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To cite this article: Min Xu, Stijn Reijnders & Sangkyun Kim (2019): '*Mingren* are the respectable ones': an analysis of everyday engagements with contemporary celebrity culture in China, *Celebrity Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2019.1611461](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1611461)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1611461>



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Published online: 12 May 2019.



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'Mingren are the respectable ones': an analysis of everyday engagements with contemporary celebrity culture in China

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the values and social norms underpinning celebrity culture, it is crucial to study everyday uses of celebrity culture. Yet, studies in this area have been limited thus far, especially in non-Western contexts. This exploratory study focuses on the ways how young and middle-aged adults in everyday life in urban China discuss and value media celebrities. The results show that respondents have a rather similar way of valuing celebrity: celebrities need to have strong work ethics and showcase social responsibility; only then do they 'earn' their right to be considered 'famous'. We conclude that these values are closely related to the current socio-cultural situation of China's social transformation and echo the value system promoted by the Chinese government.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2018
Accepted 20 April 2019

KEYWORDS

Celebrity; audience; fame;
China's celebrity culture;
cultural values

Introduction

Contemporary celebrity culture has been a valuable lens through which to understand and analyse social and cultural values, trends, changes, and/or shifts in a society. A majority of studies are based on textual analysis, addressing detailed media representations, while direct enquiries of audiences, producers and publicists are limited. Scholars in the field of celebrity studies have called for research that deepens and quantifies our understanding of audience consumption (Turner 2010a, Mendick *et al.* 2015). An increasing number of empirical studies have examined what audiences 'do' with celebrity narratives (e.g. Duits and van Romondt Vis 2009, Jackson *et al.* 2016). However, little is known about everyday uses of celebrity beyond interactions between stars/celebrities and fans/consumers. Such inquiries are essential to further investigate the values and social norms underpinning celebrity culture, especially beyond Western contexts and in Asian countries experiencing rapid socio-economic and cultural change, such as China.

If the emergence of celebrity is a direct product of late-capitalist society (Marshall 1997), associated with the decline in organised religion and the processes of democratisation and commodification (Rojek 2001), why does celebrity culture in China 'appear to mirror the production and consumption of celebrity in wealthy, industrialised nations' (Jeffreys and Edwards 2010, p. 1)? China has a high percentage of atheists and non-religious people. Contemporary Chinese culture has continued 'the socialist legacy and

cultural tradition of the past', while the nation is 'becoming further integrated into the global capitalist system' (Yu 2009, p. 6). These apparent differences between China and many western countries make us question the nuances in the broader social and cultural implications of celebrity culture. It is possible that certain elements play a more important role in flourishing Chinese celebrity culture, despite the seemingly similar production and consumption of celebrity, and developments of commodification and mediatisation.

On a deeper level, the complicated dimensions of celebrity culture in China make our investigation even more worthwhile. First of all, there are links and striking tensions between tradition and modernity. Although celebrity culture is seen as a feature of modernity, many celebrities in various fields invoke the rich cultural values of China's heritage, such as 'Wushu Master' Jet Li (Farquhar 2010, p. 123), action-film star Jackie Chan (Weiss 2013), and popular singer Jay Chou (Lin 2013, p. 209). The traditional star images and cultural identities they project are widely welcomed by media institutions and audiences in Mainland China. Second, social norms can diverge from the value system that the government promotes (e.g. Guo 2010, p. 48). Despite the influence of government in the cultural industries, the commercial interests of this market are growing. Sometimes media content with officially promoted values may not be popular among the public. Last but not least, the collectivism of Chinese culture has long been recognised by scholars (Leung 2010, p. 231). It is common that a celebrity experiences escalated public support or criticism overnight. As Driessens points out, there is a need for more studies on non-Western celebrity cultures: 'What kind of celebrity cultures exist in more collectivistic cultures?' (2013, p. 654) On the other hand, Chinese society has witnessed the rise of individualism (Hansen and Svarverud 2010). Therefore, to what extent does Chinese celebrity culture reflect aspects of collectivism and/or individualism remains an intriguing open-ended question.

This study aims to examine the values and norms embedded in everyday uses of celebrity culture in the Chinese context. It is argued that the categorisation of celebrities is sometimes arbitrary (Driessens 2015). Research subjects 'tend to be drawn from a limited pool of individual celebrities' (Turner 2010a) whom 'we assume to be culturally significant' (Mendick *et al.* 2015). Therefore, to overcome these potential pitfalls, this study does not choose any celebrities in a particular field (e.g. entertainment, business and sports) or specific media texts as the starting point. Instead, it turns to general audiences and discuss their perceptions of famous people and the assigned social status. Specifically, it aims to answer the following questions: How do young and middle-aged audiences in urban China discuss famous mediated personalities? What do these audiences' practices and self-reflections tell us about cultural values and norms in contemporary Chinese society?

