PALGRAVE STUDIES IN GLOBALIZATION,
CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China

David Craig · Jian Lin
Stuart Cunningham

PALGRAVE STUDIES
IN GLOBALIZATION
CULTURE & SOCIETY

palgrave
macmillan

Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society

Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society traverses the boundaries between the humanities and the social sciences to critically explore the cultural and social dimensions of contemporary globalization processes. This entails looking at the way globalization unfolds through and within cultural and social practices, and identifying and understanding how it effects cultural and social change across the world. The series asks what, in its different guises and unequal diffusion, globalization is taken to be and do in and across specific locations, and what social, political and cultural forms and imaginations this makes possible or renders obsolete. A particular focus is the vital contribution made by different forms of the imagination (social, cultural, popular) to the conception, experience and critique of contemporary globalization. Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society is committed to addressing globalization across cultural contexts (western and non-western) through interdisciplinary, theoretically driven scholarship that is empirically grounded in detailed case studies and close analyses. Within the scope outlined above, we invite junior and senior scholars to submit proposals for monographs, edited volumes and the Palgrave Pivot format. Please contact the series editors for more information: b.j.dekloet@uva.nl/e.peeren@uva.nl

More information about this series at
http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15109

David Craig • Jian Lin
Stuart Cunningham

Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China

palgrave
macmillan

David Craig
USC Annenberg School for
Communication and Journalism
Los Angeles, CA, USA

Jian Lin
Centre for Media and Journalism
Studies, University of Groningen
Groningen, The Netherlands

Stuart Cunningham
Digital Media Research Centre
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, QLD, Australia

ISSN 2730-9282 ISSN 2730-9290 (electronic)
Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society
ISBN 978-3-030-65375-0 ISBN 978-3-030-65376-7 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65376-7

Cover illustration: Alex Linch / shutterstock.com
Cover design: eStudioCalamar

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgments

David Craig received funding support from Shanghai Jiao Tong University's USC-SJTU Institute of Cultural and Creative Industry, and from Zizhu National High-Tech Industrial Development Zone, via the Zizhu New Media Management Research Center. This book is an output from the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project 160100086 "The New Screen Ecology and Opportunities for Innovation in Production and Distribution" for 2016–2018 awarded to Stuart Cunningham.

We take this opportunity to thank Dr. Adam Swift, who has worked (again) with us on this project and has contributed meticulous editorial oversight.

For David Craig, the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California has provided tremendous support as have his mentors and colleagues, including Dean Willow Bay, Henry Jenkins, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Josh Kun, Hector Amaya, Ben Lee, Junyi Lv, Francois Bar, Nicholas Cull, Hernan Galperin, Colin Maclay, and Patti Riley.

From Jian Lin, a heartfelt thanks to Jeroen de Kloet and Esther Peeren for their firm support of this project and the invaluable coaching received from them in the past years. He appreciates the University of Groningen for allotting research time for writing and his superb colleagues at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism for their kind encouragement and friendship. The previous research experience at the Department of Media Studies and Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis at the

University of Amsterdam has proven to be tremendously inspiring. Deepest thanks to Grace for her love and companionship, especially at the time of pandemic.

For Stuart Cunningham, the Digital Media Research Centre in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology has been an enormously stimulating environment. He wishes to thank Jo, Vivien, Hugo, Ben, Brooke, Belle, and Billie for their sustaining love.

We use the hanyu pinyin system for Chinese terms although these are not italicized. Family names are listed first for Chinese scholars and journalists, unless listed in another order in English-language texts.

Contents

List of Figures

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In 2016, co-author David Craig visited Suzhou University to deliver a lecture in the communication school. He had been invited to present ongoing research into an emerging industry of amateur entrepreneurs harnessing social media platforms to carve out quite new career opportunities which became *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (Cunningham and Craig 2019). In transit to the lecture, Craig inquired whether there were local enterprises of this sort. Jumping on WeChat, his student escort sent out a general request to friends who recommended a possible contact—Wei Kan. When contacted, Wei Kan agreed to participate in a Q&A after the lecture.

