

# **B.5 The Chinese Heartland and its Imaginaries: Essays**

## **寻衅滋事 [Picking Quarrels and Provoking Trouble]: China Tightens Regulation of Celebrity Culture as it Reforms Education and Develops Insights From "Social Mentality" Studies**

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The Coalition for Peace and Ethics has been looking at the ways in which states have increasingly sought to (again) attain a greater control of the management of the popular culture and the way in which the masses approach, understand, value, and embrace cultural knowledge. China has proven to be an easy site for study primarily because its efforts have been both quite visible and unashamedly open. The West is working in parallel, but as a more fractured amalgam of ecologies of collectives, it is both more difficult to trace and much less stable. Either way, the goal is an important one--the management of perceptions of customs and traditions, of the way that things are accepted as "natural."

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In the case of China, CPE has focused on two related but distinct thrusts in the assertion of leadership by the vanguard (as the leading force of society--in the West there are many collectives vying for the authority of a "leading societal force"). The first focused on longitudinal efforts--the education of the young and the disciplining of the intelligentsia.<sup>2</sup> The second focused on a sustained and quite objectives based development of fields of study on the management of what is called social mentality.<sup>3</sup>

For this essay CPE focuses on an increasingly important, and potentially challenging source of cultural power in China--celebrities and their fans.<sup>4</sup> Liberal democratic collectives, of course, have long ago embedded and exploited celebrity culture<sup>5</sup> (influencers, theatrical people, personalities with followers, Tik Tok stars, talk media mouthpieces and the like).<sup>6</sup> They have become large parts of the cultural landscape along with traditional actors--religious leaders, institutional big-wigs, public intellectuals, industrialists with substantial media presence, and political figures.<sup>7</sup> To that extent, they have become potent but are deeply embedded in the culture machine and in this sense support rather than challenge the institutional structures which are designed to withstand constant movements of cultural orthodoxy (at least within normative limits). Those normative limits, that is system tolerance of movement and deviation, has been increasingly tested since the 1960s, but the

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Larry Catá Backer, "Knowledge Must be Correctly Cultivated! Considering! 《中小学生课外读物进校园管理办法》 "Administrative Measures for the Entry of Extracurricular Reading Materials for Primary and Secondary School Students," *Emancipating the Mind in the New Era: Bulletin of the Coalition for Peace & Ethics* 16(1):Essay 16.B.A, (2021).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Larry Catá Backer, "The Duty of Faculty is to Further the Great Patriotic Campaigns! 中国共产党普通高等学校基层组织工作条例 [ Regulations of the Communist Party of China on the Work of Primary Organizations in Regular Colleges and Universities] and the Florida Anti-Faculty Bias Legislation," *Emancipating the Mind in the New Era: Bulletin of the Coalition for Peace & Ethics* 16(1): Essay B.2 (2021).

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of celebrity as used in this context, see Jonathan Sullivan and Séagh Kehoe, "Truth, Good, and Beauty: The Politics of Celebrity in China," *The China quarterly* 237:241-256 (2019) ("It is the celebrity persona, "a crafted and consolidated public projection of the real person, built in part out of film roles and other public appearances,"<sup>7</sup> that distinguishes celebrity from mere well-knownness. Celebrity comes in numerous forms, from "stars," the sub-group at the apex of the celebrity hierarchy, to "celetoids," ordinary people who become famous for a short time due to particular acts or circumstances." *Ibid.*, (footnotes omitted)).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Andrea Galeotti and Sanjeev Goyal, "Influencing the influencers: a theory of strategic diffusion," *The RANBD Journal of Economics* 40(3):509-532 (2009).

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Karen Freberg, Kristin Graham, Karen McGaughey, and Laura A. Freberg, "Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality," *Public Relations Review* 37(1):90-92 (2011).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Suzanne Keller, "Beyond the Ruling Class: Strategic Elites in Modern Society (Routledge, 2017). Cf., Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital, Civil Society, and Development," *Third World Quarterly* 22(1):7.20 (2010).

