CHAPTER 6

Global Wanghong

The wanghong industry comprises a media ecology operating within China separate from the otherwise global-scaling social media entertainment industry carried on United States platforms. Wanghong’s “parallel universe” is not isolated from the conditions of digital and platform capitalism (Srnicek 2017; Hong 2017; Schiller 1999), although we have observed that the wanghong industry lives in a platform environment that is in general more competitive and collaborative than classic accounts of Western platform capitalism would allow. As a leading edge of China’s transition to a digital economy, wanghong shares both continuities and discontinuities with other “platform societies” (van Djick et al. 2018). While autarkic in development, more recently elements in the wanghong industry have begun to exert greater influence on the global stage, whether through state-based imperatives or capitalist demands for growth.

In this chapter, we consider the rise of “global wanghong”, with reference to the regional and global extension of platforms, creator practices, and wanghong culture. Gathering up our cultural, creative, and social themes, global wanghong is considered across the perspectives of governance, platforms, creators, and culture. Like Jeroen de Kloet, Thomas Poell, Zeng Guohua and Chow Yiu Fai’s (2019) account of “China as method”, we approach global wanghong “in order to interrogate, complicate, and complement current research on the global rise of platform societies” (p. 250).

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We write amidst the backlash to the rise of global China. China’s pursuit of cybersovereignty and their own internet (Hong and Goodnight 2020) has itself been a response to United States-led platform imperialism and repeated attempts to dominate every market (Jin 2013). Rising platform nationalism, fueled in part by Sinophobia, may be the leading edge of a major pivot away from multilateralism, globalization, and historically high levels of global trade. The larger consequence of what we are experiencing in 2020 may prove to be a planet separated by multiple firewalls, a balkanized internet, and “tech-tonic” clashes between nations over political, economic, and socio-cultural power.

**Global Wanghong Governance Mandates**

Chapter 2 focused on the way Chinese tech and platform policy and regulation incubates, protects, as well as censors the wanghong industry. Consistent with Chinese party-state practice, top-down policies feature prominently in the nation’s advance towards a digital economy. These policies fostered tech and platform national champions (the BATs) that, as described in Chap. 3, proved vital to investments in fostering a competitive and collaborative platform landscape. In turn, these platforms operate as proxies for the state, charged with social governance, as evidenced by increasing commitments to content moderation, admonitions, and censorship, to prevent users, creators, and firms violating regularly calibrated cultural norms.

Policy directives advancing Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation incentivize not only platforms and businesses, but also wanghong creators and MCN firms, to build brands and careers. It is important to distinguish the outworking of mass entrepreneurship policies in the wanghong industry from merely the further advance of gig labor. Low margin platformed service-based labor, like food delivery and car sharing services, in China as much as anywhere else, involves a “third kind of worker” marked by diminished benefits, job protections, and employee rights, even dehumanization (Lu and Chen 2020).

Even though it is riddled with inequality and precarity, the wanghong industry is different. It occurs on a different array of platforms. Rather than service-based, this industry is co-dependent on creator entrepreneurialism and innovation, where value inheres in their individual or group brand ownership and development. The wide divergences of outcome for wanghong testify that value lies in entrepreneurial endeavor rather than in
a single, supervening platform-tech business model. Wanghong can succeed whether operating in the tier one cities or located in the “grassroots” where pig farmers like Liu Mama can “live-stream her life and make a fortune” (Liu 2018). Such enterprising creators emerged against the backdrop of earlier social policy that contributed to gender divides and economic policy that contributed to migration from countryside to city.

Chinese media policy now promotes universal high-speed internet access and smartphone usage, platform and app development, and online shopping and mobile banking. All the while, tech policy directed that great firewalls locked out competition. Initially engaging in “edge-ball” tactics that embodied vulgar and offensive violations of cultural norms, as the wanghong industry matured, so have creators. Pivoting to a “social-benefit” model, wanghong creators are the new national champions, building sustainable careers while trying to avoid state and platform scrutiny, and garnering the admiration of their followers as well as their sustaining support.

