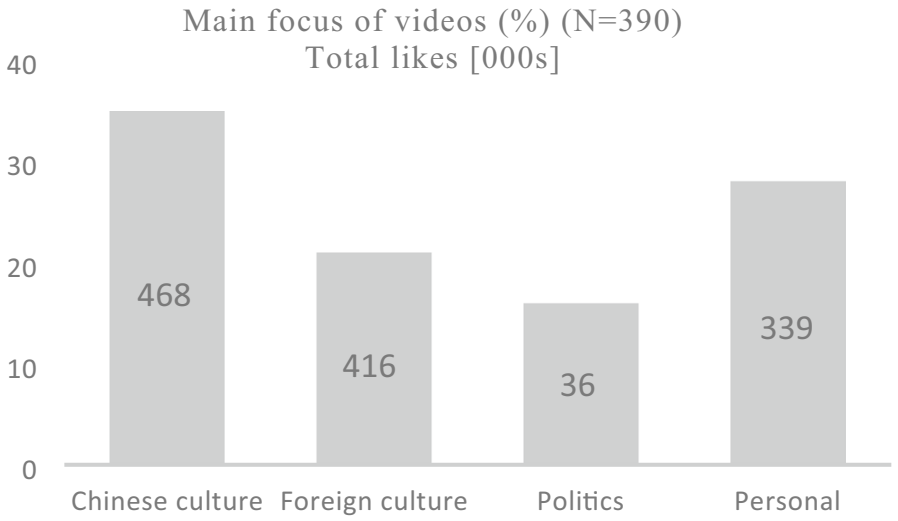

Chart 1 Video content

despite constituting a smaller number of videos. By contrast, videos in our sample that explicitly address political issues are the least popular, with an accumulated 36 thousand likes.

Within the generally positive energy/mainstream melody (*zhu xuanlü*主旋律) vein that most of the creators in our sample adhere to, there is less explicit praise for China than one might expect. In many cases, it would be superfluous, since the vibe created in a video implies a positive orientation toward China and Chinese culture. There are also more videos where the creator strikes a neutral tone. As shown in Chart 2, of the valanced orientations that we recorded, explicit praise for China appears in under a quarter (22%) of videos. This is more than double the proportion of videos featuring explicit criticism of foreign countries and societies (10.5%). Videos praising China received the greatest absolute number of likes, but the proportion of likes per video defending China (which features in just 8% of videos) was the greatest. By contrast, explicit criticism of foreign countries does not seem as resonant, achieving the smallest proportion of likes (32 thousand).

Chart 3 below, setting out various aspects of video production divided by our categorization of creator types, shows substantial variation in modes of cross-cultural communication. This variation supports our intuition that treating foreign wanghong as a singular type of communicator masks more than it reveals, especially if it assumes that all foreign wanghong are "political". In fact, the political commentator category that has generated so much international media attention has some singular characteristics. For instance, they are alone in delivering their content almost exclusively in English, which makes sense if their primary audience is outside China. They are the least likely to feature visual and sound effects or background music, and generally eschew co-production. The main modus operandi for these actors is an unembellished speak-to-camera style. The three other categories, which are focused