When the time came, Kan revealed himself as the COO of The Best of Soochow, a firm comprised of local vloggers and bloggers using Chinese social media platforms to recommend local restaurants, bars, and activities. Kan then presented his investor deck, showing Best of Soochow had secured multiple rounds of investment and expanded into seven cities in just 18 months. Toward the end of the Q&A, Kan mentioned that he was still a college student—in fact, a junior right there, at Suzhou University, in the Dental School. When the assembled communication scholars asked him why he wasn't in their school, he said, "what are you going to teach me?" Checking back a few years later when this book was being prepared, we found that Best of Soochow no longer exists and Kan is working in the banking industry.

D. Craig et al., *Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China*, Palgrave Studies in Globalization, Culture and Society,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65376-7_1

The story tells us a lot in miniature about the wanghong phenomenon—at once cultural, social, industrial, and ultimately highly political—that has emerged, evolved, and embedded throughout Chinese society at remarkable speed. Like much of what has happened in the evolution of China since Deng Xiaoping started the process of economic modernization in the 1980s, this phenomenon has left both Chinese and Western scholars struggling to keep pace.

A vernacular term, wanghong is a contraction of wangluo hongren (Chinese for "people who have gone viral on the internet" or, literally, "red internet"), wanghong refers to online celebrities, or micro-celebrities (Tse et al. 2018; Han 2020). Comparable terms offered slight variations in connotation and reference: there were KOLs (key opinion leaders) and zhubo (showroom hosts), as well as explicitly pejorative uses of the term to describe how female livestreamers appealing to lonely Chinese men operated within what Aynne Kokas calls a "virtual girlfriends industry" (cited in Kaiman and Meyers 2017). Over time, wanghong came to be increasingly defined "by their acute ability to convert internet viewer traffic to money with diverse economic models in its contemporary context of wanghong economy" (Han 2020).

Wanghong, the term, is thus wildly polysemic. It means "popular online", "internet famous", and can refer to celebrification as a problematic process or an entire industry. The latter use is seen increasingly frequently in the Chinese media, industry reports, and recent scholarship. In this book, we use it to refer to both the creators themselves and to the wider industry. The wanghong industry, as we understand it, refers to social media entrepreneurs and platform and intermediary media professionals working within a highly competitive platform landscape, incubated through regulatory protection, fueled by a rising middle class and responding to the demographic challenges of the urban-rural divide, and which offers potentially more lucrative opportunities for creators than their Western counterparts.

How did this happen—essentially since 2015—and with what consequences? This book engages with these questions from a critical media industries perspective, combining insights from media industry and cultural studies, and social media and platform studies. It explores the conditions of emergence of wanghong with historical, industrial, and policy-minded, as well as cultural, social, and political, lenses.

When it comes to making claims about new media industries, veteran television scholar Horace Newcomb (2009) encourages us to be precise about "who" and "what" we are discussing when writing about "the industry". Nitin Govil (2013) responds, challenging the "obviousness of the object" and arguing that the process of industrial emergence is often "achieved rather than presumed, processual than preordained" (p. 176). These conditions apply to the protean status or formalized designation of new industries. In addition to *what* is an industry, *when* is it designated? For Sheilagh Ogilvie and Markus Cerman (1996), in their study of European proto-industrialization, the recognition of the shape of new industries emerges as a process through media attention, macro-economic analysis, and evidence of state-based policy interventions. As two of us argue in *Creator Culture* (Cunningham and Craig 2021), a wave of scholarship and research around these phenomena further support the assignation of social media entertainment and wanghong as industry and a cross-disciplinary subfield of study. We now introduce the wanghong phenomenon by drawing on these kinds of sources as well as the scholarship that has pioneered in the field.