Celebrity culture and audience engagement with celebrity

The term celebrity, generically referring to anyone of social prominence from a diverse range of social spheres, is formally defined as 'a person whose name, image, lifestyle, and opinions carry cultural and economic worth, and who are first and foremost idealised popular media constructions' (Redmond 2013, p. 5). In other words, the single term celebrity ubiquitously suggests 'the contemporary state of being famous', although

distinctions between different variations of fame have become blurred (Redmond and Holmes 2007, p. 8).

In recent years, discussions about celebrity culture in the everyday have mainly revolved around social media and reality TV. The former redefines the boundaries between public and private and transforms the 'para-social interaction' (Horton and Wohl 1956). Celebrity culture previously infused the everyday primarily through television, newspapers and magazines, but today, this infusion occurs increasingly through social media – a manifestation of 'deep mediatisation' (Couldry and Hepp 2016). The production and consumption of celebrity news, as Turner suggests, plays a fundamental role in the development of 'mediatisation' in everyday life (2013, p. 144).

The emergence of 'ordinary celebrities' is another trend that has attracted much scholarly attention in the past decade. Ordinary people can not only easily access celebrity content and sometimes become caught up in celebrity news everywhere, but also seem to have more opportunities than ever to broadcast their own extraordinariness (e.g. Turner 2010b, Redmond 2013). Due to the prevalence of reality TV and online video channels, numerous ordinary people have become famous for 15 minutes. However, the ephemeral nature of contemporary celebrity does not promise an enduring status, whether for a traditional sense of celebrities or today's ordinary celebrities. Instead, the celebrity industry constantly sells new faces. As Redmond suggests, the manufacture of ordinary celebrities has, to some extent, led to 'speed up this process of relentless commodity renewal' (2013, p. 69).

Next to the fleeting nature of fame, it has also been argued that the fame of contemporary celebrities rests overwhelmingly on media coverage of their lifestyle, rather than on talent and achievement (Redmond and Holmes 2007, p. 8). Partially due to the popularity of celebrity reality TV in Western culture, fame seems to have moved even further from the merits of talent and hard work, relying more and more on luck (Holmes 2006, p. 47). This type of celebrity is regarded as 'lottery celebrity' (Press and Williams 2005). Sports stars can be found as an exception, however, as they are often expected to serve as an appropriate role model for young people (Whannel 2002 cited Turner 2015, p. 123).

In line with the tendency to perceive a distinction between 'heroes', who are distinguished by achievement, and 'celebrities', who are created by the media, it is necessary to note that 'an affective desire for stars is only one facet of celebrity consumption' (Johansson 2015). Audience attitudes towards celebrity consumption are not all positive and sensational. A more extreme example would be anti-fandom, which exists at a personal, industrial and creative level (Giuffre 2012). Anti-fans explicitly express their dislike, for example, in the form of online reactions to celebrity news and gossips (Claessens and Van den Bulck 2014). The ways of audience engagement with celebrity are indeed becoming more complex.

Contemporary celebrity culture in China

Deepening our understanding of the different ways that audiences relate to celebrity culture starts with acknowledging the major differences that exist between countries, since media cultures and their related celebrity cultures are still, to a large degree, of a national character (e.g. De Bruin 2012, Han 2015). In the case of China, it can discern

two intertwined tendencies, namely, *universalising* and *localising* (Van Krieken 2012, p. 136). The universalising tendency is derived from endless media productions and new media content that spread around the world. The localising tendency in the Chinese context, as argued earlier, can be more nuanced and deserves a closer look.

To begin with, the Chinese language construction for the concept of celebrity implies a slightly different perspective than the word's connotation in the English language. Behind the usage of words about fame, there are 'the wider historical and cultural contexts in which they circulate' (Redmond and Holmes 2007, p. 8), and presumably diverse implications in different cultures. In Chinese translation, *Mingren* (literally 'famous people') is a term that refers to the famous from a wide range of fields, including entrepreneurs and politicians, as well as pop stars and others from the entertainment industry. Interestingly, people who become famous specifically through Internet media, are described as *Wanghong* (literally 'Internet' and 'famous'). Because of this specific phrasing implying a categorical difference, many people are more likely to associate 'famous people' (*Mingren*) with those who they know from the traditional media. The term *Mingxing* ('celebrity'), however, refers to well-known people in the entertainment industry, rather than generically referencing all outstanding figures in various fields like its English counterpart. There is also a tendency to use *Mingxing* exclusively in reference to glamorous actors and actresses, an even more narrow idea of fame in the settings of media encounters (Xu and Reijnders 2018).

Secondly, existing studies have identified several notable features of the nation's celebrity culture. These national features range from resisting the 'celebritisation of politics' (Sullivan and Kehoe 2019, p. 12) to appreciating moral virtue and public pronouncements of patriotism (Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, p. 16–17). Chinese features are, moreover, reinforced by the Chinese government, which is aware of the social impact of celebrities exert and expects celebrities to set an example and standard for the moral direction of society (Chen 2015). Not only does this value on moral virtue directly influence Chinese celebrity culture, but non-conformity and immorality in this regard would contrarily also result in notoriety (Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, p. 19). To some extent, celebrities are harnessed as a vehicle for promoting traditional virtues, socialist values and patriotism (Sullivan and Kehoe 2019).