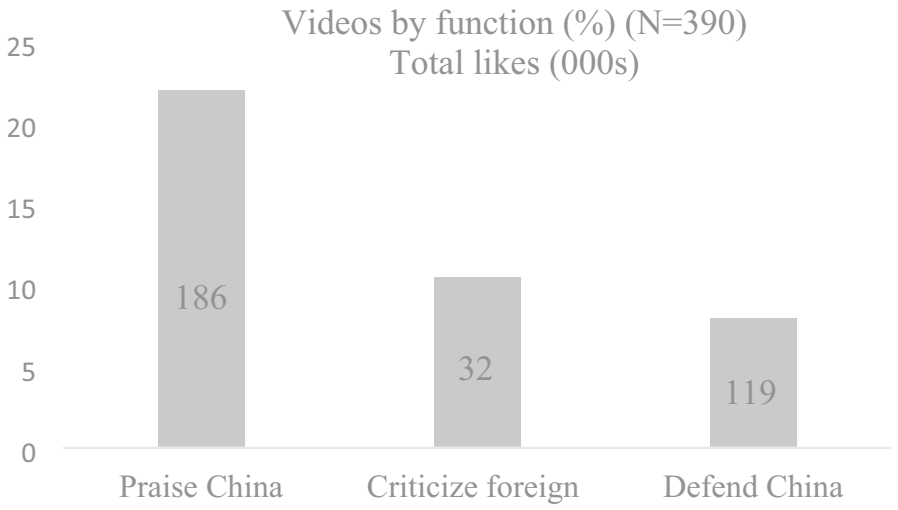

Chart 2 Valanced functions

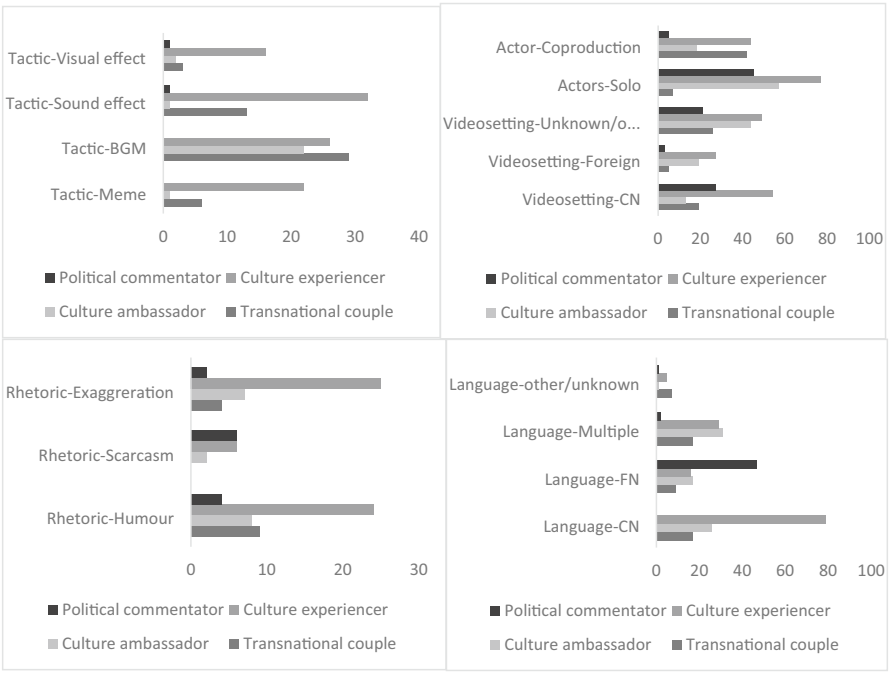

Chart 3 Features of video production (% of videos)

on cultivating Chinese audiences, are more sophisticated, attractive and diverse in their production. They make greater use of humour and exaggeration and use Mandarin much more often. We expand and specify observations of the four types of creators in the following section.

Transnational Couples

Transnational and transracial couples are no longer a rarity in China, but audience curiosity and interest in how such romantic partners experience and negotiate cultural difference remains [32]. In our sample, there were six transnational couples involving one foreign and one Chinese spouse. Their videos are dominated by personal content, are often co-produced and use Mandarin and foreign languages with captions. The transnational component of the partnership is the obvious selling point, indicated by account usernames that explicitly point to this form of coupledom. Relationships are explored through documenting quotidian experiences and identifying curious or humorous cultural differences. Each account foregrounds the presence of the foreign spouse, employing a mix of strategies from appealing to foreign exoticism to processes of acculturation. Foreign exoticism includes cultural traits and customs, but also physicality and sex appeal. The popularization of the female gaze as an expression of the interaction between sexuality and celebrity [33] is evident the way that Linni和Falki capitalize on the looks of the foreign male partner, using titles such "foreign little fresh meat" (*waiguo xiao xianrou* 外国小鲜肉) to attract female fans. Exotic foreign traits can be an attractive selling point, but longer-term transnational romantic relationships are frequently framed as a process of the foreign partner encountering and acclimating to China and shedding elements of foreignness. The communication strategy of divergence is used to highlight elements of foreign difference for the purpose of humour or as an illustration of foreign idiosyncrasy or obtuseness. When it comes to identity, however, the Chinese partner rarely manifests a "foreign" identity by acceding to the norms of their foreign partner. In contrast, the foreign spouse is often portrayed as assuming a "Chinese" identity by learning and engaging with Chinese culture and customs under the influence of their Chinese partner. Progression is demonstrated through foreign partners shown improving their language skills, acquiring tastes for local cuisine and increased proficiency in dealing with the demands of Chinese life tasks and bureaucracy. In other words, transnational couples are inclined to portray the foreign partner going through a process of assimilation in their self-representation.