A Soupçon of Wanghong: Scope, Scale, and Significance

Media and cultural studies analysis (Zhang and de Seta 2018; Xu and Zhao 2019) has identified internet celebrification (wangluo hongren) that dates from the 1990s. Xiaofei Han (2020) warns against using

> wanghong interchangeably with the term internet celebrities (Zhang and Hjorth 2019 2017, Li 2018). … while interrelated, they have become distinct since the mid-2010s. The Chinese term for internet celebrities is 'wangluo mingren' ('mingren' literally meaning 'famous people'), and comprises a wide spectrum of participants, such as writers, grassroots activists, public intellectuals, opinion leaders, and memes. The term 'wangluo hongren' is more specific ('hongren' meaning people who are 'red', connoting people who have become viral/popular often within a short period). In the late 1990s and 2000s, use of the term wanghong still largely overlapped with 'internet celebrities' and the patterns and/or value chains for monetising such online fame—which is arguably one of the defining characteristics of contemporary wanghong since the mid- 2010s—were yet to emerge. The meaning of the term 'wanghong' changed significantly between 2015 and 2016 due to the construction of 'wanghong economy', which diverges from the term 'internet celebrities'. (p. 2)

This reminds us there is a wide variety of online practitioners; Han's critical distinction corresponds to the distinction we will make between cultural on the one hand and creative and social on the other.

The emerging cultural trend became "officially" an economic phenomenon from Alibaba's Wanghong Economy seminar held in 2015 to boost its social e-commerce business strategy (Chen 2016; Han 2020). From then, and with Papi Jiang's breakout success seeing 2016 named "Year One of Wanghong" across Chinese media outlets, the Chinese pinyin term *wanghong* became one of the top watchwords in China (Jing 2016). Since 2016, Chinese business consultant Yuan Guabao has written multiple editions of *The Wanghong Economy* (2016) that mapped the dimensions of this industry and best practices by industry professionals. Chinese industry websites like CBNData publish annual industry reports about the "wanghong economy" that are used in research by management scholars (Prud'homme et al. 2020). Referring to wanghong as the "internet celebrity economy", the China Business Industry Research Institute (2020) lays out "an economic phenomenon born in the Internet era. It means that Internet celebrities gather traffic and popularity on social media, market a huge fan base, and convert fans' attention to them into purchasing power, thereby turning a business model for monetizing traffic".

Estimates and comparative accounts of the economic size and scale of the wanghong industry signal high growth rates. However, these accounts vary wildly and demand close scrutiny of what boundaries are put around the industry, the accounting methods used, and reliability of the source. In 2016, a BBC journalist claimed the industry was in the order of USD 8.5 billion and had just surpassed China's box office (Tsoi 2016). Four years later, according to scholar Xinyuan Wang (2020), the industry was "32 times" China's box office, citing a government propaganda source from 2018 that offered unsubstantiated and inconceivable claims that the wanghong economy was worth nearly USD 300 billion (Beijing Review 2019).

Sober scholarly assessment is nevertheless expansive; the wanghong industry is now "considered the next economic growth pole for the Chinese internet" (Han 2020, p. 1). The most recent (in late 2020) and more reliable accounts come from Chinese platform owners, business consultants, and industry analysts. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, a Chinese business consultancy claimed the industry has tripled in size from USD 15 billion in 2019 to USD 44 billion in 2020 (1421.com 2020). This number was confirmed by leading industry reports by TopKlout published on CBNData (2020). Other business reports attribute said growth to the rise of 5G with industry estimates closer to USD 50 billion (China Business Industry Research Institute 2020).

Industry and press accounts of the revenue generated by wanghong creators also demand careful scrutiny. According to Bytedance China CEO Kelly Zhang, on Douyin (China's version of TikTok), 22 million wanghong creators made over USD 6 billion in 2019 with revenue expected to double in 2020 (Choudhury 2020). This estimate, however, is limited to those revenue streams for creators across a single platform in an environment populated by hundreds of platforms, as we detail in Chap. 3. In Chap. 4, we discuss how these creators harness these platforms to develop a diverse portfolio of business models and revenue streams. While most wanghong creators are by no means rich, and many struggles to generate sustainable incomes, in 2019, the top wanghong creator earned USD 67 million that year by "turning fans into customers" in an industry "you've never heard of" (Youmshajekian 2019).