Chinese governance within the Great Firewall may have birthed an autarkic wanghong industry but, now in its adolescence, state policies are directing it over the wall. Chapter 3 noted the range of instruments for and instances of platform investment from abroad, such as United States-based Sequoia Capital, that continues to underwrite Chinese platforms. Since the late 1990s, this strategy of “attracting-in” (引进来 yin jinlai) also featured a “going-out” (走出去 zou chuqu) strategy, encouraging Chinese companies to look globally for investment opportunities and export (mostly manufacturing) products (Huang 2016). In the ICT sectors, the state encouraged Chinese internet companies to “go out” through “overseas mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, opening overseas branches” and through “providing internet services including industrial Cloud, supply chain management and big data analysis”, for the aim of incubating “Chinese Internet+ platforms with global influence” (The State Council 2015).

The ambition of China’s going-out strategy was first introduced by former president Jiang Zemin in 1999 and later articulated by former president Hu Jintao in 2007, which not only focused on international economic and business activities, but also included the aim of promoting the going-out of cultural products and presenting Chinese culture to the world (Li 2016). Officially named as “Cultural Going-out” (文化走出去 wenhua zou chuqu), the aim of this policy was to enhance Chinese “soft power” (软实力 ruan shili) globally—to increase the influence and appeal
of China through “persuasion and attraction” instead of coercion (Nye 2012). As Aynne Kokas (2017) and Weiying Peng and Michael Keane (2019) detailed, these initiatives sparked co-production and co-financing initiatives with Hollywood in the 2010s. However, the tactic of investing financially in Hollywood projects while also trying to intervene in storylines and character portrayals that where not sufficiently positive about China largely failed. The pathway of advocating for modern China to global audiences through Western narratives has been replaced by China’s film industry turning inward, producing Hollywood-style genre movies like action films Wolf Warrior 2 and sci-fi space operas The Wandering Earth. While these franchises secure massive box office returns domestically, emulating if also supplanting the mythmaking and nation-building once dominated by the United States “dream factory”, these cultural products barely register abroad outside of Chinese expatriates.

Of potentially much greater import is China pivoting towards a tech and platform-forward export strategy traced back to the launch of its “Belt and Road Initiatives” (BRI) in 2013. According to the Chinese authorities, the BRI aims to establish a comprehensive economic architecture that promises to mutually benefit all the regions and countries participating in the initiative (The State Council 2015; Huang 2016). This classically loose and highly flexible policy framework represents a fundamental shift from the previous bring-in and going-out strategies that predominantly focuses on export of manufacturing industry and foreign direct investment (FDI) from and to the developed economies (Huang 2016, p. 315). Within a few years of its launch, stage 2.0 of BRI shifted to include high-tech, high-value-added sectors along with low-value-added and labor-intensive manufacturing industries. The goal remained the same—to establish a more favorable international economic architecture that allows China to exert greater influence in global economic governance (Huang 2020).

The “digital silk road” (DSR) marks the next phase of BRI, predicated on the expansion of the material infrastructure of Chinese telecommunication and the “Chinese” internet across the targeted BRI regions. Within its own borders, Chinese tech has become an indispensable part of modern infrastructure of the digital economy, facilitating the international trade of goods and equipment. Now the mandate is to expand beyond their borders. As Hong Shen (2018, p. 2689) described, the Chinese state “encourages its homegrown internet companies to complement other team members in conquering foreign markets” and the Chinese internet industry in this process has identified themselves as a “boat to help other
Chinese companies when they venture out”. Outbound Chinese platforms like Alibaba and ByteDance are advancing a “digital empire in the making” (Keane and Yu 2019) and, along with it, components of the wang-hong industry are beginning to encroach into the territory of the global-scaling social media entertainment industry controlled by United States-owned platforms.

Inside the Firewall, and in the context of domestic tech policy, Chinese platforms have avoided accountability for violating user privacy and civil rights. Derived from Western liberal societies, these are international norms missing from the Chinese internet policy agenda. Instead, datafication becomes more than a fundamental mechanism for platform business, but also a crucial tool for social and cultural governance. This tool is best demonstrated by state investment in the social credit system: a “punishment/reward system based on credit scores that will determine whether citizens and organizations are able to access things like education, markets, and tax deductions” (Liang et al. 2018).

Outside the firewall, wanghong creators’ content and communication, poised to go out, face “cultural discount”. This notion is well theorized in studies of global audiovisual trade: in addition to language differences, cultural products are “rooted in one culture and thus attractive in that environment, will have diminished appeal elsewhere as viewers find it difficult to identify with the styles, values, beliefs, institutions and behavioral patterns of the material in question” (Hoskins et al. 1994, p. 367). For those projects inhibited by “narrowly nationalistic and realistic stories” (Mirrlees 2013, p. 3) are often “valued less by foreign viewers, who lack the cultural background needed to understand the product” (p. 181).