Demonstrating the acculturation of a foreign partner appeals to national pride and gives a measure of external validation (*kending* 肯定). To concretize the point, foreign partners (and sometimes their foreign family members) often sing China's praises. Law and order is a particular frame highlighted by foreign partners, juxtaposing safe China with chaotic and dangerous home countries, a theme that clearly resonates with official Chinese narratives. The merits of Chinese people as romantic partners are another frame emphasized by foreign partners to appeal to audiences. For example, in a video made by 俄罗斯珊珊和阿康, the telegenic young Russian wife praises Chinese men as "good marriage material". Speaking directly to

her imagined audience, she encourages Chinese men to be bold in their pursuit of a foreign romantic partner. All foreign spouses attached positives to their "Chinese identity" by stressing pride in being a Chinese daughter- or son-in-law, simultaneously emphasizing the importance they attach to acculturation and manifesting their progress towards it. Transnational couples followed the communication strategy of life-sharing influencers elsewhere in speaking directly to their fans and showcasing unvarnished "unedited" life moments to convey a sense of relatability [34]. Typically, most creators in this group pinned videos relating to their wedding ceremonies, marriage proposals or childbirth. By documenting their everyday lives, transnational couples give their fans a sense of intimacy and a stake in sharing their life journeys. Like other contexts, this mode of presentation is a key strategy for forging para-social bonds between creators and followers [35].

Cultural Ambassadors

Several Chinese scholars have argued that one of the positive functions played by foreign wanghong is as carriers of cross-cultural communication [36, 37], the ideal model of which is a two-way process involving appreciation of "home culture" and introduction to "guest culture" [38]. What we find in our sample is a distinction between creators whom we describe as cultural ambassadors (who introduce their home culture to Chinese audiences) and cultural experiencers (who document their experience and appreciation of Chinese culture, again for Chinese audiences). Cultural ambassadorship is characterized by ostensibly apolitical cultural content. We say ostensibly since these creators are also wont to praise China and criticize their home countries when introducing their home culture to Chinese audiences. The cultural ambassadors in our sample were mostly proficient Chinese speakers and their videos almost exclusively presented in Mandarin. Though introducing foreign cultures to Chinese people, they choose to converge their language choice to facilitate better understanding. In theory, cross-cultural communication efforts to introduce foreign culture could help to challenge stereotypes and redress sources of misunderstanding thereby solidifying the basis of people-to-people exchange. However, our cultural ambassadors are sometimes deficient by that standard, emphasizing stylized social issues at home, notably the gun crime and homelessness that are often feature in Chinese state media narratives. While these are genuine problems for some western societies, framing them in this way is more likely to confirm stereotypes than expand understanding of why they exist.

Divergence also proves a popular tactic for cultural ambassadors by playing up other commonly held Chinese stereotypes about their home cultures. This is visible in humdrum ways, like fluent Chinese speaker 混血兄妹signing off every video with Ypa (乌拉, equivalent to the English hooray or huzzah), a stereotypically Russian phrase widely known as such in China. More playful are the Indian 印度胖娃snjy's spoof videos, including supplying his Chinese roommate with a glass of purported Ganges water to drink (mocking the misconception that Indian people routinely hydrate with river water). Self-deprecation can sometimes veer into more demeaning territory by alienating one's home identity, such as Japanese creator日本

的小姐姐儿hikali's video of her standing in front of a food trolley with an aggressive Chinese language slur against Japanese people printed on it.