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liberal democratic system has been stable enough to eventually absorb these movements. That, in part, is grounded in the fundamental institutional structure that is made stronger by factional fracture (again within tolerable limits, the definition of which also tends to be a moving target). That system may be breaking down now.<sup>8</sup>

Leninist systems necessarily approach this source of cultural power from a different perspective.<sup>9</sup> With the leading social forces, its political vanguard, at the center, the systemic toleration of autonomous sources of societal production becomes much more problematic. That problem increases as a function of its intersection with the objectives of the vanguard, its basic line, and its definition of the sphere of activity that are meant to be undertaken only under and through the guidance and leadership of the vanguard. These normative limits are also constantly tested, and its constitution are also dynamic. The relationship between the Communist Party and celebrity culture is a great example. Once understood as innocuous enough (again within the limits of systemic toleration, which started quite broadly), celebrity culture has become more of a challenge as it grows in power and influence in ways that might rival that of its liberal democratic analogues. What is tolerable, or even cliché, in liberal democratic states, however, can easily be constituted a direct threat to the policies, objectives and (most dangerously) the authority of the vanguard.

Celebrity culture was originally treated (mostly) as harmless and distracting--fashion, talent, discussion of roles (again within bounds that avoided politics or criticism of the vanguard).<sup>10</sup> Entertainers, like others, had a specific role to play in the construction of post-revolutionary China; for the vanguard, "entertainers aren't artists but are rather "art workers" who play a key role in molding the minds and values of the people. Celebrities, therefore, should be upstanding role models and paragons of virtue who contribute to China's rise in the world."<sup>11</sup> Celebrities did not

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<sup>8</sup> For the character of current challenges, see, e.g., Christine Rosen, "Inside the hypocrisy of media manipulators, censors who claim to fight misinformation," *New York Post* (14 December 2021); available [https://nypost.com/2021/12/14/hypocrisy-of-media-censors-claim-to-be-against-misinformation/?utm\_campaign=iphone\_nyp&utm\_source=mail\_app].

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Werner Meissner, "China's Search for Cultural and National Identity from the Nineteenth Century to the Present," *China Perspectives* 68:41-54 (2006). Cf., Susan Greenhalgh and Edwin A. Winckler, *Governing China's Population: From Leninist to Neoliberal Biopolitics* (Stanford University Press, 2005); Chin-Chuan Lee (ed) *Power, Money, and Media: Communication Patterns and Bureaucratic Control in Cultural China* (Northwestern University Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Karoline Kan, "In China, it's the Party that keeps the boy band going," *New York Times* (6 May 2017); available [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/world/asia/china-tfboys-boy-band.html].

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Frater and Rebecca Davis, "China's Crackdown on Celebrities Like Zhao Wei Is Growing Increasingly Far-Reaching," *Variety* (23 September 2021); available

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appear to threaten the political order and as long as they stayed out of politics and avoided scandal, they helped pass the time and might sometimes be of value in putting forward public narratives.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, in this era when everything is political or cultural (that certainly has been the trajectory of thinking in liberal democratic systems as well) it would not be long before the consequences of celebrity--fans and influence, would draw attention.<sup>13</sup> In China, celebrities are symbols of system acceptance and demonstrate that "the system rewards talent and cherishes upward mobility."<sup>14</sup> They are useful in the outward projection of Chinese policy.<sup>15</sup> The relationship between celebrities and fans is self-reflexive. Celebrity conduct--their work ethic and social responsibility--fuels and maintains their celebrity status among their fans and increases the approval of officials, even as their rebellion against conduct and responsibility expectations will have the opposite effect.<sup>16</sup>

Individual lapses could be easily identified and controlled, and celebrities wore golden collars<sup>17</sup>--they could fairly easily be guided to avoid sensitivities.<sup>18</sup> The attention of officials becomes more suspicious and less supportive as celebrity culture begins to appear to be less amenable to undertake their obligations to further state aims and vanguard goals. It is in this sense that "thus, celebrity is inherently political and closely connected to the state and its mechanisms of governmentality."<sup>19</sup> At this point celebrity appears to detach itself from the guidance of the vanguard, as an aggregate mass movement with its own vanguard (the celebrities themselves). And that poses a threat not

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[<https://variety.com/2021/global/asia/china-crackdown-celebrities-zhao-wei-1235071553/>].

