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.
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 aspirationalists. 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), multi-channel 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 Chinese 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.
Creative Industries

The concept of creative industries has a shorter, twenty-plus year history. It was also incubated in the UK, developed by a mixture of industry leaders and policy makers seeking to contemporize the scope of cultural activity and maximize the export opportunities for British creative output. The original UK Government Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) definition describes the creative industries as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (DCMS 2001, p. 4). Sociologists Scott Lash and John Urry double down on the IP aspect of the category, arguing that each of the creative industries has an “irreducible core” concerned with “the exchange of finance for rights in intellectual property” (Lash and Urry 1994, p. 117).

What are the deeper drivers of this newer concept? These can be understood as long-term, structural changes in economy and society, summed up in the notion of “culturization”. Fundamental economic trends underpin the process, such as rising affluence, which shifts aggregate expenditure towards cultural consumption; the related rise in human capital, which permits greater specialization; growth in ICT, which is the technology base of the creative industries; and globalization, as access to global markets both in demand and factor mobility (Potts and Cunningham 2008). Such economic indicators correlate with notions of the “creative” or “experience” economy and reflect the attempt to grasp the increasing proportion of activity that is occurring to meet what Abraham Maslow, with his concept of a hierarchy of needs, famously called the “higher-order” needs (social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization) (see Cunningham 2014).

It was Lash and Urry (1994) who coined the term culturization of the economy. This marks a sharp break from the critique of the industrialization of culture—Adorno and Horkheimer’s original dystopian version of the culture industry. Instead of culture being suborned by the industrial age, what Lash and Urry observed was “ordinary manufacturing industry … becoming more and more like the production of culture” (p. 123). Creative industries is a term that captures the fact that cultural products and services are growing as a proportion of whole economies, but also that design and business models derived from the creative sector are infusing contemporary social and business practice.
In China, there has always been a cautious and skeptical approach to the adoption of the concept of creative industries. It exudes highly suspect Western ideals of individualism, self-expression, and creative freedom. In the early days of China’s project to adopt and adapt this concept, United States-based China scholar Jin Wang (2004) noted that the “least problematic” idea in a western liberal democracy, that of creativity, might be the “most problematic” in China. But investing hugely in reforms to grow especially the digital economy and infrastructure has meant that China cannot avoid managing into public policy and programs such a concept. Thus, the slogan “from made in China to created in China” became a rallying cry for reform in the early 2000s (Keane 2013, p. 6).

These terms often get joined up, in terminology such as “cultural creative industries” and “cultural and creative industries”, in a process of pragmatic inclusivity. There has often been a distinction made between the definition of the cultural/culture industries as those that have core propaganda functions such as the traditional big industrial media of broadcasting and print and those which belong in the light entertainment and small-medium business domains which can be allocated to the creative industries part of the field (Hartley et al. 2013). There are also the pragmatics of cultural industries remaining the preferred terminology in national policy statements while municipal and local governments will often use creative industries or the hybrid cultural creative industries (Keane 2013, p. 42). Chapter 2 goes further into these terminological nuances.

**Social Industries**

The centrality of the performance of authentic interpersonal communication and of the relational labor of sociality has been a strong theme in our previous work on SME and online creative labor (Cunningham and Craig 2019; Lin and de Kloet 2019). In Cunningham and Craig’s previous work on the subject, we say that “[v]ital to grasping the significance of SME is understanding how social media entertainment platforms operated as both content delivery systems and networked communication technology” (Cunningham and Craig 2019, p. 32). SME creator culture is being developed and practiced at the intersection of the digital and the social, the interpersonal and the mass; SME is both a content and a communication industry and creators both produce and distribute content and manage through relational labor their communities.
Early scholarly accounts of “social industries” and “social media industries” looked at new markets created by public-service and non-profit social service providers (Freyens 2011). In his edited volume The Social Media Industries (2013), Alan Albarran and his contributors articulate the emerging market conditions for industries dependent on the network effects of social media platforms. Disruptive of legacy and even digital advertising, social marketing and advertising refer to strategies and practices derived from the information generated by widespread consumer engagement with platforms (Li and Bernoff 2008; Bakshy et al. 2012). Social marketing and advertising use the term “social video” for video circulated across social media platforms designed to drive engagement, rather than more traditional calculations of impressions. According to an industry website, “Every social video aims to drive social actions such as shares, comments, and likes. Those acts of engagement are what bring your content organically into the feeds of potential new followers and new audiences” (Wochit 2019). Fullscreen, one of the prominent firms in SME, promotes the term social entertainment (Nizan 2019).