But the challenge extends beyond the cultural and linguistic to the demands by the state for creators to propagandize the virtues of China. “Tell good stories about China to the world” is a refrain oft repeated by President Xi Jinping (Xinhua 2016). Overtly nationalistic proselytization has rarely proven viable in any entertainment industry. But in the wang-hong industry such demands are in direct violation of the normative appeals towards authenticity by creators that drive community engagement.

This deviation from the international norm of internet governance has posed challenges for the global operation of Chinese internet and platform companies. Despite the constant efforts in expanding their overseas business, none of Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (BAT) has managed to achieve significant growth among international users and the majority of their online traffic remains from either the domestic Chinese market or overseas
Chinese communities (Negro 2017). The “Chineseness brand” intrinsic to these companies means that when it comes to political controversies (such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong), these companies ostensibly need to show their allegiance to the Chinese party state and “stereotypes and negative Western media coverage of Chinese issues like censorship” make it even harder for Chinese platforms to maintain a positive image among their international users (Negro 2017, p. 185).

As we will see in the next section, one path to secure wider success of Chinese platform companies has been to decouple from the purported “Chineseness brand”. Through a combination of parallel platforms and localization strategies, Chinese social media platforms have a proven ability to compete, even to surpass their United States competition, in tech and platform performance, but not in global competition with Western narratives formats and genres of culture and entertainment. Chinese ceding the popular culture field to Hollywood may be the price for a larger prize—supremacy in data, information, or surveillance capitalism.

Yet this strategy diverges from the tenet of “cultural going-out” and “soft power”, as advocated for decades by the Chinese state, and underlines the challenging conditions for any advance on that ambition. Chinese tech is now in direct competition with Silicon Valley. But the key cultural output of the two tech systems—the wanghong and SME industries—exist in starkly different operating environments. As we see in the next two sections, wanghong platforms have adopted parallel platform strategies, with creator-first localization and regionalization strategies. The consequence is creator segregation, preventing Chinese creators from going beyond the wall on Chinese-owned platforms. However, some Chinese and non-Chinese creators have developed cross-border, cross-platform strategies. These creator voices, despite increasing challenges, advance intercultural communication through shared affinities while seeking to overcome cultural discount and linguistic divides.

**GLOBAL WANGHONG PLATFORM STRATEGIES**

In Chap. 3, we saw how the wanghong platform landscape operates at the vanguard of the transformation of China’s digital economy. More technologically advanced than the SME platform landscape, we also described a more competitive and collaborative system that differs in key respects from central tenets of United States-driven digital and platform capitalism.

China’s well-tended tech garden is outgrowing its borders. The national champions like Tencent and Alibaba, along with second generation
platform firms like ByteDance, are ambitiously expanding their overseas empires. These private platform companies together with their unique platform affordances appear to have gained more credibility and “communication capacity” (Sun 2010) than the traditional media organizations like CCTV (China Central Television) and People’s Daily in the process of cultural “going-out”. With Tencent and Alibaba mainly target overseas Chinese population, the second-generation platforms like TikTok and Kwai aspire to expand their user base beyond the “Chinese-speaking” communities. However, these outsized successes have provoked anxieties in response to the expansion of Chinese platform power. Chinese tech has adopted a parallel platform strategy to address these anxieties and further expansion. But these strategies decouple “Chineseness”, potentially violating the state’s mandate for cultural “going out”.

The response by Chinese wanghong platforms to the political unrest in Hong Kong illustrates the challenges they face. On 30 June 2020, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of China enacted the Hong Kong national security law. One week later, Bytedance announced that it would pull TikTok out of that market. According to prior official statements, the platform did not store user data in China or follow Chinese government regulations to censor content. Nonetheless with passage of the national security law, the platform was perceived to be under complete surveillance by Beijing and would be forced to submit user data to the Chinese government (Haldane 2020). In its stead, however, some journalists speculated that in the future Bytedance will probably turn on Douyin, its domestic, more technologically advanced, version of TikTok in Hong Kong (AFP 2020).