<sup>12</sup> Jian Xu and Ling Yang, "Governing entertainment celebrities in China: practices, policies and politics (2005–2020)," *Celebrity Studies* 12(1):202-218 (2021).

<sup>13</sup> Min Xu, , Stijn Reijnders & Sangkyun Kim, "'Mingren are the respectable ones': an analysis of everyday engagements with contemporary celebrity culture in China," *Celebrity Studies* 12(1):84-101 (2021).

<sup>14</sup> Sandrine Zerbib, "From Celebrity Endorsement to idol industry in China," *Fulljet* (7 June 2021); available [<http://www.fulljet.com.cn/From-Celebrity-Endorsement-to-idol-industry-in-China>] (quoting Tom Doctoroff is the Asia CEO for J. Walter Thompson; the reporting also noted that the "government has continuously promoted role models for their patriotism, heroism, or exemplary role-fulfillment, using celebrities as a vehicle for promoting nationalism, traditional virtues, and the pursuit of modernity." *Ibid.*).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Saskia Postema and Jan Melissen, "UN celebrity diplomacy in China: activism, symbolism and national ambition online," *International Affairs* 97(3):667-684 (2021).

<sup>16</sup> Xu, Reijnders and Kim, "'Mingren are the respectable ones,'" *supra*.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Elaine M. Jeffreys, "Zhang Ziyi and China's Celebrity-Philanthropy Scandals," *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 8(1): (2011).

<sup>18</sup> Zhongxuan Lin and Yupei Zhao, "Beyond Celebrity Politics: Celebrity as Governmentality in China," *Sage Open* 10(3):1-10 (2020); available

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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merely to the normative project of the vanguard (instilling appropriate values) but to its authority as well.<sup>20</sup>

A central element of this dynamic centers of fans. Once celebrity culture spawned substantial and focal fan bases, things appear to have changed.<sup>21</sup> Fan bases from a Leninist perspective looks suspiciously like mass mobilization. Mass mobilization for objectives consonant with vanguard objectives might be tolerated or exploited. Where its autonomy collided with (changing and broadening) vanguard policies and objectives (in this case the control of cultural movement and the training of the young), or when it becomes to collide with great public societal campaigns (the Socialist Core Values, the campaigns for trust and trustworthiness),<sup>22</sup> things become more complicated. The consequences, then, of celebrity deviation and fan autonomy, would serve as a point of substantial concern for the vanguard, which could no longer tolerate celebrity misadventures and fan exuberance without appearing (at least in the way that the vanguard leadership saw it) to lose control of its societal reform projects.<sup>23</sup> This becomes especially acute where celebrity culture bumps up against government policies meant to meet the challenge of the New Era principal contradiction “between unbalanced

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Elaine Jeffreys and Jian Xu, “Celebrity-inspired, Fan-driven: Doing Philanthropy through Social Media in Mainland China,” *Asian Studies Review* 41(2):244-262 (2017) (“Alternatively, the expansion of celebrity-related communication may be interpreted as creating new spaces for networked activity that fans actively use and sometimes rework for their own social purposes. . . But the operation of fan-driven philanthropy in China demonstrates that celanthropy can encourage participatory and public-oriented youth cultures.” *Ibid.*, 247).

<sup>21</sup> Cf., Xiao-xiao Zhang, Li Liu, Xian Zhao, Jian Zheng, Meng Yang, Ji-qi Zhang, “Towards a Three-Component Model of Fan Loyalty: A Case Study of Chinese Youth,” *PLoS One* 10(4):1-15 (2015).

<sup>22</sup> Cf., Dalia Lin and Susan Trevaskes, “Creating a Virtuous Leviathan: The Party, Law, and Socialist Core Values,” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 6:41-66 (2019) (though meant critically, from a Leninist perspective a positive spin: “The total alignment of legal and judicial processes with the Socialist Core Values not only justifies the necessity for an all-virtuous Party that is capable of bringing peace, unity, justice, and prosperity for every member of society, but, post 2012, also legitimates the idea of the Party as an organ that is increasingly characterized by the unmitigated concentration of power.” *Ibid.*, 45).

