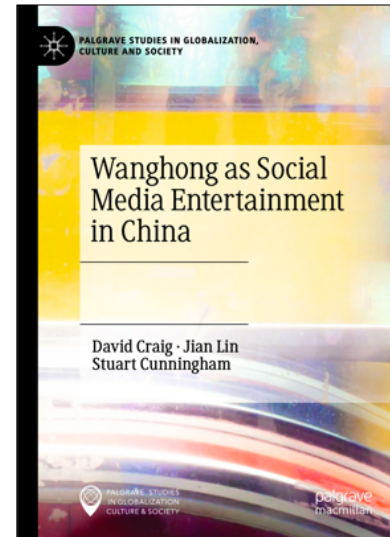


David Craig, Jian Lin, and Stuart Cunningham, **Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China**, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 197 pp., \$109.99 (hardcover).

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The year 2020 witnessed a disruptive shift in the global expansion of China's *wanghong* (a Chinese term for microcelebrity) industry. On one hand, Chinese vlogger Li Ziqi earned the most subscribers for a Chinese-language channel on YouTube, with a record of 11.4 million as of July 2020. On the other hand, China's first global app (J. Li, 2020) and the world's most popular entertainment platform, TikTok, was forced to retreat from globalization, as reflected in the permanent ban of TikTok in India. Many may thus ask: What has happened to China's *wanghong* industry, and what has brought it to where it stands today? A timely book, **Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China** seeks to answer these questions from a critical media industries perspective, by "analyzing the dynamic relations of culture, media, technology and political power and policy" (p. 9).



Authors David Craig and Stuart Cunningham, who coined the term "social media entertainment" (SME), have well documented the emergence of amateur entrepreneurs on social media platforms in Western nations (i.e., Cunningham & Craig, 2019). The third author, Jian Lin, has produced well-established scholarship on creative industries, cultural work, and platform studies in contemporary China. This book stems from the areas where the three authors' research agendas neatly overlap. It first compares *wanghong* with SME by concentrating on three conceptual frameworks central to China's *wanghong* history, namely the cultural, creative, and social industries. In the Western instances, arts and individual creativity are placed at the core of cultural and creative industries; however, the Chinese approach tends to align culture with economic and political imperatives and adopts the cultural industries as a nonpolitical apparatus to disseminate social meaning, especially on the international level. For example, one of China's top *wanghong* creators, Li Ziqi, has had tremendous success in drawing international fans, granting her the capacity to generate an attractive image for the country. Instances such as this suggest the *wanghong* industry's great potential in providing an "alternative path of wielding Chinese global soft power" (p. 35), which is of paramount importance because of the state-endorsed legacy media's long-term failure in promoting positive publicity outside China.

In this book, China's *wanghong* industry is thus laid out as an ICT-based industry that is introduced, incubated, protected, and surveilled by state governance. Its highly detailed profile on state-based policy interventions around *wanghong* industry also constitutes one of this book's biggest contributions. As the authors have pointed out, though some government mandates (i.e., the "cultural going-out" strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]) have contributed to the *wanghong* industry's vigorous growth, they have

also posed great challenges for Chinese wanghong platforms' overseas business. In particular, because Chinese wanghong platforms are often viewed as "proxies for the state" (p. 162), they find it difficult to retain international users who are concerned about data privacy and state censorship. This forces Chinese platforms to dissociate from their "Chineseness brand" (p. 165), through launching a separate international version that claims autonomy from the Chinese state and promotes more liberal practices. As discussed in the book, TikTok—which is the international version of the Chinese app Douyin—allows the publication of content about Hong Kong, Uyghurs, and other topics critical of the Chinese government, which are strictly censored on Douyin.