The social dynamics of wanghong deserve close attention—for a greater level of detail, see Chaps. 4 and 5. Platforms specializing in wanghong content and performers operate nationally, but are socially "tiered". Platforms like Douyin are designed to appeal to urban and cosmopolitan users in Tier 1 and 2 cities. Other platforms like Kuaishou target lower-tier, rural, grassroots (caogen) users (McDonald 2016). These lower-tier cities also drove the rise of China's e-commerce platforms, like Taobao and T-mall (Perez 2016). There is solid evidence that economic and creative opportunity has been provided for rural, less-educated, and lower classes of wanghong entrepreneurs—what Jian Lin and Jeroen de Kloet (2019) refer to as "unlikely" creators. There are popular media accounts of this, such as the tale of a pig farmer turned livestreamer who is "making millions" (Liu 2018). Alibaba's e-commerce platform, Taobao, launched its "village broadcasting plans" to help convert rural farmers and factory workers into wanghong (Schaefer 2019).

China's provincial governments and municipalities are sponsoring wanghong platforms and creators. Notably, many of these are outside the more affluent and cosmopolitan coastal cities. With support by the Wuhan Municipal Committee, the Tencent-backed Douyu game streaming platform launched a festival in Wuhan. In 2019, the third year of the festival attracted nearly 410,000 fans along with 310 million viewers online while earning Wuhan the title of "live city" (Daily Economic News 2019). In partnership with a local investment firm, Wuhan built a "district" or "livestreaming base" to house over 100 livestreaming wanghong (Kun 2017) to live and stream all day. (Further research suggests that this venture may have been unsuccessful.) Located in southwest China, the Chongqing Institute of Engineering has offered wanghong courses since 2017 (Lianzhang 2017).

The disruptive emergence of wanghong has become the target of state-based interventions around cyber governance and internet control in Xi Jinping's China (Creemers 2015). Platform and cultural policies enacted by the Cyberspace Administration have led to the suspension of wanghong platforms and fines, warnings and even incarceration of violating wanghong (Huang 2018; Low 2018). State demands to moderate and censor content on platforms means the employment of tens of thousands of humans, in addition to algorithms, as content moderators. The vast majority of these are Party members deemed more "stable" and "men hailing from rural areas" with the exception of "moderators from a specific ethnic group", referring to Uyghur people (Yu and Xie 2018).

And well might the party-state concern itself. In 2016, a research department at Tencent, one of China's and the world's largest tech conglomerates, conducted a study of 13,000 Chinese college students. Fifty percent aspire to become wanghong (Marketing to China 2017). More recently, university research studies placed that number at 42 percent (Roxburgh 2018). These surveys became self-fulfilling prophecies accompanied by official recognition. As of mid-2020, "China has expanded the definition of 'employed' for 8.7 million fresh college graduates to cover those that open online shops, play competitive online games or have blogs" (Leng 2020). More than state-based acclamation to boost employment data, these classifications signal the future of Chinese gig and digital—but more accurately termed—social media labor.

One of the most recent trends in wanghong's short, accelerative history, one which is bringing platforms such as TikTok and WeChat to center stage in international politics in 2020, is the way wanghong platforms have achieved what no earlier efforts for China to "go out" had—to export its culture successfully. In 2019, Beijing-based Bytedance had become "the world's most valuable startup" (Chen and Wang 2019). In 2018, their app *Douyin* became the fastest growing platform in China (Lee 2018) as has TikTok, their alternative non-Chinese platform, which is outpacing Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Perez 2018). Concurrently, these parallel platforms have also launched a new wave of wanghong inside and outside of the country (Kharpal 2019). Yet, these platforms, users, and wanghong have also run afoul of cultural norms and policies, with entire platforms banned in Pakistan (Jahangir 2020) and India (Singh 2020). In the United States, Chinese platforms TikTok and WeChat were targeted by the Trump administration as threats to national security, threatening the livelihoods of Western-based creators operating across these platforms (Lorenz 2020) and, more profoundly, severing essential means for communication between Chinese immigrants and their families back home (Wakabayashi et al. 2020). The contested cultural politics of globalizing wanghong platforms are treated in Chap. 6.