<sup>23</sup> Tanwei Zhang, “What Does China’s Crackdown on Celebrity Culture Mean for Luxury?: Some suggested that brands can reference government-led projects to pick safer choices, while some argued that the era of storytelling based on grassroots celebrity has arrived,” *Women’s Wear Daily (WWD)* (20 September 2021); available [https://wwd.com/fashion-news/fashion-features/china-crackdown-celebrity-culture-mean-for-luxury-1234923453/] (“A key issue is that the Chinese government sees celebrities as not just entertainers, but also as role models for the general public and there is no room for mistakes or for causing any sort of bad influence.” *Ibid.*).

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and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life."<sup>24</sup>

This applied in two contexts. The first touched on what in liberal democratic states might be labelled as consumer protection concerns. This included the management of celebrity endorsements of products, and perhaps as well of national policies and politics. This touched on the management of the morals and politics of celebrities to ensure that they served state interests. More important perhaps was the need to ensure that celebrity fan bases could not be turned into mobs.<sup>25</sup>

The second touched on the power of mass mobilization through the engagement mechanisms of popular shows. As one commentator noted, by 2020:

The rise of reality talent shows and stardom since 2005's *Super Girl* made reality TV the first target of governance. Since 2006, China's TV regulator has imposed a series of restrictions to regulate the production, content and broadcast of talent shows, from the age, performance and dress of contestants, prohibition of out-of-studio voting, and cancellation of prime-time broadcasts, to the allocation of production quotas to TV stations. Regulation of other types of entertainment programmes in which celebrities are the main selling points for high audience ratings has also been tightened. Since 2011, SARFT [editor, now SAPPRFT] issued a series of notices to 'curb TV entertainment' (限娱令), requiring satellite TV channels to cut back the number of prime-time entertainment programmes and reserve time for serious news and 'ethics-building programmes' (道德建设节目).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Xinhua Insight: China embraces new "principal contradiction" when embarking on new journey," Xinhua (20 October 2017); available [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/20/c\_136694592.htm].

<sup>25</sup> Zerbib, "From Celebrity," supra. ("illustrated in the case of Xiao Zhan in February 2020, when fans of this idol were so actively engaged that they attacked another brand that was perceived to be damaging Xiao's image. In return, fans of the other brand counter-attacked and in the end permanently hurt Xiao's idol image and the brands it was promoting").

<sup>26</sup> Xu and Yang, "Governing Entertainment Celebrities in China: Practices, Policies and Politics (2005–2020)," supra. (citing Sheng Qu, Cultural-moral governance and television entertainment: the transformation of talent shows in postsocialist China. Thesis (PhD). The University of Manchester; available [https://www.proquest.com/openview/7b034ba7d2a229d99880c8d1dbd1615d/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=51922&diss=y]; and Sally Huang and Michael Martina, "China Orders Cutback on TV Entertainment," Reuters (25 October 2011); available [https://www.reuters.com/article/oukoe-uk-china-tv/china-orders-cutback-on-tv-entertainment-idUKTRE79048K20111025?edition-redirect=uk].

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Regulation of programming, and thus of the trajectories and scope of celebrity is managed by the Ministry of Culture (Wenhua bu 文化部) (MOC) and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (Guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongju 国家广播电视总局) (SAPPRFT; formerly SARFT) under the guidance of the Central Publicity Department (Zhongyang xuanchuan bu 中央宣传部).<sup>27</sup>

Of course, Chinese social credit regimes might have been deployed to manage these autonomous collectives and exploit them (harness their influence potential) to align with vanguard objectives. And there are significant ratings systems in place that serve as a disciplinary barometer of “star” power.<sup>28</sup> Surveillance of a sort is not difficult with respect to celebrities whose celebrity is dependent on widely accessible social media outlets.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, data based governance was not generally the preferred path chosen by the vanguard decision making bureaucracy (perhaps a problem of capacity, perhaps a problem of inter-vanguard fighting, perhaps a normative decision based on a rejection of the use of data driven metrics based nudging strategies; it is not clear). Instead, as recently reported by Reuters, the vanguard appears to be choosing a more old-fashioned path, one that is reactive rather than proactive, and one that is likely to produce additional challenges that the next generation of leaders will be forced to face because of the generational blinkers of the current collective assigned the task of domesticating celebrity culture.