These aforementioned remarks are helpful in that they have pointed out the distinctive themes in the research of celebrity culture in contemporary China. However, as many of the arguments are based on textual analysis, we expect to see some nuances in the everyday audiences' accounts – for example, the traits of the celebrities that they find admirable.

Finally, celebrities in the entertainment industry seem to attract more attention than those in other fields, especially on the Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo, which has many active celebrity users. Adopting social network analysis, a study on repost behaviours shows that a famous actress attracted many more reposts and comments than well-known entrepreneurs or a public intellectual (Zhang 2016, p. 135). The actress, with an emotional writing style, appeared to have a greater influence on readers' disposition to continue discussions. On the other hand, it is also possible that active users of Weibo are generally more engrossed in entertainment celebrity culture. Moreover, repost behaviour does not necessarily mean that the user values celebrities in one field more than those in other fields. Therefore, how audiences value famous people in different domains remains an open empirical question, worthy of investigation.

Research methods

As empirical studies on China's celebrity culture are limited thus far, an investigation into the meanings behind audiences' discussions of famous people becomes crucial. Any engagement with the celebrity culture starts with certain mindsets. For this exploratory study, a qualitative approach has been adopted, with the potential to build a better understanding of people's attitudes, and shed light on the cultural context of the research topic (Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

The study recruited young and middle-aged respondents through personal networks, including eight acquaintances and friends, and seven snowball samples recommended by participants. When approaching acquaintances and friends, the first author made sure that none of them went to the same school as her. Instead, each was acquainted in various social settings, and their professions varied. With this initial choice, the study hopes to mitigate the static possibility of social and educational background.

The resulting pool of the respondents includes seven men and eight women, living in cities across different provinces in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shandong, Xinjiang, Qinghai and Fujian (see Table 1). While snowball samples ensure a basis of trust for productive in-depth interviews, the limitation is also noticeable. For example, many of the respondents were educated, due to the assumed correlation between the ability to discuss famous figures and the possession of requisite cultural references and knowledge.

A total of 15 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted on the phone (Bryman 2012). To stimulate fruitful discussions, the authors familiarised themselves with the latest news of the famous and obtained a general knowledge base of famous people in various fields. Questions were prepared in advance, but they were not followed strictly during the interviews. Instead, the respondents could introduce details and remarks of their own interests. The interview questions revolved around the following topics: the perception of famous people, favourite public figures and the impact of the famous. Some specific follow-up questions were asked to probe into more detailed memories and their meanings. These expanded accounts were useful to show the consistency and sincerity of their answers. Saturation of data was verified

Table 1. Profiles of respondents.

Name (Pseudonyms)	Age/Generation	Gender	Location (Province in China)	Profession
Ling	26	Female	Xinjiang	Student
Xiaochen	25	Female	Fujian	Student
Feifei	23	Female	Zhejiang	Student
Hua	29	Female	Shanghai	PhD student
Wen	29	Female	Guangdong	PhD student
Zhu	born in the 60s	Female	Shandong	Teacher
Stone	47	Male	Shanghai	Manager
Jie	54	Female	Shanghai	Owner of a trading company
Chang	27	Male	Zhejiang	Employee in a shipping company
Chuan	49	Female	Shandong	Accountant
Ma	30	Male	Shanghai	Teacher
Qian	30 ~ 35	Female	Qinghai	Teacher
Ju	32	Male	Beijing	Screenwriting agent
Hong	45	Male	Shanghai	Sales
Zhexi	35 ~ 40	Male	Shanghai	Investment manager

when the last two interviews hardly obtained additional data but developed concordance (Denzin and Lincoln 2017).

Lasting 30 minutes on average, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded and thematically analysed (Bryman 2012). Based on the analysis of the transcriptions, the research identified recurring patterns, which will be analysed in three sections: how young and middle-aged adults discuss celebrities in everyday life, reasons for appreciating certain celebrities and the values underlying their discussions.

Discussing celebrities in everyday life

Respondents from all walks of life, despite their different levels of interests, all encounter and read celebrity news during their leisure time. Most do not think they actively consume celebrity content but have a quick flip through it for 'relaxation'. They are informed of news of the famous through television and internet, including major news websites and social media platforms, which are also most commonly used by these respondents to access news in general. Many have the impression that the current media sphere is characterised by news and programmes of the famous, which seem to be everywhere and endless. Consistent with Johansson's finding (2015), respondents in this study also display their knowledge in many domestic and international famous figures. Some respondents would look up a name in the news that they see for the first time.