Cultural Experiencers

Cultural experiencers presenting their engagement with Chinese culture is the largest sub-group in our sample. They also demonstrate the greatest willingness to adopt convergence tactics to cater to the taste of Chinese audiences. Generally boasting superior Mandarin language proficiency, this group also employs the most sophisticated video-editing techniques. The adoption of background music (BGM) and sound effects demonstrates their familiarity with Chinese audience tastes on short-video platforms. They frequently employ humour and exaggerated positivity in their responses to quotidian Chinese cultural and social situations. Not overtly political, they routinely and explicitly praise the Chinese social and cultural phenomena they experience, whether food, transport, shopping, urban cityscapes, rural landscapes or the Chinese language and internet culture. Self-presentation strategies range from claiming vast experience to appreciative (sometimes faux) naïveté. Professing ignorance is not necessarily a disadvantage as sincere expressions of the desire to learn and experience more about China seem to resonate with Chinese audiences. The crucial thing is to express openness to integration with Chinese culture. Foreign exchange students like Noel González (Noel苏诺伊) frame narratives about broadening horizons and personal growth around their engagement with China. Divergence was often employed to create a sense of non-threatening foreign distinctiveness. Positioning oneself, as the Israeli Raz Gal-Or 歪果仁研究会 does, as a knowing foreigner among ignorant co-nationals, produces both humorous content and burnishes his own enlightened bona fides. For foreign wanghong presenting themselves as an experienced China hand, demonstrating superior familiarity with China often comes with pride in progress towards acculturation. Kris 老外克里斯, a Norwegian "Chinese son-in-law" with 21 million followers, speaks fluent Chinese, cooks authentic Chinese dishes and practices all kinds of Chinese cultural customs. He is attuned to Chinese stereotypes about foreigners and cleverly turns them into an affirmation of his own credentials as a cultural experiencer, often gently juxtaposing his culture-shocked Norwegian family members to comedic effect.

Exaggerated appreciation is the hallmark of cultural experiencers, but gratuitous praise can rebound, leading to the problem over-convergence [39]. Vladislav Kokolevskiy (*Fulafu* 伏拉夫), the pioneering Russian wanghong known throughout China for his exuberant articulations of love for the country, has faced mockery, harassment and scepticism. Starting his creator career as a wine taster, it was not until he overhauled his video style and adopted the persona of a hyperactive cultural experiencer that his popularity surged. His videos are bursting with jubilant exclamations of "our China is so awesome! I love China! I am a true Chinese!" His hotpot video series went viral for his comparative tasting of foreign and Chinese dishes, in which the latter invariably came out on top. Criticized for his purported insincerity, Fulafu posted a viral "confessional" video explaining his lifelong affinity for Chinese culture.

Some cultural experiencers eschew exoticism, acculturation or excessive praise in favour of a studied neutrality. They do not overtly discuss political issues, but subtly insert political frames into their content that portray China in a positive light. For example, though both Stuart 司徒建国 and 纽卡斯尔老田 engage ostensibly apolitical topics like backstreet eateries and panda enclosures, they also showcased makeshift hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic and Winter Olympics villages. The American Katherine Loraine Olson (我是阳离子), who focuses on environmental issues in the Chinese countryside and posts content on both YouTube and Douyin, communicates the message to Chinese and international audiences that China's efforts at environmental protection and rural development are working. Her content is a studiedly unvarnished and uneditorialized representation of the rural folk she interacts with.