The management of celebrity culture continues. The object is not so much to suppress it as it is to harness it in ways that align with the needs and policies of the state. The challenge is to find a way of harnessing this power of celebrity while continuing to effectively shape and control it. That danger is that celebrity culture spawns mass mobilization outside of the control of the political vanguard. In late 2021 the latest fine tuning of celebrity management was announced.

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<sup>27</sup> Sullivan and Kehoe, “Truth, Good, and Beauty,” *supra*. They note as well the structures of soft power regulation “in the form of government pronouncements and state media editorials setting out norms and expectations.” *Ibid*. In addition extra-legal methods are also effective. Among them the extra legal and highly discretionary practice of banning celebrities (‘fengsha’ (封杀)). *Ibid*. “The deterrent force of a ban lies in its unpredictability and uncertainty and its devastating effect on a celebrity’s career.” Xu and Yang, “Governing Entertainment Celebrities in China,” *supra*.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Baidu. 2017. “Jinri yule mingren paihangbang” (Today’s celebrity ranking), 10 June, [http://top.baidu.com/buzz?b=618&fr=topbuzz\\_b18](http://top.baidu.com/buzz?b=618&fr=topbuzz_b18).

<sup>29</sup> Xu and Yang, “Governing Entertainment Celebrities in China,” *supra*. (“Stars’ willingness to cater to the Party call (e.g. for patriotism) in their artistic works, openly support the CCP’s political stance on social media (e.g. about Hong Kong protests), and proactively participate in activities that help build a persona of spreading ‘positive energy’ (e.g. philanthropy) constitutes a new norm of celebrity culture in the Xi era”).

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China cracked down on what it described as a "chaotic" celebrity fan culture on Friday, barring platforms from publishing popularity lists and regulating the sale of fan merchandise after a series of controversies involving artists. The country's top internet watchdog said it would take action against the dissemination of "harmful information" in celebrity fan groups and close down discussion channels that spread celebrity scandals or "provoke trouble". Platforms will no longer be able to publish lists of popular celebrity individuals and fan groups must be regulated, the watchdog said.<sup>30</sup>

Also on the chopping block was any sort of televised interactive activity that has the slightest alignment with the practices of liberal democratic states--for example voting to express collective sentiment. It was reported that online voting connected to variety shows where fans voted their favorite performances and the like. Related to these measures was the sense that such engagement was worrisome as a means of deceptive marketing, and, in any case, a threat to public order.<sup>31</sup>

But it is not just the voting. There has been some misgiving about the way that such devices instill values that may corrupt. More immediately it appears to also affect the ability of youth to function appropriately in the society being crafted for them by the vanguard. These clubs "have also been criticised for their influence over minors and for causing social disorder, as competing fan clubs have been seen trading verbal abuse online or spending large amounts of money to vote for their favourite stars on idol competition programmes."<sup>32</sup> But it also represents a large industry in its own right--one substantially beyond the guidance of the vanguard.<sup>33</sup> Still, it is the chaos of mass politics by other means to likely worries at least some within the vanguard senior leadership. Sports and entertainment for millennia been the usual way in which mass political expression can be realized--sometimes with substantial political effect--when formal politics is subject to different rules. The Nika Riots in the Eastern Roman Empire provides an ancient template.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Brenda Goh and David Stanway, "China cracks down on 'chaotic' celebrity fan culture after scandals," Reuters (27 August 2021); available [<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-crack-down-chaotic-online-fan-culture-2021-08-27/>].

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. ("Regulators need to "increase their sense of responsibility, mission and urgency to maintain online political and ideological security," the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) said in a statement.").

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. ("A "local newspaper The Paper projecting the country's "idol economy" could be worth 140 billion yuan (\$21.59 billion) by 2022."").

<sup>34</sup> Fearghal Fitzgibbon, "The Nika Riots: How a Chariot Race Sparked Off the Bloodiest Riots in History," History of Yesterday (23 June 2020); available [<https://historyofyesterday.com/the-nika-riots-a4660f55ed22>].