Social games are based around social platforms “providing users with an identity and also can provide the backbone for simple forms of communication (such as notifications and so forth)” (O’Neill 2008). This concept has been featured in recent scholarship around the gaming industry, most notably in Asian markets where videogame practices are more advanced than in the West. Mirko Ernkvist (2016) described the formation of the new social game industry in Japan dating back to 2011 that “emerged from the entrepreneurial conditions of the mobile Internet-service sector rather than the established video-game industries” (p. 93).

Extending beyond advertising and entertainment discourses, the concept of social journalism varies from those practices by journalists on social media to a “hybrid model of content from professional journalists, paid and unpaid contributors and readers” (Sussman 2014). The term has been advanced by journalism scholars including Jeff Jarvis (2014), who launched a master’s degree in social journalism at the Graduate School of Journalism at City University of New York. These developments accompanied the rise of digital-first news organizations like Daily Beast and Buzzfeed harnessing social media platforms for reach, and anticipated the rise of social publishing platforms like Medium and Substack (Botticello 2020).

For over a decade, social media studies (SMS) and platform studies scholars have advanced new concepts and research agendas to identify their fields as discrete objects of study (Montfort and Bogost 2009;
Fordyce and Apperley (2016). Nancy Baym’s (2002) field-setting work around computer-mediated communication anticipates how social media allows users to foster online identities. danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) further defined these platforms by their ability to allow users to construct public profiles, list their own connections, and view those connections with others. Jose van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2013) differentiate the logics of social media from those of mass media through the four principles of programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication. Peter Ballon (2014) further differentiated social media platforms from digital media portals such as video streaming services Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. The former, he argues, depend upon open access, user affinities, peer-to-peer connectivity, and empowerment. Van Dijck (2013) divided social media platforms into networking, content generation, and trading and marketing platforms, noting blurred lines “as part of the continuous battle to dominate a segment of online sociality” (2013, p. 8).

Recent work around the platformization of the internet and rise of the “platform society” (Helmond 2015; van Dijck et al. 2018) have placed greater focus and awareness of how social networking sites have become the primary means for users to harness the technological features of the internet, effectively turning the internet into the social web. David Nieborg and Thomas Poell (2018) further advanced this concept of platformization for “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems” (p. 4276). These conceptual frameworks provide diagnostic tools for better understanding China’s digital economy, as in the case of the growth of “superapps” like WeChat, which provide vital infrastructure upon which all forms of economic, social, and cultural activities transpire (Plantin and de Seta 2019).

The commercialization practices by creators who trade in these social dynamics are not fundamentally different to established media business models. Both SME creators and wanghong secure traditional advertising, subscription, and transactional revenue, as well as fees for live performance from platforms and in traditional media. However, these industries have introduced “social business models” including programmatic advertising, influencer marketing (branded content), and e-commerce integrations which are highly disruptive of the norms of media advertising as ROI is driven by the socialization and engagement practices by creators on these platforms. Crowd-funding and virtual goods comprise radically new forms of revenue generation built upon online engagement and interactivity.
What distinguishes wanghong industries from SME, however, is that Chinese social media platforms have developed world-leading integration of social features and monetizing affordances (exemplified by their social business models such as social video, social tipping, and social commerce). Haiqing Yu (2019, n.p.) argues that Chinese social media platforms have pioneered in advancing the so-called “social plus business model”, which “combines social networking and entertainment in the context of e-commerce transactions”.

The sociality of production on these platforms on the one hand echoes Jenkins’ account of participatory culture on the western platforms: “the web has become a site of consumer participation” (2006, p. 137). In his political economy of networks, Yochai Benkler (2006) described how “social production in general and peer production in particular present new sources of competition to incumbents that produce information goods for which there are now socially-produced substitutes” (p. 122). Axel Bruns’ neologism “produsers” captured the new opportunities on social media platforms (2008) and Burgess and Green’s account of vernacular creativity across YouTube (2018) signals the industrialization of the social. On the other hand, rather than trading in traditional media intellectual property, for example, films or television, books or movies, many creators work to foster “social content”, which aim at not only facilitating platform engagement and interactivity (through comments, likes, sharing, and curation), but also branding and e-commerce.