Political Commentators

Six creators in our sample create content addressing explicitly political issues. We characterize these creators as political commentators and we note that five of the six appear to be in receipt of some kind of support or affiliation to Chinese media or other state organs. This is the category of most concern to analysts reporting on the co-optation of foreign individuals for propaganda purposes. Compared with other types of wanghong, political commentators show the least interest in converging to the communication styles that Chinese audiences are familiar with. They do not speak Chinese in their videos, and unlike other foreign creators, they seldom employ background music or visual effects. Their content is dominated by speaking-to-camera on location or in a studio. As a group, they frame their content in a way that reliably affirms Chinese policies and behaviours, criticizes foreign nations and media and refutes foreign criticism of China. They seek "authenticity" in the low production value of their videos and frame themselves as "truth tellers" (contra bêtes noires like CNN and the BBC). Their "neutral" observations and the views implied are consistent with established lines of official Chinese discourse and propaganda. Their counterarguments against Western criticism select, highlight and omit salient information and re-organize "ideas for news content" [18], p.100–101]. Commenting on the international criticism of Chinese policies, they redirect by invoking racism, inequality, gun crime and homelessness in western societies, mirroring the whataboutism employed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials and "wolf warrior diplomats" [40]. Addressing geopolitical conflicts such as Russia's war in Ukraine or the Israel-Palestine conflict, they unanimously blame the USA and portray China as a responsible actor pushing for peace. Addressing China's domestic or foreign policies, they deny human rights abuses in Xinjiang and affirm Taiwan's status as a part of China. Democracy, freedom and universal values are treated sceptically as the soft conceptual underpinning of American imperialism. The Chinese system is praised for its efficiency and effectiveness. In one video, Let's Go Matt (加油马特) refutes the "misunderstanding widely held by many foreigners [that] Chinese people are oppressed and need you to save them". Filming a busy night market filled with joyful flâneurs, he asks rhetorically: "Does China need your salvation?" Juxtaposing

China's remarkable high-speed rail network to the UK's inability to construct a second short line, Jason Lightfoot (Jason看中国) lauds China's systemic superiority and exhorts other countries to "learn from China."

Increasing geopolitical tensions between China and the West and concomitant growth of nationalistic sentiment presents an opportunity for self-motivated foreigners to play to receptive Chinese audiences. Cyrus Janssen (王德中) transitioned from a cultural ambassador to become a political commentator. The connections between political commentators and the Party-state are ambiguous [41]. Jerry Kowal (郭杰瑞), who won praise from Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Hua Chunying (华春莹) for his videos lauding China's COVID-19 response in contrast to the chaos in his home country (US), has been called a paid propagandist for the Chinese state, which he categorically denies [42]. Some political commentators are not coy about their connections to state media but deny that they are motivated by or in receipt of remuneration from the state. Jason Lightfoot, a sometime guest contributor on CGTN, says his motivation is refuting "hypocritical Western media". Andy Boreham (外媒看中国) responded to Western media accusations that he "only says positive things about China" by claiming that his voice was a needed counterweight to Western media bias. Undermining confidence in Western media narratives is a strategy used by political commentators to defuse accusations about being instruments of Chinese propaganda. Attacks on international media simultaneously bolster their credibility among Chinese audiences primed by exposure to mainstream narratives in Chinese information spaces to see Western media as inherently biased and fixated on criticising China. Jason Lightfoot established his presence in China through his satirical "BSB news" videos mocking the BBC's purported biases against China. Enunciating in ostentatious Received Pronunciation, parodying the outdated BBC English stereotype, he satirically recasts a community sports venue as a concentration camp and bucolic countryside as war-torn wasteland. The grey-scale videos reference the widely held Chinese belief that the BBC deliberately selects dull and grainy filters for its visual reporting from China to convey foreboding and despair [43].

Discussion and Conclusion

Foreign creators hoping to develop their careers in China face multiple constraints and challenges. In addition to multilayered regulatory and enforcement mechanisms, informal expectations to follow the main melody and diffuse positive energy, they must also adapt to a specific set of market conditions that prevail in China's digital cultural economy. To become a viable wanghong, foreign creators must stay within permissible boundaries set by the state and deliver a product that resonates with Chinese publics. The logic of internet celebrity as a more intimate form of para-sociality also requires that they establish bonds with their followers. Attempting to capture the attentions of Chinese fans, and to turn attention into affect [44], raises questions about identity, perceptions and expectations as features of cross-cultural communication. How foreign wanghong navigate these challenges has largely been neglected in favour of speculation about potential incorporation into Chinese state propaganda.

Our study of the content and performativity of foreign creators shows how they deploy a repertoire of good conduct, linguistic ability, cultural competency, exoticism and stereotypes, cultural appreciation and manifestations of friendship.