At the beginning of the interviews, several respondents asked about the definition and the specific spheres of *Mingren* (famous people). When they were told any definition and sphere of their choice would be valid, the connotations given by respondents were diverse. Noticeably, several respondents call the big names in the entertainment *Mingxing* (celebrities) instead of *Mingren* (famous people). Although many respondents often use social media, they simply do not mention any *Wanghong* (internet celebrities) during the interviews, including one respondent who explicitly says that he does not consider *Wanghong* as famous people.

When it comes to the spheres of famous people, some male respondents suggest that male readers and audiences are generally more into politics, international news, financial and economic news, and sports. A few male respondents have the impressions that girls may be more interested in reading celebrity news, in line with the gendering of celebrity gossip (e.g. McDonnell 2014, Johansson 2015). Respondents pay close attention to the fields related to their hobbies and works, and develop the most substantial knowledge of famous people in those fields. For respondents who have been working for many years, they read more about famous individuals in their career-related fields, partaking in opinions and experiences. The younger generation tends to be more interested in the entertainment industry in general, as they enjoy watching films and sports, and listening to music.

Most respondents discuss famous people occasionally in everyday life: whether it is chatting in conversations with families, friends and colleagues, especially when others bring up the topic; or, reposting famous individuals' news or interviews on social media. Yet, they find it hard to recall specific discussions off the top of their heads. In contrast with offline discussions, several respondents share celebrity content online more often, partially because people nowadays spend a lot of time online. Meanwhile, it is easier to recall recent reposts. A few respondents find conversations about the famous casual,

which serve as ‘harmless gossips’, while some respondents are careful about reposting and avoid offending fans of the famous people.

Even at a conversational level, the respondents believe that the famous individuals a person likes mirror certain taste. A few respondents imply or explicitly say that celebrity gossip is low culture (Johansson 2015), associating celebrity gossip with youngsters as die-hard fans. For these respondents, this fandom is ‘related to the age, his life experience, the environment he is in, and the information he absorbs’ (Wen). The reason why many youngsters born after 2000 would be attracted to those good-looking but less talented celebrities is clear: ‘lacking in life experience in society’, ‘they feel like being supported emotionally’ and ‘the power of the media as well as the belonging to fan groups’ are the lures (Xiaochen). These comments imply that grown-ups are less likely to become die-hard fans with superficial passions. The maturity lies in the understanding that televisual profiles are produced for industrial purposes rather than the reality of the situation.

Some respondents note that ultimately they are expressing their own opinions by discussing famous public figures, for example, as Hua says:

I don’t post on ‘circle of friends’ of WeChat or microblogs very often. If I repost messages or articles, I would choose the ones that can express my own identity. Normally, I would add one sentence or two sentences of comments. I would never express negative attitudes. People can get to know my personality by looking at my reposts. Also, I think it necessary to be cautious. Even if I dislike a celebrity very much, I wouldn’t publicly say so online, because I don’t want to be blamed by his or her fans.

Hua (29, female, PhD student, Shanghai)

Similar to Hua, many respondents believe that readers can already get an idea about the person through his or her reposts about the famous. A previous study has shown that the content posted on ‘circle of friends’ can reflect the user’s real personality traits (Lin *et al.* 2017). The behaviour of reposting itself, as some respondents suggest, is a sign of recognition. The topics of famous individuals can therefore serve as intermediaries for many to give opinions, understand others’ thoughts and values, and ideally to ‘find like-minded people’ (Ling). To a large extent, discussions about the famous start with an identification: ‘we want to do something but are not able to, or want to say something but we don’t have the channels to express, and then there is a famous individual whom you identify with’ (Chang).

Sometimes, celebrity content has the potential to stimulate discussions about societal changes, as Xiaochen reflects:

Some famous people would talk about minority groups on their microblogs. I get to know those people because of the famous. If possible, I would repost, or go to the places where accidents happened or those people are.

Xiaochen (24, female, student, Fujian)

For Xiaochen, some celebrities can be considered as activists who make invisible groups in the society visible. She uses their content to get to know marginalised groups and join societal discussions. It was found that those who particularly follow celebrity culture are least likely to involve themselves in action or discussion about public issues (Couldry and Markham 2007). Despite the uncertain applicability of this argument in the Chinese

context, it is worthwhile for future research to address the possible link between celebrity and public engagement (Markham 2015). At least, the role of entertainment is present in Chinese citizens' political communication (Wu 2017), and fans participate in celebrity-related initiatives such as celebrity-inspired philanthropy (Jeffreys and Xu 2017). In the case of Xiaochen, she welcomes celebrity involvement in social movements, which may not only provide a 'hook' for media coverage but also attract potential supporters' participation (Meyer and Gamson 1995).

While discussing their favourite famous individuals, several respondents recognise a personal connection, echoing the appreciation of certain celebrities in relation to familiar personal characteristics in Johansson's study (2015). For example, Hua's self-reflection depicts such a connection:

I like this TV presenter (Dong Qing) for her appearance, manners and temperament. I watched her programmes as I grew up. When I was little, I watched her hosting singing contests. That's entertainment. Now I'm in the university, and she is hosting cultural programmes. It's like her change in the programmes fits my growing up. I'm on the path that she pointed. I can feel her influence.