Whereas Google, Facebook and Twitter continue to operate in Hong Kong and comply with Chinese state and Hong Kong police (Haldane 2020), TikTok’s departure epitomizes the complex global strategies adopted by Chinese social media platforms. By blocking access from Hong Kong users, TikTok signaled that they place user privacy and security alongside their own commercial interest while being unwilling to compromise their autonomy and independence in data management for a sustained Hong Kong market. But the increasing political strife in Hong Kong may still place ByteDance in an untenable situation. How might TikTok respond to Chinese government demands for the user data of Hong Kong activists or removal of anti-Chinese content? In this regard, replacing TikTok with Douyin appears to be a “win-win” for ByteDance.
Corporate Discourses

One strategy of decoupling starts with public-facing corporate discourses. On their international webpages, China-based platforms such as Alibaba, TikTok and Kwai identify themselves as global platforms, like their American counterparts Facebook and YouTube. Alibaba defines its mission as “to make it easy to do business anywhere”. TikTok sees itself as “the leading destination for short-form mobile video” while emphasizing they have “global offices including Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Dubai, Mumbai, Singapore, Jakarta, Seoul, and Tokyo”. Kwai claims to have “over 700 million users worldwide”, while without mentioning the majority of them are located in Mainland China.

This discourse is complimented by a display of visual images of international creators on their webpages (see Fig. 6.1). In a recent study of Alibaba’s electronic World Trade Platform, or eWTP, Alibaba features language combined with images that appeal to Westernized ideals of diversity, multiculturalism, and marginalized identities. These strategies help to deflect a focus on Alibaba’s eWTP ownership and participation within a China-centered, private-led digital trade regime (Seoane 2020).

In July 2020, TikTok published an update of its “Global Transparency Report”, which discloses the number of requests the platform has received from governments around the world for user information and content removal between July and December 2019. The report claims the platform follows the localized legal and professional procedures in dealing with these requests and provides detailed statistics and technical protocols surrounding content moderation. However, the list of countries in this and prior reports omitted any reference to China or the Chinese people.

By publishing the report, TikTok aspires to be known as a “global platform” not subject to the statutes of an authoritarian, illiberal, government. As promoted in the report, the platform features “thousands of people across the markets where TikTok operates working to maintain a safe and secure app environment for everyone” (TikTok 2020). This report also echoes earlier company statements that they “store all TikTok US user data in the United States, with backup redundancy in Singapore”. Reinforcing their autonomy from the Chinese state, the report claims that they do not “remove content based on sensitivities related to China” and “[have] never been asked by the Chinese government to remove any content and … would not do so if asked” (TikTok 2019).
Parallel Platforms

In addition to these corporate discourses decoupling from domestic governance regimes, Chinese platforms have pursued a dual platform strategy, launching international versions with similar, but not identical functions to their domestic apps. These include ecommerce platforms like Alibaba’s Aliexpress, and social video and social streaming platforms owned by Bytedance, Kuaishou, and Tencent. ByteDance and Kuaishou have adopted a similar strategy by launching Chinese and international versions. By renaming Douyin as TikTok, Kuaishou as Kwai, the international versions of these apps are only accessible in mobile app stores when users are outside China. Like their domestic counterparts, these platforms have
advanced the affordances of social presence (see Chap. 3). Whether through social streaming or social video, a mobile-first user-interface with in-app editing features, a voluble music library, and discovery algorithms, as of mid-2020, these apps have proven state-of-the-art and globally popular. Unlike their domestic counterparts, these platforms cannot emulate the same conditions and platform strategies of hyperplatformization and interplatformization including near frictionless interoperability across ecommerce platforms coupled with online mobile payment systems.

Beyond their socio-technological features and affordances, Douyin and Kuaishou’s international apps promote more liberalized platform practices, governance, and control. Both apps claim to have separate servers mostly located outside China and allow users to sign up through their American social media accounts such as Facebook and Google. Curiously, the sign-up pages of Douyin and Kuaishou also include these western social media plug-ins, but Chinese social media like WeChat and QQ are placed in more central positions. With regard to content moderation, these firms block outside content from coming into China but do not share or promote Chinese content across these platforms. Alongside the content, search and hashtags are completely different as are algorithmically-driven recommendations and discovery. As further discussed below, these are based on localized interests and appeal.

