



Routledge Studies in Media and Cultural Industries

INTERNET CELEBRITIES IN CHINA

Xinyi Yang



“Xinyi Yang’s book shows how class and ideology operate in China’s Internet celebrity industry and celebrity economy. It is an excellent, highly meticulous and extremely insightful study, a must-read for everyone who wants to better understand the Internet in China and how influencers shape contemporary digital capitalism. I highly recommend the book to everyone who wants to understand how to apply the political economy of communication approach to a concrete case such as Internet celebrities”.

— **Christian Fuchs**, *Professor of Media Systems and Media Organisation, Paderborn University, Germany*

“This is a well-researched, cogent and penetrating study of a neglected area in celebrity studies: Internet celebrities in China. Xinyi Yang shows how platform exchange operates within the context of a state sponsored society-wide media. The book is a landmark contribution to the comparative study of celebrity culture”.

— **Chris Rojek**, *Professor of Sociology, City and St George’s, University of London, The United Kingdom*



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Internet Celebrities in China

This comprehensive study offers an examination of China's Internet celebrity ("Wang Hong") phenomenon through a critical political economy framework, investigating how social media platforms, talent agencies, and e-commerce systems intersect to create a complex digital labour ecosystem.

Employing extensive semi-structured interviews across three key platforms – social media, short video sites, and live streaming platforms – the book reveals a sophisticated three-link industry chain of production, dissemination, and consumption that characterises China's Internet celebrity industry. The book explores the intricate workings of the influencer economy, highlighting the stark disparity in working conditions and economic outcomes between successful influencers and precarious platform workers, as well as fan identity construction and consumption patterns, examining how fans integrate into collective identities and shared values within broader social contexts.

Through its theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions, this monograph provides crucial insights into the commodification of digital labour, working conditions, and the distinctive features of China's Internet celebrity industry within its specific political, economic, and cultural framework. As such, it will be of great value to scholars, cultural practitioners, students, and all those interested in digital culture, media industry, Chinese and East Asian studies, and the political economy of communication.

Xinyi Yang is a researcher in media and communication and holds a PhD from the University of Westminster, the United Kingdom. Her research focuses on the political economy of social media, with particular attention to Internet celebrities in the Chinese context.

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Preface

The Political Economy of Internet Celebrities in China

In 2024, there were 5.5 billion Internet users worldwide, around one billion of them were located in China. Since the early 1990s, when the WWW started to boom, the Internet has become a truly global communication phenomenon that has transformed all aspects of our lives. Given the importance of Chinese users on the Internet, Internet studies need to give attention to China and the Internet. Xinyi Yang's monograph *'Internet Celebrities in China'* is an excellent contribution to critical Internet studies that analyses the role of Internet celebrities in China. Combining the approach of the political economy of communication and critical celebrity studies, Xinyi Yang shows the complexities and problems of the celebrity economy in the Chinese context.

In 2024, the most downloaded apps globally were TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Temu. Three of these apps were operated by Meta, a Silicon Valley-based United States tech corporation. Two of these apps were operated by Chinese corporations, ByteDance and PDD Holdings. Internet platforms and the world of apps are dominated by capitalist corporations from the USA and China, reflecting two models of political economy, namely neo-liberal US capitalism and Chinese state capitalism.

Social media platforms mainly accumulate capital based on targeted digital advertising, a business model that is based on users' unpaid digital labour. On such platforms, a second political economy has developed: the influencer economy. Xinyi Yang's book is an excellent contribution to the analysis of the political economy of Internet celebrities with a special focus on aspects of labour and ideology on Internet platforms. She combines critical theory and empirical social research in the form of interviews with Internet celebrities and fans in order to scrutinise the power structures underlying influencing.

For doing so, it utilises the combination of critical political economy in the tradition of Karl Marx's thought and critical celebrity studies with a special focus on the contributions by the sociologist Chris Rojek. The study shows that digital labour with Chinese characteristics plays a special role in the Internet celebrity economy and that new power structures have emerged on the Internet and in the political economy of Internet celebrities, where a small number of influencers become rich and famous as part of the capitalist class, while the

vast majority conduct relatively precarious digital labour, whom Xinyi Yang terms “proletarianised platform workers”. The study also critically outlines the role of management that takes on the form of so-called multi-channel networks in the Internet celebrity economy.

Political economy of communication is an approach that uses social theory, empirical social research, and moral philosophy for analysing the roles of communication and communication systems (media and communication) in society, especially the interaction of politics and economy in the context of media and communication. It studies how the interaction of communication, politics, and economy works and this interaction’s role in society. Political economy of communication often is a critical analysis of how communication and communication systems work and are organised in capitalist society and how they impact on and interact with society and the lives of humans in society. This critical analysis is also termed critique of the political economy of communication and the media. It gives particular attention to the analysis of the capitalist mode of producing information; communication labour; the production, distribution, and consumption of information and communication(s) as commodities; the space and time of communication; the interaction of politics and the media economy; ideology critique; communication in the context of class and social struggles; and alternatives to capitalist communication(s), non-capitalist communication(s).

Xinyi Yang manages to synthesise all of the best features that characterise the political economy of communication approach and applies the resulting approach to the study of Internet celebrities. Her book combines theory, empirical research, and moral philosophy for situating and analysing Internet celebrities in global capitalism with a special focus on commodification, labour, ideology, class, and domination.

Influencer capitalism’s culture industry tries to convince everyday users that, via TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, everyone can become famous and rich. Such claims hide the realities of precarious labour, inequality, sexism, racism, capitalism, mental health problems, and alienation that shape the influencer industry. Only in a classless society, will everyone be recognised. If everyone becomes a celebrity, then there is no longer a need for the existence of celebrities. In a classless society, everyone is a celebrity. Only by overcoming class can we tackle the problems we face in influencer capitalism.

Xinyi Yang’s book shows how class and ideology operate in China’s Internet celebrity industry and celebrity economy. It is an excellent, highly meticulous and extremely insightful study, a must-read for everyone who wants to better understand the Internet in China and how influencers shape contemporary digital capitalism. I highly recommend the book to everyone who wants to understand how to apply the political economy of communication approach to a concrete case, such as Internet celebrities.

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