Chinese publics demand a high degree of moral rectitude and good behaviour of all celebrities, irrespective of nationality, as a demonstration that they "deserve" the adulation and remuneration that attaches to their status [45]. Any hint of low moral standards or inappropriate conduct can derail a celebrity's career, leading to "cancellation" by authorities and affronted fans alike [46]. In the past, foreigners in China were often afforded generous latitude to contravene quotidian social or cultural conventions. However, scrutiny of foreignness and foreigners' conduct have become increasingly prominent in the Chinese information environment as China's foreign relations have become more complicated and relations with western countries increasingly fraught. Yet, Chinese fans do not appear to treat foreignness per se as an obstacle to engagement. For instance, in a study of attitudes toward naturalized foreign footballers in China, i.e. foreigners who represent the Chinese nation on the international stage, Sullivan et al. [47] found that the strongest effect was not ethnicity or nationality but whether players adhered to societal rules and norms and conducted themselves in an appropriate manner. As a communication strategy, divergence is only permissible when it does not constitute a perceived offense towards Chinese people and does not subject China to an "inferior" position, i.e. highlighting the distinctiveness and superiority of one's home culture. For most foreign wanghong, convergence is a logical strategy, in that the perceived costs for doing so are proportionally lower than the anticipated rewards. The foreign wanghong that we studied adhere to these expectations, refraining in their videos from behaviours common to creators elsewhere, including interpersonal conflict ("beef" and "drama"), provocation (edgy or sweary "bantz") and cynicism ("dank memes" and "snark"). There is nothing in their content and personal presentation that could be interpreted as inappropriate conduct. Manifestations of positivity are also found in great abundance, reflecting the state-directed imperative for positive energy in the public sphere. Creators are often exuberant and enthusiastic in their videos, and we interpret the articulation of positive energy as a conscious choice knowing that both the state and Chinese audiences demand it.

Conforming to expected behavioural standards may be necessary, but it is insufficient for a foreign wanghong to accumulate the streams, likes and follows they need to achieve a sustainable career in a competitive attention economy. To achieve that, they must also entertain, stimulate or provide something uniquely appealing. There is clear evidence of foreign wanghong positioning themselves and their offering, accentuating characteristics that can be framed as a unique selling point (USP). As more foreigners have become resident in China and transnational couples become more commonplace, simply speaking Chinese or "being foreign" is no longer a USP. Foreign wanghong thus seek other unique or appealing qualities. One approach is to self-present as an "insider," reproducing or mimicking elements of specifically Chinese internet culture, in terms of production technique or the use of internet slang. Others foreground their collaborations with Chinese wanghong (such as Greg 李格 or Sander Kole桑德在荷兰), demonstrating their bona fides as digital cultural insiders and tapping into the Chinese cultural preference for bustle and excitement (*renao*

熱鬧) often reproduced by wanghong [11]. A different approach is juxtaposing their own cultural competencies with the ignorance of other foreigners, sometimes their own family members, an insider–outsider dynamic often used to comedic effect. Various degrees of orientation towards home/host culture are observed, but most communicators disproportionately favour the host (Chinese) culture. This finding complicates arguments in the social identity literature that high orientation that integration, rather than assimilation, is the optimum strategy for cross-cultural engagement [48]. The negation of one's own foreign identity is in some cases redolent of the weak/outside conforming to the identity of the strong/inside group [49] and hints at complex and fluid power dynamics around foreign identity in China.