While censorship and propaganda are prevalent on Douyin and Kuaishou, TikTok and Kwai appear to be more lenient and even active in allowing and facilitating certain forms of online activism. For example, TikTok allows hashtags under its discover tab like #blacklivesmatter, #MyEarthHour, and #Forclimate, featuring critical socio-cultural issues in the West regarding racism, animal abuse and climate change. After TikTok’s apology for deleting a video about Uyghur education camps in Xinjiang, at least as of mid-2020, users can search and find content critical of the Chinese government, whether searching “Hong Kong” or “Uyghurs”.

But Fergus Ryan, Audrey Fritz, and Daria Impiombata (2020) qualify this, claiming they discovered “an algorithm with CCP characteristics” in which most of the content “glosses over the human rights tragedy unfolding there and instead provides a more politically convenient version for the CCP, replete with smiling and dancing Uyghurs” (p. 17). These developments may align with earlier proclamations by the platform, including Bytedance CEO Zhang Yiming, that the firm will continue to promote state interests, suggesting that these firms “can’t outrun Beijing’s shadow”
Despite the concern surrounding political discourses and control, these platforms are nonetheless generating growth in creator economies through a mix of creator-first, localization, and regional strategies.

**Localization: Creator-First and Regional Strategies**

Platforms like TikTok have also pursued “localization done at a global scale” (Tirosh 2019). Described as “parallel platformization” (Kaye et al. 2020), the co-evolution of different versions of these platforms comprise a “new paradigm of global platform expansion that differs from strategies of regionalization adopted by previous major social media platforms” (p. 1). Like their United States counterparts YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, these platforms use algorithms to feed user-generated content to online audiences based on their geo-locational and online behavioral data, stimulating online interactions among local users. These comprise a marked departure from the ethnocentric strategy by traditional media platforms whose audiences are comprised of overseas Chinese already familiar with the content (Keane and Chen 2017, p. 70).

Unlike their Western counterparts, however, Kwai and TikTok have pursued a “creator-first” strategy, localized within each market. Western platforms position their creators as minor stakeholders in their growth, relying more on digital advertising through ad-tech stacks in an increasingly monopolized landscape. Catapulted to compete globally outside of China, these platforms optimize native platform entrepreneurs for growth. TikTok recruits local wanghong creators, often through contests and challenges, enticing them and their fan communities on to these platforms, followed in rapid succession by advertisers and brands. In Australia, for example, former YouTube and Google executives have been hired to run TikTok offices and “oversee the creator and community ecosystem across the regions, which will involve developing creator opportunities and building support for communities across key verticals including LGBTQIA, sports, fashion, and education and science” (Cheik-Hussein 2020).

The combination of parallel platform and creator-first localization strategies have proven remarkable at driving scale and growth outside the country. In 2020, despite—or because of—the global pandemic, TikTok had a “monster year” (Newton 2020). This expansion is not uniform globally. Rather than compete with United States platforms in the Euro-American markets, these firms have focused on emerging social media
markets including India, Southeast Asia, Brazil, Russia, and Africa. The large populations and the underdeveloped internet and social media economy in those regions have provided great opportunities for Chinese wanguhong platform companies, with less competition from their international rivals. This platform strategy follows a similar route mapped by China’s agenda with its Belt and Road Initiatives.

These developments have been followed by a wave of Chinese firms emulating these international platform strategies, whether launching their own or acquiring platforms. Before India shut them down in 2020, 6 of the top 10 most downloaded apps in that country were Chinese-owned (Business Insider 2019). Aside from TikTok (at the top on the list), Likee (by JOYY), Helo (ByteDance) and Vmate (by Alibaba) are Chinese social media platforms developed exclusively for overseas markets. Bytedance’s closest domestic competitor, Kuaishou, developed Uvideo for India, LOLita for Egypt, Vistatus for Brazil, and Snack Video for Indonesia and Vietnam. Bigo Live, a leading livestreaming platform in Southeast Asia, was originally a start-up company based in Singapore. In 2019, the platform was merged by JOYY, a NASDAQ listed Chinese platform company, which owns the popular Chinese livestreaming platforms YY and Huya. Like TikTok and Kwai, these apps were developed for specific regions and target markets, while adopting localized aesthetics, languages and habits in affordances and marketing, and competing for local creators.