Wanghong vis-à-vis Social Media Entertainment (SME)

The industry based on wanghong is a major variant of what Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2019) call social media entertainment and flourishes inside China's digital economy, a "parallel universe" in so many ways to those seen in Western countries. SME is an emerging, distinct industry based on previously amateur creators professionalizing and monetizing their content across multiple social media platforms to build global fan communities and incubate their own media brands. SME comprises an industry ecology of platforms, creators, intermediary firms, and fan communities operating interdependently, and disruptively, alongside legacy media industries as well as VOD portals, down the middle of Madison Avenue (the advertising industry), and across global media cultures. These platforms include first-generation platforms like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook competing against—and sometimes acquiring—later-generation platforms like Twitch, Instagram, and TikTok.

SME creators range from the more prominent—gameplayers like Ninja and Markiplier; lifestyle and beauty vloggers like Huda Beauty and Michelle Phan; personality vloggers Lily Singh and the Vlogbrothers; unboxers EvanTube and Ryans Toys Review—to mid-level creators and early career aspirationals. SME intermediaries, or as YouTube refers to them, "creative services" firms, include acquired divisions of media corporations (Disney's Maker Studios, RTL's Yohobo and Stylehaul), multichannel networks (BroadbandTV, Brave Bison), influencer advertising and talent management agencies (ViralNation, Fullscreen), and data providers (Tubefilter, SocialBlade).

Like the wanghong industry, SME is native to social media platforms, including but not limited to YouTube, Facebook, Twitch, Twitter, and Instagram. Like wanghong, social media entertainment creators have been dubbed many things: influencers, micro-celebrities, YouTubers, vloggers, livestreamers, and gameplay commentators. Similar to wanghong, creators harness these platforms to engage and aggregate massive fan communities which they have found the means to convert into cultural and commercial value. Both wanghong and SME creators have been the targets of backlashes around their scandalous behavior and illicit business practices. Vloggers Jake and Logan Paul and PewDiePie are repeatedly penalized by both their platforms and communities for breaches of decorum, as has leading Chinese beauty wanghong Zhang Dayi for the appearance of backdoor dealing and affairs with platform executives. In both industries, the rapid and rising cultural influence of creators perceived as role models has been cause for critical concern from parents and politicians.

While mindful of and careful to note these continuities, we stress the differences between wanghong and SME. While operating on United States-based platforms, SME is a global phenomenon. Chinese platforms featuring wanghong creators have quite recently been successful in "going out", but are now, in 2020, the subject of major pushback. Wanghong has come to be considered a critical part of China's high-level policy and planning and to be a leader in the digital economy and the social as well as economic benefits it may confer on such leaders (Chaps. 2 and 4). Wanghong sports a wider range of content genre, especially noting the degree to which official state participation appears to be embedded. (We explore this aspect in Chaps. 4 and 5.) Wanghong is facilitated by a mix of technological advances and business model innovations that make it more lucrative on a per capita basis than SME (Chap. 3). While both industries exhibit endemic precariousness and highly problematic labor conditions for creators, wanghong have the onerous weight of dealing with the always-on surveillance of the party-state and its always-readiness to intervene, censor and not irregularly close down wanghong platforms.