Creating a monetizable personal brand is more than just a function of reach measured by the number of followers or views recorded across social platforms. It also requires establishing bonds with fans. The creators in our sample present themselves as unvarnished and unpractised, inviting audiences into intimate, personal and familial spaces, and publishing videos with deliberately low production values embodying the "calculated amateurism" identified by Abidin [44], p.91]. Unlike performing artists or movie stars, who's reified status in the cultural economy renders them inaccessible and unrelatable, the celebrification of ordinary people increases expectations about engagement [50], p.119]. In short, it is more realistic to be seen and heard by a live streamer or content creator than a pop star or professional athlete. The reduction of distance between fans and wanghong is crucial to accruing monetizable social capital through e-gifting, subscription services or adjacent e-commerce activities (*daihuo* 带货). Whether it is a function of a "culture of loneliness" caused by demographic imbalances or China's ultra-competitive socio-economy, engagement with internet celebrities sometimes resembles quasi-familial "para-kin" relationships rather than commonplace para-social relations [51]. Wanghong, especially those lower down the hierarchy, must invest "emotional labour" in cultivating relationships [52] and maintain ties through frequent engagements via comment and chat functions [3], p.808]. Transnational couples are especially conscientious in responding to fan comments and engaging with fans. This likely reflects the greater cultural awareness and language skills possessed by the Chinese spouse in the partnership. Transnational couples also expend greater effort foregrounding their relatability as "real people", documenting seemingly unscripted and unedited episodes from their personal and family lives and thus inviting audiences into their lives.

Language skills, cultural competencies, appreciation for China and Chinese culture and demonstrations of friendship can form the basis for success in the Chinese cultural market, as demonstrated by the case of former NBA player Stephon Marbury, who finished his career in Beijing and was celebrated for his sincere embrace of life in China. However, Chinese publics have become more discerning and sensitive to foreign companies and celebrities using Mandarin and other signalling methods to curry favour. Insincere flattery and pandering have been identified as a "secret to wealth" (*caifu mima* 财富密码) instrumentally employed by some foreigners [37], p.55]. Some foreign wanghong, like Fulafu, have been called out for ostentatious pandering [53]. As responses to Falafu's ebullience suggest, over-convergence can lead to rejection when such behaviours are perceived as insincere or exceeding cultural boundaries [20]. What counts

as sincere and acceptable behaviour in cross-cultural communication is not easy to pin down. It is complicated by a priori expectations about foreignness, some of which are based on national, racial and gendered stereotypes [3], p.59] manifest in diverse settings, such as Chinese students' relationships with their foreign teachers [54]. The Chinese "foreign gaze" [55], p.2] is not inherently hostile, but stereotypes such as those pertaining to Western women [56], p.157–158] or African men [57] can be problematic. Most foreign wanghong appear to have some understanding of this "foreign gaze" and attempt to use it to their advantage, for example, by playing to stereotypes about foreign physicality, albeit staying within the chaste norms of the Chinese public sphere. A handful of male wanghong have the youthful physicality and good looks to appeal to the growing market for "little fresh meat" (*xiao xianrou*小鲜肉). Some women performers wear Chinese traditional dress, such as the Hanfu, a tactic also used by Chinese women wanghong to appeal to both cultural nationalism and stereotypes about femininity [11]. Instrumental or sincere, it is common for foreign women wanghong to affirm Chinese men as the ideal dating choice or life partner.

As strategic cross-cultural communicators operating in a competitive marketplace, foreign wanghong use the resources at their disposal (talent, production skills, language, looks etc.) to package and present their content and personality in a way they believe can attract and sustain a following. In the Chinese context, they must do so in a way that stays within the bounds of "political correctness" and avoids criticism of China, while also appearing sincere and conforming to audience expectations about appropriate articulations of their own foreignness. This cultural dynamic is especially pronounced due to the closed nature of the Chinese internet ecology. The authoritarian information order has rendered Chinese cyberspace a largely depoliticized public sphere. Aside from semi-certified political analysts such as former *Global Times* chief editor Hu Xijin (胡锡进), discussing political issues on the Chinese internet is generally not a winning strategy for wanghong. This is the case even for the foreign wanghong we characterize as political commentators. Explicitly political content accounts for a small share of the videos in our sample and has limited popularity compared with personal and cultural content. Nevertheless, even apolitical foreign wanghong must pay attention to political dynamics. For example, posting condolence videos after natural disasters and avoiding posting "unserious" content on sensitive memorial days are essential acts to show respect to Chinese publics. For some actors, even those who do not explicitly praise the Party, participating in state-sponsored events can boost popularity and provide a degree of insurance through quasi-official endorsement. Like all individuals and organizations engaging in cultural production in China, foreign wanghong benefit from signalling acceptance of the Party's hegemony in the cultural realm [58].

Data Availability Data are available on request.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This paper has received institutional ethics approval.

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