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A conservative view of Leninism might view this later decision as necessary. Voting and the imposition of collective decision making from the bottom might be understood as a challenge to the core Leninist principle of democratic centralism. On the other hand, democratic centralism cannot be read in isolation in Chinese theory (again practice is an entirely different world from time to time in ways that poses additional challenges not considered here). The Chinese mass line suggests the structures for encouraging, exploiting and managing popular sentiment in ways that make it easier and less risky for the exercise of democratic centralism by putting the conversations between guiding leadership and mass sentiment at the center of leadership working styles.

Most interesting, of course, is the implicit rejection of the managerial approach of big data and social credit regimes (especially ironic in the context of internet based regulation and leadership guidance), and the reliance on very old school administrate (and inefficient case by case) discretionary administration through the use of that old standby--"provoking trouble."<sup>35</sup> Not that there isn't a role for this catch all in a Leninist system (though the arbitrariness of its application especially when not used as a top down disciplinary tool, can be risky for the long term trajectories of authority). "Celebrities have also been directly criticised. On Tuesday, the China Federation of Literary and Art Workers Professional Ethics Committee held a forum in Beijing that issued a proposal advocating strict self-discipline for actors and other entertainers."<sup>36</sup>

And yet it might have been worth considering whether this approach aligned and creates synergies with the vanguard's efforts at managing culture and ideological training in the education system, and more importantly, whether it provides maximum benefits within the insights provided by the emerging study of social mentality. Suppression and resort to ancient techniques also ought to be considered in light of the trajectories suggested by emerging principles of New Era thinking. Here there is no question that celebrity culture represents an important

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<sup>35</sup> Cf., Guo Rui, "Explainer: 'Picking quarrels and provoking trouble': how China's catch-all crime muzzles dissent," *South China Morning Post* (25 August 2021); available [https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3146188/picking-quarrels-and-provoking-trouble-how-chinas-catch-all] ("Picking quarrels and provoking trouble" was split off into an independent crime. Initially, it applied to four situations: 1) randomly beating others; 2) chasing and insulting others; 3) arbitrarily damaging public and private property; and 4) causing serious disorder in public places. But in 2013, authorities significantly broadened its application to allow it to be used against those deemed to have posted and widely spread false news or rumours on the internet.").

<sup>36</sup> "China to crack down on 'chaotic' online fan culture; iQiyi halts 'idol competition' programmes," *The Straits Times* (27 August 2021); available [https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/china-to-crack-down-on-chaotic-online-fan-culture-iqiyi-halts-idol-competition].

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target for regulation and now falls within the basic line of the Communist Party and its New Era objectives.<sup>37</sup> The ideological question, then, is whether is this an approach consistent with that ideology or now a distraction from its forward looking agendas.

In any case, this policy thrust might best be understood as deeply embedded in what appears to be a large scale multi-objective policy that might well have been long in the planning and now executed seriatim along its various front. Some have read this in a wider context--as part of the state's reorganization of its macro-economic foundations to place greater emphasis on the public sector and to more strictly control a more manageable private sector.<sup>38</sup> And, indeed, to the issue seems to be about control--of business in the service of larger state objectives, and of the management of the masses with respect to which celebrity culture, certainly, roved to be a challenge.<sup>39</sup> In the process the sensibilities of inter-Party discipline appear to be transposed onto the management of informal mass organizations.

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection — the ruling Chinese Communist Party's disciplinary watchdog — said Thursday that the Cyberspace Administration of China, the internet regulator, has shut down 1,300 fan groups, disabled 4,000 online accounts, and removed more than 150,000 "toxic" remarks in a recent crackdown against "unhealthy" celebrity fan culture.<sup>40</sup>

Interesting, as well, in this respect, is the way in which the authorities have been using the language of chaos and the need to ensure stability and prosperity in the context of its management of celebrity culture.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the language of toxicity and unhealthy culture, the authorities

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<sup>37</sup> Goh and Stanway, "China Cracks Down", supra. ("China has stringent rules on content ranging from video games to movies to music, and censors anything it believes violates core socialist values.").