We will throughout the book note quite systematically differences and similarities between the wanghong industry and SME. We do this mindful of, and seeking to address, long-standing concerns voiced by scholars about Western-centric analyses of Chinese media industries. Leading communication scholar Guobin Yang (2014) warns that we need to move beyond Chinese exceptionalism: "distinctively Chinese characteristics are the beginning, not the end, of analysis" (p. 136), which means any declaration of distinction demands further explication. These studies are often problematic for their binary "either/or" frameworks (Huang 2016) or "sweeping and dichotomous analytic frameworks" (Yang 2014, p. 136). Wilfred Wang and Ramon Lobato (2019) posit that scholars ought to reevaluate the degree to which implicit western centrism in media and social media studies theory and frameworks may have inhibited a fuller understanding of Chinese strategy and achievement in the screen industries. In our comparative account of both industries, we take up the charge posed by de Kloet et al. (2019) to "explore overlaps and similarities, alongside differences, and to zoom in on contradictions, ambivalences, and connections rendering it urgent to commit to detailed, locally specific, and empirical analyses" (p. 250).

Critical Media Industries Perspectives

The critical media industries approach we adopt in this book seeks to analyze the dynamic relations of culture, media, technology and political power and policy. Douglas Kellner's (2003) critical cultural studies agenda recommended a three-fold project of analyzing the production and political economy of culture, cultural texts, and the audiences and reception of these texts and their effects. This approach "avoids too narrowly focusing on one dimension of the project to the exclusion of others" (2003, p. 4). Horace Newcomb (2009) advocated for "synthetic media industry research", proposing a balanced approach to the power, structure, and agency of media industries and workers. In his standard work on *The Cultural Industries* (2019), David Hesmondhalgh brings together "a combination of political economy, critical sociology and cultural studies of media industries and media production" (p. 77).

Building on these advances, critical media industry studies (CMIS) (Havens et al. 2009; Herbert et al. 2020), seeks to bring the concerns and focus of political economy and cultural studies closer together. To do this, however, it is necessary to critique both. CMIS pays close attention to the political, economic, and social dimensions of popular culture and its production practices. What political economy and cultural studies often see as mass culture fatally compromised by commercialism, CMIS regards as a major focus for representation and contestation, often around marginalized and emerging groups. "Ignoring the logic of representational practices in entertainment production works to reinforce the relative invisibility or misrepresentation of those who often have the least power in the public sphere" (Havens et al. 2009, p. 250).

Cultural studies inform CMIS' focus on "the complex and ambivalent operations of power as exercised through the struggle for hegemony" (Havens et al. 2009, p. 235). But serious, sustained attention to the industrial processes of digitization and globalization differentiates CMIS from cultural studies. On the other hand, the tendency in political economy to focus on news media means that CMIS often differentiates in its focus on entertainment—where pursuing the implications of power needs to be more nuanced: "If and when popular culture is considered within a political-economic analysis, there is a reductionist tendency to treat it as yet another form of commodified culture operating only according to the interests of capital. There is little room to consider the moments of creativity and struggles over representational practices from that vantage point" (Havens et al. 2009, p. 236).

To give an adequate account of creator or wanghong agency as more than "yet another form of commodified culture operating only according to the interests of capital [or party-state]", we need to address the question of commercialism and brand culture. Dealing with these questions across a wide range of contemporary online commercial and not-for-profit culture, Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2018) are clear that the kind of participatory culture exemplified in SME and wanghong practices cannot be reduced to "consumptive behavior by a different name":

> [I]f we see participatory culture, though, as a vital step toward the realization of a century-long struggle for grassroots communities to gain greater control over the means of cultural production and circulation—if we see participation as the work of publics and not simply of markets and audiences—then opportunities to expand participation are struggles we must actively embrace through our work. (Jenkins et al. 2018, p. 193)