Hua (29, female, PhD student, Shanghai)

Apart from the qualities of the famous person she likes, Hua points out the connection between her own life experience and the works of this famous person. Indeed, what many respondents shared during the interviews are the famous people whom they have liked for a long time. Recognising this long-term connection, some can be considered as 'enduring fans' (Kuhn 2002, p. 197), and the celebrities they appreciate are not limited to film stars. The inspirations the respondents get from the famous are lasting ones.

Reasons for appreciation

Famous people appreciated by the respondents work in a variety of careers, such as scientists, entrepreneurs, TV presenters, directors, musicians, sports stars, writers and cultural educators, etc. Despite the diversity of these professions, certain famous individuals have become the respondents' favourite for several recurring reasons.

First of all, many respondents admire the diligence and perseverance that famous public figures possess throughout their careers. Below are comments made by Stone and Ma:

Many people would be destroyed in the face of extreme adversity. But Chu Shijian was able to start over. He started his new business when he was seventy something. He chose an entirely different field, and made the brand stand out. [...] The success itself is a result. His inherent spirit is what's extraordinary. That's why he is admirable. This spirit may also be what I need. So it resonates with me.

Stone (47, male, manager, Shanghai)

To maintain the high standard performance in basketball matches, one must be very enduring, and train repeatedly and tirelessly in all aspects. I can image his (LeBron James') efforts behind the scenes. I learnt this sort of information from the media, too. I really like this kind of dedication, whatever the field is.

Ma (30, male, teacher, Shanghai)

Stone and Ma describe the famous they like as people that are much more dedicated and perseverant than many others. Likewise, when describing their favourite famous individuals, many respondents emphasise the long-term process of endeavours instead of the direct results of success and fame. A rhetoric that they share is often more about hard work, even when they admire famous people's talent as well. This way of identification with role models can be associated with the age group of the respondents, from 23 to 54 years old. It is possible that younger generations might be more interested in other aspects, such as body image aspirations (Gunter 2014, p. 40).

Another implication that these quotes bring up is the audiences' active interpretations of mediated portrayals. In this study, the respondents admire certain famous individuals particularly because of their professional dedication, even though there are mediated portrayals of many other famous entrepreneurs and sports stars. The respondents are indeed informed of those famous figures' stories through the media. Although the media coverage may be relatively limited compared to that of celebrities in the entertainment sector, those profiles are memorable and respectful. Those admirable televisual images of famous people depend largely on the top performance in the sectors off-screen.

For the younger generation, such a motivational impact is most frequently mentioned, understandably as the respondents identify with role models. This tendency is in line with a general idea Chang suggests during the interview:

The society develops rapidly, and the young generation face a lot of pressure. Under the circumstances, those who can motivate people are particularly needed. There must be many individuals like this, from all walks of life. But the media wouldn't give attention to them, because they are not newsworthy. You don't have many opportunities to know about them. Instead, you can learn about the famous.

Chang (27, male, employee in a shipping company, Zhejiang)

Chang ascribes the need for inspirations from famous people to the pressures of everyday life the young generation have faced with nowadays. For him, excellent individuals in everyday life are not promoted by the media, as they do not have eye-catching stories that media reporters assume the public would like to see. One may find Chang's argument somewhat outdated because of the phenomenon of the ordinary celebrity. However, the respondents' instinctive discussions imply a potentially undeniable gap between the ordinary celebrity and a traditional form of celebrity. At the same time, it seems that the fast-paced life and the prosperity and convenience of media platforms have somehow prevented many from discovering inspiring examples in real life.

On the other hand, such a motivational effect is not easily sustainable or accepted. 'Maybe it is no longer there tomorrow. [...] It is hard to put it into practice. Perhaps it works better for children. As adults, we have our own living reality' (Qian). A person who sticks to his or her own routine for years and years is less likely to change the self because of the inspirations from the famous and alike. Similarly, some mid-aged respondents such as Hong and Stone admit that their world views are relatively stable and are unlikely to change under the influence of famous figures.

Next to an appreciation of the famous individuals' dedication and perseverance, some respondents express a lot of respect for the famous individuals who are outspoken in opinions shared by the public. For Wen, Bai Yansong, the leading investigative journalist