This particular feature of Chinese platforms demonstrates the wide integration of “social presence” in their interfaces and affordances. Though first introduced by western computer scientists in the 1970s (Short et al. 1976), Chinese computer scientists and media and communication scholars have deepened our understanding of the concept of social presence in their analysis of the socio-technological affordances of virtual reality, social media, and livestreaming (Lu et al. 2016; Liu et al. 2020). As Wang and Lobato (2019) note, Chinese scholars’ focus on social presence signals their awareness of the need to differentiate the ontology of China’s platforms from those of the West.

Wanghong as a practice and an industry takes the dimension of sociality to a new level. This social dimension of wanghong industry not only resides in its provocative contents and relational creator labor, but also its transformative influence on Chinese society and social governance. As we illustrate in the following chapters, the governance of wanghong economy goes beyond China’s existing policy agenda of commercializing and
digitizing cultural production, but also fits into the state’s aspiration to platformize the economy and embed mass entrepreneurship as a step change in employment. The inclusive nature of wanghong employment promises to contribute to the state’s agenda of poverty alleviation and rural regeneration (see Chap. 2). In practice, the wanghong economy invites and enables various Chinese individuals, especially those relatively marginal populations such as farmers, migrant workers, and housewives, to become entrepreneurial creators, forming the so-called “unlikely creative class” (Lin and de Kloet 2019). Alongside these “unlikely” creators are their similarly “unlikely aesthetics” as bodied forth in their contents, which originate from and resonate with the mundane lives lived by the majority of Chinese individuals. Chapter 5 profiles wanghong culture, through such aesthetic “unlikeliness” and its highly communicative features, light-heartedly re-framing mundane everyday life and established Chinese screen culture, both of which can be experienced as “boring” within the Chinese hierarchical social, cultural, and economic order.

It is this intensification and extensification of the social dimension that distinguishes wanghong industry from both established media industries in general and from SME outside China, and justifies devoting some more space to this emerging concept—social industries—rather than the previous two well-established concepts. As earlier argued, the way the emerging shape of new industries may be evidenced is through the accumulation of popular journalistic and academic accounts, the adumbration of new data, and advent of policy interventions. We see evidence in these indictors for “social industries” as an emerging concept. Subsequent chapters contain our detailed discussion of the relevant policy (Chap. 2) and data (Chaps. 3, 4, and 5).

The Shape of the Book to Come

Chapter 2 concerns itself with policy and governance. The concept of governance captures more than state policy and regulation; “[g]overnance refers … to all processes of governing, whether undertaken by a government, market, or network, whether over a family, tribe, formal or informal organization, or territory, and whether through laws, norms, power or language” (Bevir 2012). The governance of China—the title of Xi Jinping’s collected speeches (2014, 2017, 2020)—involves more than the development and implementation of state policy. As Wang and Lobato (2019) argue, in contrast to the “essentially liberal values” of free speech and free markets, which are the constitutive conditions underlying much of Silicon
Valley business practice, approaches to the governance of the Chinese internet do not see communication technologies as being outside the state’s political domain. Instead, media and communication technologies have always been conceptualized as part of the state’s political apparatus. China’s platform evolution reflects this, requiring as it does constant realignment in the wake of ongoing policy shifts. For example, these developments have exposed ongoing policy tensions between protection of China’s traditional cultural heritage and the pressure to keep their platform economy growing at rapid pace. The chapter builds on our core themes of the cultural, the creative and the social by demonstrating how policies embodying distinctive Chinese interpretations of western concepts of cultural industries and creative industries have been deployed, exemplifying how China has maintained its vestigial Marxist principles, alongside its more assertive cultural nationalism, while at the same time embracing the industrial modernization offered by creative industries policies including IP rectification and growing global brands. But it is China’s pivotal embrace of the full potential of digital platformization of economy and society that marks Chinese policy and governance as world leading—both for its integration of social amelioration objectives as well as the concerning level of social surveillance.

Chapter 3 is a study of Chinese platforms on which the wanghong economy is built. We contrast these to the SME platform landscape, using the concepts of hyperplatformization, interplatformization, portalization, and the affordances of social presence. Hyperplatformization refers to the accelerated rate of adoption of ICT and mobile consumer technologies and the underlying material conditions for China’s platform economy that makes it arguably a more competitive business environment than that on which SME is built. There are of course exceptions—platforms seek to secure monopolistic advantages (Tencent most particularly). But if the environment is more competitive, it is also more collaborative—perhaps because of such competitive pressures. Interplatformization is our term for this more collaborative environment, in which platforms engage in greater interoperability than their Western counterparts.