Despite these drawbacks, the authors argue that the wanghong industry has other merits that have contributed to its growth. When viewed from the perspective of platform strategies, what distinguishes the wanghong industry from SME is what the authors name "hyperplatformization and interplatformization, portalization, and the affordances of social presence" (p. 60). While hyperplatformization refers to the expansion of the e-commerce industry enabled by technological advancements, interplatformization reveals the great collaboration across platforms. Specifically, a plethora of technological features—such as rapid-fire bullet messaging (or social commentary), live streaming, and social tipping (also known as online tipping)—have been incorporated in wanghong platforms to facilitate the creators' interaction with their fan community. Notably, Chinese platforms are often found to precede their Western counterparts in adopting these features. For example, while China's dating app MoMo introduced livestreaming in 2015, Tinder didn't launch the live video feature until 2020. Consequently, these central strategies in the wanghong platform have contributed to their differences with the SME landscape. As the authors contend, "the wanghong platform landscape exhibits *both* greater competition *and* greater collaboration than we see in the SME platform landscape" (p. 62).

Another important factor that has promoted the wanghong industry is creator labor. Similar to the evolution of SME nomenclature, the names for the wanghong entrepreneurs have shifted between KOLs (key opinion leaders), *zhubo* (a Chinese term for livestreaming showroom hosts), wanghong, influencers, and many others. The authors also propose a taxonomy of three types of creators—including *cultural* wanghong, *creative* wanghong, and *social* wanghong—to further demonstrate how distinctive socioeconomic classes have contributed to the wanghong industry. The first two categories both focus on content creation to extend their cultural capital; while *cultural* wanghong are usually professionals and public figures with a well-established reputation and influence, *creative* wanghong are amateurs with self-taught skills. Notably, although *creative* wanghong can transform into *cultural* wanghong, they can hardly surpass *cultural* wanghong's production values. Different from these two, *social* wanghong—who are also amateurs—are mostly involved in cultivating a close social relationship with their fans. This, however, can be a pitfall when it comes to female live streamers. Nicknamed "virtual girlfriends," female wanghong are often condemned for wearing sexy outfits, using vulgar language, and performing erotic shows for their followers. Therefore, the labor conditions for wanghong "are distributed unevenly by their background, their cultural and social capital, type of content and part of the country they work in" (p. 129).

Accordingly, wanghong content also differs among genres and formats. The authors identify three primary types of wanghong content: *cultural* content, such as video programs promoting heritage culture and positive values; *creative* content, such as cooking shows and self-made sitcoms with an emphasis on

creative expertise; and *social* content, such as live dancing and live commerce based on social skills. In particular, the antihegemonic spirit and “boredom culture” embedded in the younger generation have endowed wanghong content with a unique “grassrootedness” (p. 112). As the authors articulate, “those that might be viewed as ‘bizarre,’ ‘useless,’ and ‘nonsensical’ in the mainstream culture are celebrated by their followers as authentic, funny, and creative” (p. 149). This explains why millions of online viewers—who are bored with real-world hierarchy and routines—spend hours watching Li Ziqi’s “countryside life” shows (H. Li, 2020). Notably, most of such content is produced by “unlikely creators,” such as the less-educated working class and peasants in rural China. Accompanying the grassroots creators’ upward mobility, critics have observed an increased sense of materialism (Lou & Kim, 2019), facial dissatisfaction (Wang, Fardouly, Vartanian, & Lei, 2019), and Internet addiction among today’s adolescents. Yet, partially due to this book’s concentration on the industrial perspective, such negative social consequences that may exacerbate in the era of “wanghong economy” are not well discussed.

Ostensibly, this book’s three core themes—cultural, creative, and social—have been neatly woven into its insightful discussion of wanghong industry across multiple aspects of the governance, platforms, creators, culture, and global landscape. This multiperspectivity makes the book a valuable resource for scholarship beyond communication studies, as epitomized in its sophisticated articulation of the various social business models and industry policies. Though its academic prose may undermine this book’s readability, the extensive use of vivid illustrations to discuss supportive cases lends great joy to the reader’s journey.

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