with China Central Television (CCTV), is 'a famous person who has a strong character and excellent journalistic qualities'. Wen is impressed by how Bai balances between being in the central media institution and saying things that normally people might not hear from a national journalist. Bai became known to the public when he first hosted a daytime documentary news magazine programme *Oriental Horizon* (*Dongfang shikong*). Since 1993, the programme presented 'factual materials with an exposure of social issues not usually aired on Chinese television' at the time (Berry 2009, p. 74). More recently, since China is one of the top 10 countries purchasing 2018 World Cup tickets, and lots of Chinese elements including sponsors were present at the World Cup, Bai praised the cultural exchanges while being humorous, 'it almost feels like the only Chinese people not appearing at the World Cup are the Chinese national football team' (Xinhua 2018). As Wen notes, such a humorous statement is certainly not usual from CCTV. After all, CCTV represents 'the authority of the Chinese state and the national image of China' (Hu *et al.* 2017, p. 72). As another respondent Feifei comments, stating thought-provoking and possibly controversial opinions can be something that ordinary people want to do, but do not dare to, or that they are simply without the opportunity of being in the public spotlight. For these respondents, famous people who are courageous and (skilfully) outspoken are unsung heroes. Such a remark is not unusual, as public intellectuals and writers who articulate their views on popular concerns serve as leaders in public opinion in contemporary Chinese society. For example, Han Han's blogs that engage with social issues, and feature an enjoyable writing style, are welcomed by netizens (Cai 2017, p. 18).

From what have been discussed above, it has become clear that although some mention that 'the famous are also ordinary people', many respondents identify with role models: the famous who *inspire* us and *represent* us. In this sense, several respondents point out that the admired qualities of famous figures are particularly important during China's ongoing social transformation. Moreover, the respondents' comments on their role models can overlap with the promoted characteristics of public figures on national TV channels. The respondents in this study actually appreciate some media profiles who appear in the national media institutions. Media profiles in the national media institutions should not be stereotyped, suggested by the example given by Wen of the famous journalist.

Finally, for other respondents, traditional virtues and cultural elements are the reasons why they like particular famous individuals. For example, Chuan recalls a TV presenter who has a lot of respect for the senior, on top of her excellent programme. For the respondents whose favourite famous individuals are TV presenters, directors, musicians and writers, they appreciate the media figures' in-depth knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture. Zhu is impressed by how knowledgeable the TV presenters of the traditional culture programmes are, saying 'they can naturally speak splendid sentences whenever they respond to anything'. In this regard, several respondents are familiar with certain famous individuals' works and believe that those famous people are as knowledgeable or sharp as the televisual images. The general appreciation of the works can be transferred to a more specific and personal admiration of the creators. Sometimes more credits seem to be given to those who are in front of the camera, such as TV presenters.

Underlying values and critiques

Several respondents remarkably articulate their ideas of *Mingren* (famous people). With the following attributes, the famous have then earned the right to be called 'famous', as Feifei and Jie remark,

I would define the famous as the respectable ones. They must have prestige and deserve the reputation. Although some (celebrities) are well-known, such as good-looking, popular young actors, I wouldn't regard them as the famous. For me, famous people need to be respectable in all aspects, and make contributions to the society.

Feifei (23, female, student, Zhejiang)

I think the famous are those who are respected and to look up to. This makes the person famous. They must do things for the public. When they speak, they are representative of a group, an industry, and a country. They have so many followers. So they have to be responsible. [...] But some so-called young famous people are not like that. Some of them only care about money. Their despicable behaviours have caused bad influence to the society.

Jie (54, female, owner of a trading company, Shanghai)

Both Feifei and Jie describe a respectable persona as an inherent requirement of being a famous person. In a way, this summarises the required qualities for famous people that many respondents discuss, such as being righteous, kind-hearted, responsible, dedicated and having a positive influence on society. The high hope for famous figures is even more evident in the argument such as 'famous people need to be better than the ordinary people in all aspects' (Zhu).

The attributes suggested by the respondents reflect certain values that they hold dear. Two values, criteria for preference or justification for behaviour (Williams 1968), appear to be dominant. The first is work ethics. For example, Ling's comment suggests that one's fame would be problematic and even criticisable without expected work ethics,

Now many think they can become famous with the help of traffic online. For instance, recently, an 18-year-old high school girl has become famous for her extravagant lifestyle, going to the pubs and having a relationship with a 'second generation rich', etc. What kind of social value is it? Isn't this telling kids that you don't have to work hard to become famous? I think this is a very bad example that has negative influence. These kinds of content occupies audiences' time and attention, and leads to excessive entertainment. That's terrible.

Ling (26, female, student, Xinjiang)

The appropriate values conveyed in the media, as Ling implies, should include the healthy, inspiring message that 'one has to be working hard to achieve the success or earn the fame'. Such an emphasis on work ethics is not unusual. It is, to begin with, always part of national and local mediated narratives. A lot of successful personages share their diligent professional experiences as featured guests on television talk shows. Wealth is legitimised in China when it is presented as the result of hard work and ingenuity, and when parts of it are handed out through celebrity philanthropy (Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, p. 19). For citizens, however, it can be a different story. Behind the

suggested significance of work ethics, there might be a continuative but a more harmonious way of challenging the rich. For example, heated public resentment about the new rich in China since 2000 is based on three hypotheses: the new rich's questionable ways of first accumulating their wealth, an inadequate sense of compassion and social responsibility, and rising income inequality (Zang 2008). In other words, although the presumed underlying reasons for official narratives and people's ideas can differ, the resulting emphasis of certain values such as expected work ethics is shared.