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has produced an important account of commercial culture from a critical perspective. She rejects the binary logic that equates the commercial with inauthenticity, and the noncommercial with authenticity, as "too simple" (Banet-Weiser 2012, p. 11), just as she similarly refuses the narrative that a citizenship culture has been transformed or disintegrated into a consumerist culture (Banet-Weiser 2012, p. 133). Brand culture is first and foremost *culture*; it is foundational, rather than the epiphenomenon thrown up as the byproduct of a singular, supervening capitalist hegemony. As such, it is fundamentally productive yet ambivalent, holding out the "possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony simultaneously" (Banet-Weiser 2012, p. 12). Deeming the anticonsumerist left critique to be "nostalgia for authenticity," Banet-Weiser recognizes that "individual resistance within consumer culture is defined and exercised within the parameters of that culture; to assume otherwise is to believe in a space outside consumerism that is somehow unfettered by profit motive and the political economy" (Banet-Weiser 2012, pp. 12–3).

Through vlogging, streaming, and tweeting alongside commenting, curating, and sharing, creators and wanghong enhance community engagement and, in turn, commercial viability. They generate alternative creator cultures distinct from what Kellner (1995) calls media culture. They foster fan communities built around their affinities, identities, and values, not necessarily in a critically progressive manner. Some of the most successful creators push cultural or social norms to secure the devotion of their fan communities.

Framing Themes: Cultural, Creative, Social

In addition to bedrock adherence to a form of cultural nationalism that has become progressively more bellicose under Xi Jinping, and investing hugely in reforms to shore up the growth of especially the digital creative industries, China has led the world in what we have come to dub "social" industries. To repeat, these concepts—cultural, creative, social industries—do not describe three separate phenomena; they are conceptual frameworks with which we seek to capture different aspects of China's wanghong's history and broader context.

Cultural Industries

The concept of cultural (or culture) industries has a decades-long history. (The best introduction is Hesmondhalgh's (2019) *The Cultural Industries.*) It also has an explicitly Marxist history—which may once have made it amenable to China's policy makers—dating back to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's attack on the capitalist industrialization of culture in the 1940s and the New Left's riffing on the theme in the 1960s, for example with Herbert Marcuse's critique of the one dimensionality of contemporary culture (Marcuse 1964). The term became more common from the 1970s, particularly as industry leaders and policy makers struggled with how to respond to both rapid deindustrialization and the emergence of world-leading popular music and broader popular culture in "Cool Britannia", turning to culture as a site for economic development strategies.

In Hesmondhalgh's (2019) *The Cultural Industries* we see a careful working out of the relationship between "core" cultural industries (television and radio, film, music, print and publishing, games, advertising and, marketing and public relations, and web design), and those that are "neighbouring", "peripheral", "borderline" or "problem" cases. This is helpful for underlining the relationships we are establishing across cultural, creative, and social themes in this book. On the one hand, Hesmondhalgh is critical that many accounts of the cultural industries and media industries fail to pay adequate attention to "neighbouring" sectors such as telecommunications, consumer electronics and the IT industry (pp. 17–9). On the other hand, he considers social media as a "borderline case" in even an open and inclusive treatment of cultural industries as "[social media industries'] basis is the commodification of ordinary sociality and communication, rather than of culture" (pp. 22–3).

"Cultural industries", says Michael Keane (2013, p. 23) in his detailed account of official Chinese state language use, "is the official national term emanating from Beijing". But the nuances are apparent when we consider that, according to Hesmondhalgh, "The cultural industries have usually been thought of as those institutions … which are most directly involved in the production of social meaning. … they deal with the industrial production and circulation of texts" (2019, pp. 14–5).

For the Chinese party-state, social cohesion, and "harmony" rests as much on a cultural base as on an economic one. And the "ultimate point of reference is China's pre-eminent civilization and the historical idea of the 'middle kingdom' (Zhongguo)" (Keane 2013, p. 27). This has meant that there has never been—despite all that has happened to turbocharge the Chinse digital and platform economy and its technological infrastructure—a fundamental move away from this historical term cultural industries and we will see how the attempt to persuade or enforce adherence to normative cultural precepts and norms plays out throughout succeeding chapters.