<sup>38</sup> "Pop culture crackdown another blow for China's entertainment industry," Financial Review (29 August 2021); available [https://www.afr.com/world/asia/pop-culture-crackdown-another-blow-for-china-s-entertainment-industry-20210829-p58mw8].

<sup>39</sup> Adrian Blundell-Wignall, "What China really fears about its big tech companies: Xi Jinping wants China's youth and capital focused on the battle for national tech supremacy, not leisure and consumer power," Financial Review (18 August 2021); available [https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/what-china-really-fears-about-its-big-tech-companies-20210818-p58jo9].

<sup>40</sup> Laura He, "Chinese regulators eye unruly online fans and pop culture shows as their next crackdown targets," CNN Business

<sup>41</sup> Alexandra Stevenson, Amy Chang Chien, and Cao Li, "China's Celebrity Culture Is Raucous. The Authorities Want to Change That: The Communist Party has declared war on idol worship, part of a broader crackdown on what it sees as toxic celebrity culture that is poisoning the minds of the country's youth," The New York Times (27 August 2021); available [https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/27/business/media/china-celebrity-culture.html].

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here speak to “chaos” in relation to fan clubs with the insinuation that part of what is driving this is the black hand of capital (资本的 黑手).<sup>42</sup> This is a language similar to that developed in opposing the protests in Hong Kong between 2019-2020.<sup>43</sup> In that context the black hand of foreign interference (外国干涉的黑手) played an analogous role to the black hand of capital.<sup>44</sup> And yet the connection between the two were underscored by the recent decision of a prominent Chinese company to delist on the New York Stock Exchange and relist in Hong Kong.<sup>45</sup>

Sympathetic reporting in Chinese<sup>46</sup> suggests the official mood from its title: 每个人都能感受到，一场深刻的变革正在进行！[Everyone can feel it--a profound change is underway!]. It starts with a suggestion of chaos in the entertainment business because of the lapses of character and judgment of popular entertainment personalities. This chaos threatens not just the good order of the industry but also the morals and cultural foundations of the nation.<sup>47</sup> Describing the chaos in the entertainment industry it then connected the actions against the entertainment industry with other actions against big data and credit enterprises this way:

金融领域、文化领域到政治领域都在发生一场深刻的变革，或者也可以说是一场深刻的革命。这是一次从资本集团向人民群众的回归，这是一次以资本为中心向以人民为中心的变革。因此，这是一场政治变革，人民正在重新成为这场变革的主体，所有阻挡这场以人民为中心变革的都将被抛弃。这场深刻的变革也是一次回归，向着中国共产党的初心回归，向着以人民为中心回归，向着社会主义本质回归。[A profound change is taking place in the financial field, the cultural field, and the political field, or it can be said to be a profound revolution. This is a return from the capital group to the masses of the people, and this is a transformation from

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. (““The chaos in celebrity fan clubs, exposed by the 'Kris Wu' incident, reflects that bad fan culture has reached a critical moment that must be corrected,” the agency said, adding that “fan club” culture is “crazy” and “devil-possessed.” “We must cut off the black hand of the capital — and curb the wild growth of the entertainment industry,” the agency said.”).

<sup>43</sup> Discussed in detail in Larry Catá Backer, *Hong Kong Between ‘One Country’ and ‘Two Systems’* (Little Sir Press, 2021).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., especially Chapters 7, 8, and 16.

<sup>45</sup> Alexandra Stevenson and Paul Mozur, “With Its Exit, Didi Sends a Signal: China No Longer Needs Wall Street,” *The New York Times* (2 December 2021); available [https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/business/china-didi-delisting.html].