Existing studies on work ethics in western countries often draw on Max Weber's theory of 'the Protestant ethic' in 1905. Yet, hard work does not only belong to religious obligations of protestantism, but is also encouraged by Islam, Buddhism and Catholicism, and may be guided by non-religious value systems in today's multicultural societies (Fineman 2012, p. 5). In the Chinese context, scholars have found that hard work is positively related to Confucian Dynamism (Zhang *et al.* 2012), and people with high Confucian Dynamism tend to emphasise self-improvement and contribution to society (Jaw *et al.* 2007). In general, traditional cultural values mainly associated with Confucianism, such as harmony, benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, honesty, loyalty and filial piety, continue to have an impact on the modern-day social mentality of the Chinese people (Zhang 2013). This has not always been the case, since progressive political, social and cultural revolutions in the 20th century have lessened ties with traditions (Lian 2017). However, in more recent times, there has been a resurgence of traditional Chinese values, especially those values that fit well with the new spirit of modernisation (Zhou 2017). Today, the modernisation of traditional values is considered to play a key role in China's national rejuvenation (Lian 2017). The system of values circulating in Chinese society seems to have become more diverse, whereby multiple values are able to co-exist alongside traditional ones. In particular, traditional values that celebrate hard work seem to go hand-in-hand with present-day, post-socialist ideas of meritocracy. Traces of these values can be found, for example, in the respondents' ideas regarding the must-have qualities for famous individuals.

The second dominant value is social responsibility, as Jie remarks:

In the past, we got to know many famous people, who represented the spirit of our nation. Nowadays, those who make contributions to the nation wouldn't become famous. Even if they became famous, nobody would do publicity for them. But those who are buzzworthy and make a lot money rather than making real contributions have become famous.

Jie (54, female, owner of a trading company, Shanghai)

Jie makes a distinction between people making great contributions to society and people creating buzz, similar as 'deep and shallow achievement' (Van Krieken 2012, p. 5). At first sight, it may seem that celebrities' affluent lifestyles are admired by Chinese audiences (Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, p. 18). However, the respondents' accounts in this study have clearly shown that the mere acts of showing off one's affluent lifestyle, and gaining fortune or attention through indecent approaches or too easily, such as 'crying on an entertainment show' or 'just being good looking', would be disparaged. Instead, several respondents appreciate certain famous people specifically because of their profound and 'real' contributions to society. For example, scientists such as Tu Youyou and Stephen Hawking, are

discussed and admired by these respondents. 'The happiness of the rest of my life, and the development of our country rely largely on scientists' (Qian).

Comparably, several respondents comment on those who are famous but not qualified because of their fatally flawed characters and behaviours. The most common critiques of flawed behaviours include breaking the law such as tax evasion and immoral mistakes such as having an affair. The respondents emphasise moral virtues (Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, p. 17), and obeying the law as the basic requirement for good citizenship. For the majority of the respondents, non-conformity and immorality would result in notoriety and a dislike of those public individuals (Edwards and Jeffreys 2010, p. 19). Another frequently mentioned critique is the credibility gap: a difference between one's noble and decent public persona and what he or she really does privately, especially when the overhyped nobleness is followed by a scandal.

In addition to the moral dimension, several respondents express their dislikes of those who seem to goof around and those who have overly intense media coverage. 'Their works aren't as wonderful as the hypes' (Xiaochen). The lacking of profound meanings is the reason why the respondents disparage such media coverage, reality TV shows in particular, consistent with the discussion of reality TV stars and their assumed non-existing talent in Johansson's study (2015). Seeing overly intense media coverage is not only an 'annoyance' (Ling), but also lead to the disapproval of limited talent and the questioning of the underlying logic of fame. For example, Ju complains that some good-looking actors and actresses only have 'terrible productions', even though they seem to be able to attract certain groups of audiences. He implies that whether an actor has quality performance in certain productions should be the benchmark. By the same token, Zhexi dislikes so-called experts without solid expertise.

Needless to say, the aforementioned critique of certain celebrities is also about media culture, through which media coverage can become an overdone hype. On the other hand, several respondents are aware of the commercial needs of the entertainment industry, and make justifications for some actors and actresses and overwhelming media profiles. 'Maybe they have to make money to support their families' (Xiaochen). 'Many new actors and actresses are manipulated by the companies' (Chang). 'It's an industry in which celebrities needs hypes and pay the media for these' (Ma). Considering complex relations between appearance on the media, commercial benefits and the media itself, audiences seem to take for granted that the entertainment industry has to develop and this is the way to go. Such awareness among audiences, to some extent, legitimises the prevalence of celebrity content, let alone the fact that such content is welcomed by certain groups of audiences among the general population in China anyway.