If the dominance of the big five American platforms, the GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft), has resulted in the “platformization” of the web and social-economic infrastructures and the “infrastructuralization of platforms” (Helmond 2015; Plantin et al. 2018; Nieborg and Poell 2018), then within the global “platform society” (van Djick et al. 2018) now there is also a trend we term “platformization from China”. The platform logics that have been largely developed in the techno-political economy of contemporary China have penetrated well beyond.

Bytedance, in particular, has proven formidable in its global expansion, taking “Asia by storm” (Keane and Yu 2019), becoming the “China’s first global app” (Li 2020). According to the industry-site Business of Apps (2020), as of January 2020, TikTok was one of the most downloaded apps in the world with over 800 million monthly average users (MAUs), available in 150 markets and 39 languages, while turning Bytedance into “the world’s most highly valued private startup”. The firm flexed its global muscle by hiring prominent Disney executive, Kevin Mayer, to run their American operations (Isaac 2020). But all that changed a few months later.
**International Backlash**

2019–2020 has seen what may be the start of a major pivot in the global digital economy. There were already key drivers of a retreat from globalization: the rise of right-wing populism in the United States, the United Kingdom, Eastern and Central Europe, and Brazil, major cybersecurity concerns based around global Chinese tech infrastructure players (Huawei and LTE) and roll outs of the BRI and aggressive Chinese “wolf warrior” diplomacy. COVID-19’s planetary restrictions on movement and its triggering deep global recession accelerated that pivot. Wanghong platforms Bytedance and TikTok have come to take center stage in these dramatic reversals. Enjoying huge growth in this period, they have been charged of infringement of copyright and user privacy as well as online discrimination against vulnerable minorities, in violation of the norms of platform governance (Hern 2020). Malaysia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Egypt have either banned the platform, insisted that users secure local licenses to post content (Shukry 2020), demanded that the platform remove offensive content (Ahmed 2020), and/or arrested citizens for posting content critical of the government or “violating family values” (Walsh 2020).

India has gone a lot further, signaling a rising tide of platform nationalism pitted against Chinese platform power. Chris Stokel-Walker (2021) points out that TikTok was “banking on India for its future”, targeting the entire country with an advertising blitz while offering thousands of dollars in payments for leading Instagram creators to join its platform. However, in mid-2020, India banned 50 Chinese apps, including WeChat and TikTok, the latter losing 300 million subscribers, claiming a “security issue”. It then banned more than 100 Chinese apps, including popular video game PUBG, Baidu’s search engine, and the online mobile payment system Alipay (Kastrenakes 2020). These developments were, in some regards, a consequence of rising border tensions between the countries, although they have exposed larger cultural tensions as well. Indian Youtubers launched a “boycott China” campaign, giving millions of one-star ratings to Chinese TikTok that drove down its rankings in the Indian app market (Kumar 2020). These tensions reflect how “ordinary Indians couldn’t help feel that they were seeing a cultural invasion alongside a nascent physical one on their borders” (Stokel-Walker 2021).

Accompanying these bans, there was a rapid expansion of Indian-owned direct emulators of TikTok’s short video user-interface and functions: Mitron, Chingari, and Bolo Indya. The emulation extended to
creator-driven strategy. Bolo Indya’s founder openly invited “all the TikTok stars from India to be a part of the fast-growing growing Bolo Indya community” that claims to be committed to “the government’s guidelines for user-generated content platforms and data security” (Singh 2020).

The backlash pattern has been repeated in the United States, although in some respects the damage has been self-inflicted, reflecting poor, culturally naïve, Chinese platform management. In 2020, Kuaishou launched Zynn to complete against Bytedance’s TikTok, only specifically “tailor-made” for the United States market (Zhang 2020). Zynn emulated TikTok’s features—short social video featuring a mobile-first in-app user interface and a deep music library made available in international app stores. However, Zynn committed a massive misstep by allowing creators to “freeload” stolen content from other platforms, namely TikTok. In addition, the platform offered to pay users to download the app. After scaling rapidly to first place in the United States app market, the platform was banned from United States app stores (Matsakis 2020). United States Senator Josh Hawley, a critic of both United States and Chinese tech industry practices, called for a government inquiry into Zynn, claiming the platform’s practices “smacks of a textbook predatory-pricing scheme, one calculated to attain immediate market dominance for Zynn by driving competitors out of the market” (McGill 2020).