<sup>46</sup> 每个人都能感受到，一场深刻的变革正在进行！(Everyone can Feel It--A Profound Change is Underway!)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. (中国娱乐圈一直都不缺臭气熏天的猛料，前不久相继爆出吴亦凡、霍尊的乱象以及张哲瀚到日本靖国神社拜鬼之事，近日又爆出湖南卫视主持人钱枫涉嫌强奸他人一事，总让人感觉中国娱乐圈已经烂透了。如果再不整治，不仅娱乐圈烂透了，整个文化圈、文艺圈、演艺圈、影视圈也都烂透了。)

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capital-centered to people-centered. Therefore, this is a political change, the people are becoming the main body of this change again, and all those who block this people-centered change will be discarded. This profound change is also a return, a return to the original intention of the Chinese Communist Party, a return to the people-centered nature, and a return to the essence of socialism.].<sup>48</sup>

Clearly, this is a profound change long in the making. And certainly, celebrity culture is almost as old as Reform and Opening Up. So then, what is the “profound change” that is taking place? It is perhaps less about celebrity culture than around the way the vanguard’s ideological line has now profoundly changed in the New Era. Its measure might be usefully taken not by political pronouncements but by the way that the way the New Era confronts its principal contradiction now is manifested in the relation of the state, the political vanguard, and the personages from the fields of sport and entertainment whose autonomy and work are now to be realigned or at least repurposed.

It is where that leads society, and social expression in the form of sports and entertainment in relation to the mass audience to whom it is directed, that will prove the more interesting consequence. In any case, it is the practices of culture and its control that remain of central interest. And the suggestion, with celebrity, is that even the most granular expression of cultural practice may be tinged with political theory. One performs liberal democracy through the relationships between variety shows and their audiences. One moves quickly from celebrity to influence where cults of personality are curated.<sup>49</sup> As one has come to understand in the United States quite clearly since the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, the space that separates Washington D.C. (and political authority) from Hollywood, California (and the authority of the entertainment celebrity) is very very small indeed.<sup>50</sup> It is also big business--and money is an inherently ideological symbol, either in the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Olivier Driessens, “The celebritization of society and culture: Understanding the structural dynamics of celebrity culture,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(3):641-657 (2013).

<sup>50</sup> Regina G. Lawrence and Amber E. Boydston, “Celebrities as Political Actors and Entertainment as Political Media,” *How Political Actors Use the Media: A Functional Analysis of the Media’s Role in Politics* (Peter Van Aelst and Stefaan Walgrave (eds); Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); pp. 39-61; Andrew Glass, “Hollywood-Washington Political Ties Rich in History,” *Politico* (29 April 2007); available [https://www.politico.com/story/2007/04/hollywood-washington-political-ties-rich-in-history-003741] (“From the 1930s, when studio moguls dominated the scene, to today’s celebrity-strewn fundraisers, members of Hollywood’s elite have sought to influence national political campaigns. The interaction works both ways, as Hollywood sometimes has felt political pressure from Washington.”).

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liberal democratic West or in Marxist Leninist China.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps this quote sums the situation up best:

At times the moves feel targeted at Western influence, but Jaeson Ma, co-founder of 88 Rising and Stampede Ventures, believes otherwise. "It is not anti-Western. It is more like a different approach to raising children," Ma says. "The Chinese government is acting no differently from a parent disciplining a child ... [expecting] honor, respect and obedience. They are trying to ensure a good education, a respectable outlook and not getting addicted to video games."<sup>52</sup>

Combined with the quite directed policies and objectives of Chinese Marxist-Leninism led by its Chinese national vanguard, the current regulatory counter thrust to celebrities and fandom may be better contextualized. It forms part of a larger program of putting the Communist Party at the center and in the process of ensuring that those outside the vanguard to not exercise power or influence autonomous of or at cross purposes with the leadership projects of the Party.<sup>53</sup>




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<sup>51</sup> Sharon Marcus, "Why Being a Celebrity is Big Business," Knowledge @Wharton (Podcast transcript) available [https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/celebrity-culture-big-business/]; drawn from the book, Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Frater and Davis, "China's Crackdown on Celebrities Like Zhao Wei Is Growing Increasingly Far-Reaching," *supra*.

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., George Calhoun, "What Really Happened to Jack Ma?," *Forbes* (24 June 2021); available [https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgecalhoun/2021/06/24/what-really-happened-to-jack-ma/?sh=6ba871737c7e]. See Sam Peach, "also, Sam Peach, "Why did Alibaba's Jack Ma disappear for three months?," *BBC*; available [https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-56448688]

*Emancipating the Mind* (2021)16(1)  
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