Another disappointing impression several respondents have of the media sphere is an abundance of negative stories about celebrities, which is tied up with an over-emphasis on attracting audiences' attention. 'Paying close attention to the negative private lives of celebrities, such as divorce, would give them a lot of pressure, and this is not necessary' (Ling). The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) indeed prohibits the media from featuring 'celebrities who are embroiled in scandals' and gossiping over celebrity scandals (CRI 2009). The respondents' accounts seem to confirm the need for such 'censorship' and 'protection' (CRI 2009). 'If a celebrity repeatedly makes mistakes and lets the audiences down, he or she should not appear in the media any more' (Chuan). Through a few examples, some respondents note that

celebrities' disgraceful behaviours presumably make their fans to doubt the beliefs and values and therefore have a harmful impact on the society.

Conclusion

This study has assessed how young and middle-aged audiences in everyday life in urban China discuss famous mediated personalities, and it has also investigated the cultural values and norms behind their practices and self-reflections. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the data is not representative of specific parts of Chinese society. What we aim at, instead, is seeking possible ways to discuss celebrities in everyday life in China. The findings of the current study offer several points worthy of discussions both theoretically and empirically.

First, the study has identified that the respondents consume celebrity content in diverse fields, and appreciate famous people for several recurring reasons. Some respondents consider discussing celebrities in everyday life casual, while others regard it as an occasion to express their own opinions. There is not a specific field of famous people that receive the most appreciation. Despite the variety of the celebrities' fields, the respondents commonly identify with certain public figures who are characterised by dedication and perseverance, frankness in public, traditional virtues, and cultural depths in their works. Generally speaking, role models in different domains identified by the respondents seem to be those who *inspire us* and *represent us*.

Second, for many respondents, the attributes of righteousness, kind-heartedness, responsibility, dedication, and having a positive influence on society demonstrate that the famous have earned the right to be called 'famous'. There are apparently some overlaps between the qualities of public figures who the respondents identify with and the attributes that the respondents think the famous should have. In a similar vein, the respondents disvalue certain celebrities because of their fatally flawed characters and behaviours, or being overhyped by intense media coverage. The attributes that many respondents discuss reflect the values people attach importance to, among which work ethics and social responsibility are the two dominant values.

The intersections between the desirable qualities of famous people and the value system promoted by the Chinese government are clear. Among the 'core socialist values' that are associated with traditional Chinese culture, alongside national goals and social goals, individual values include 'patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship' (Xinhua 2013). The necessary qualities of famous individuals that were suggested by respondents in this study are connected to and associated with these promoted individual values. Generally speaking, 'no discussion of contemporary Chinese culture can get around noting the role of the state' (Zhong 2010, p. 8). While Western cultural studies tend to downplay the role of the state even though the state also plays a powerful role in cultural productions, in terms of 'values, ideals, beliefs' in Western societies, the same cannot be said of Chinese studies (Zhong 2010, p. 8). Interestingly, celebrities' 'social responsibility as public figures is not clearly stipulated', and the expectation about celebrity conduct from the state is very much about 'a moral issue' (Chen 2015). However, several respondents in this study take a step further and expect social responsibility to be fulfilled by celebrities.

Meanwhile, the shared and celebrated qualities of celebrity are not only the possible result of a Chinese political agenda, but are also potentially associated with the socio-cultural situation of China's social transformation. This association is made evident when some respondents justify their preferred celebrity values with arguments regarding social transformation and social mentality. Citizens are attempting to adapt to and reflect on the current environment in a rapidly developing country. In keeping with the 'widespread enthusiasm for self-improvement in China', 'Chinese celebrities nourish the vogue for self-help or "success study" by portraying the value of hard work and learning in pursuit of a better life' (Sullivan and Kehoe 2019, p. 8).

Finally, several respondents criticise media culture for the relentless pursuit of audiences' attention and for commercial purposes. In this regard, the official endeavours to guide social values seem to resonate with the respondents' ideas about the media culture. Chinese authorities announced a statement with new limits on the salaries of actors in June 2018, preventing the industry from 'distorting social values' and 'fostering money worship tendencies' (Shih 2018). Critiques of 'reality TV stars' and considering them 'undeserving' and 'undesirable' are present in western countries such as Britain (Hermes and Kooijman 2015, p. 494), which have also been identified in this study. Yet, for Chinese audiences, they are clear about appropriate social values and likely to criticise media culture based on those values. So is the official statement. On the one hand, marketisation trends in the Chinese media industry continue. On the other hand, both audiences and policymakers are consistent with certain values.

This research invited the respondents to discuss celebrities in general without focusing on celebrities in a specific field. It is possible that the celebrities in a specific field, for example, the film and TV industry stimulate more nuanced discussions and views among Chinese audiences. The study has identified the underlying reasons of young and middle-aged audiences' appreciation and criticism for famous individuals, and pointed out the relationship between identifying with famous people and the larger socio-cultural situation. Celebrity content perceived by audiences in everyday life in comparative settings are worthwhile for future research to investigate, of which this Chinese empirical case has added to the discussion.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This study was carried out with the financial support of the China Scholarship Council.

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