The chapter also analyses portalization as the process by which entertainment IP content is now increasingly curated and delivered by “portals”—Amanda Lotz’s (2017) term for streaming professional video content services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video. Another distinctive feature of the Chinese online landscape is that the stand-off in Western online content delivery systems between platforms and portals—between SME and SVOD—is blurred in China. This is another sign of the
dynamism and adaptability of the Chinese ecology but it produces both opportunity and threat for wanghong. We use the concept of social presence to build out our exposition of the social industries in this, current, chapter. In Chap. 3, the wanghong platform landscape is shown to be cultivated by technological innovations that allow for social commentary, social streaming, and social video. These affordances, in turn, enhance wanghong platform and creator viability through the near frictionless ability to engage in social tipping and social commerce, the latter two phenomena part of a “social+” business model. These developments have underpinned strong growth in the industry, and differentiate wanghong further from SME.

In Chap. 4, we examine the conditions of wanghong labor in the context of state surveillance, competitive pressures, algorithmic culture, and the role of intermediary management enterprises—multichannel networks (MCNs). The strength of our cultural, creative, and social explanatory categories is tested in their application to the socioeconomic and practice backgrounds of wanghong. There are “cultural” wanghong—the most successful referred to as “Big V” or KOLs. Cultural wanghong are typically media professionals and experts, for example, authors or actors, who use wanghong platforms to extend their celebrity status or advance their expertise. A number of these creators were previously employed by legacy media organizations in television, news media, and film. “Creative” wanghong are professionalizing amateur creators native to social media platforms generating content built around lifestyles and affinities. Creative wanghong range from urban-based university-educated young hipsters through to rural peasants and migrant workers and bear closest similarities to typical SME creators. “Social” wanghong have emerged on social streaming and social video platforms and have cultivated followers and revenue less by their content practices than through mediated social interaction, their cultivation of social presence. The affordances on later generation platforms such as Douyin and Kwai have nurtured the rise of business models including social tipping and social commerce. Combined, these socio-technological features and commercial business models further distinguish this landscape from its SME counterparts.

Chapter 5 delves into the paradoxes and dilemmas of wanghong culture. It firstly locates wanghong in the trajectory of cultural history in contemporary China, asking how distant it may be from the rebellious youth of the May Fourth movement and the revolutionary era as well as those Red Guard youth active during the Cultural Revolution in the
1970s. Wanghong presents as hypercommercialized, deeply depoliticized and non-revolutionary, defined by individualism and consumerism. But it also sits at the center of China’s high-level policy pivot to building the world’s most advanced digital economy and a robust domestic consumer economy rather than relying on cheap exports, to say nothing of the social amelioration entrusted by Chinese policy makers to vernacular creativity. And, to deepen the paradoxes, if wanghong’s consumerism and commodified entertainment culture are degrading and apolitical, why is it also dangerous and disruptive to such an extent that the party-state becomes so wary and censorially intervenes so often? Chapter 5 continues to build on the book’s themes of cultural, creative, and social by developing a taxonomy of their relationships illustrated by representative and leading wanghong. The dizzying range of genres and styles of wanghong content testifies again to differences compared with SME genre. The “unlikely” aesthetics and their inherent sociality, we argue, contributes to the authenticity of wanghong culture, serving as “light-hearted resistance” which does not challenge the social and political order, but teases, refuses, and disrupts everyday lives that have been made “boring” in a real-world of hierarchy, constraint, and conservatism.

Finally, Chap. 6 considers how the wanghong industry is “going out” transnationally, regionally, or globally. Our analysis also revisits the key arguments addressed throughout the book regarding wanghong governance, platforms, labor and management, and culture. Wanghong platforms, we argue, represent the most successful of many attempts for Chinese culture to go out, and thus compete against the United States-driven social media entertainment industry and the platforms it operates on. But the backlash against the take-up of particularly TikTok signals rising platform nationalism, and undermines the possibility of a global creator culture that transcends national borders, geography, and cultural differences. It is the wanghong industry, having produced a successful proof of concept for Chinese cultural going out, that now sits at the leading edge of concerns for the future prospects of globalizing popular culture.

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