Platform malfeasance and mismanagement was met by an upswell of United States platform nationalism. In mid-2020, the Trump administration threatened bans of WeChat and announced a forced divestment of TikTok by its Chinese owners (Perez 2020; Nicas et al. 2019). Typically couched as cybersecurity issues, they signaled a “proxy battle in the United States China tech war” (Marks 2020). These moves may have been a case of cynical electioneering—pure optics by Trump in his bid to win a second Presidential election. Trump appeals to his base by not only standing up to Chinese tech and platform power but playing into Sinophobic fears arising from the coronavirus that first appeared in Wuhan. These may also be efforts to deflect from his own mismanagement of the epidemic—“a China quagmire of his own making” (McGraw 2020).

This United States attack on TikTok is, at time of writing, still playing out. Oracle, a United States cloud-based data management tech behemoth, partnered with Walmart to enter into a “platform partnership” with a minor stake in the United States portion of TikTok. This offer “falls short”, with no genuine intention of resolving United States security
concerns (Overly 2020). However, the underlying motivations for said deal prove dubious. As we noted in Chap. 3, United States venture capital firm Sequoia Capital is a major investor in Bytedance. They are also an investor in Oracle, and have been accused of possibly being the driving the bid for TikTok (Winkler et al. 2020). There are potential synergies between TikTok’s creator-driven consumer base, Oracle’s aspirations to compete in cloud-based computing, and Walmart’s efforts to compete with Amazon through e-commerce. In addition, the scions of Oracle’s owner operate two leading Hollywood production companies, Skydance Media and Annapurna, and they may see opportunities for entertainment IP-exploitation (Stokel-Walker 2020).

In other words, Trump’s political ploy may still be part of a larger effort by Silicon Valley to emulate China’s wanghong economy. In late 2019, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg delivered a speech calling for Chinese platforms to be banned or restricted. Zuckerberg claimed platforms like TikTok censor democratic-led protests and failed to protect user privacy. He further “cited data localization as a major concern as it could help authoritarian governments improperly access user data” (Bell 2019). Zuckerberg’s stance, bordering on Sinophobia, was also, at the least, self-serving. In 2019, the European Union introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) specifically in response to the lack of adequate privacy protections by United States platforms, including Facebook and Instagram (Solon 2018).

Zuckerberg’s alarmist speech failed to mention that Facebook-owned Instagram was launching Reels, a competitor for TikTok, in India and Brazil, and later in the United States. Emulating Zynn, Instagram is buying TikTok creators to grow Reels, offering “financial incentives to TikTok users with millions of followers to persuade them to use a new competing service, an escalation in a high-stakes showdown between the two social-media giants” (Choi 2020). Similarly, YouTube has launched Shorts, a short video format deemed a TikTok-like platform, even if it lacks all the state-of-the-art socio-technical architecture of Chinese apps described in Chap. 3.

The United States platforms are attempting to emulate the interplatformization and social commerce strategies of the wanghong industry, whether by connecting to outside ecommerce platforms or by introducing ecommerce “markets” across their own. In 2017, Amazon launched Amazon associates designed for Twitch streamers to “provide a seamless way for audiences to buy select products” (Krefetz 2017). Instagram’s
Marketplace allows companies and brands to sell products and services on the platform, including a “Shopping from Creators” feature launched in 2019. In mid-2020, YouTube announced a new eCommerce feature, awkwardly referred to as “products you see in the video”, in which any brand featured in a video can be purchased. Creators “would be able to earn revenue from product placements in a much bigger way all in all, as it would be more likely that users would click on suggestions given right then and there rather than relying on them searching for a product that has been marketed to them” (Muhammed 2010).

This widespread atmosphere of profound uncertainty raises questions about the experience of individual creators in the globalization of the wanghong economy. As the previous chapters have shown, the wanghong economy forms a complex ecology in which state power interacts with capital, technology, and most importantly individual creators. We finally turn to the way globalization of the wanghong economy not only plays out in the dynamics of policy, capital, and platforms, but also through the cross-border practices of wanghong and SME practitioners, their creativity and culture.

**Global Wanghong Creators and Culture**

In Chap. 4, we traced the evolution of wanghong creators—from the rise of KOL (key opinion leaders) crafting online IP and extending their cultural value to online communities, to native mostly amateur wanghong going professional and in some instances, securing Big-V status through their online entrepreneurialism. We also distinguished social creators, more often livestreaming zhubo or showroom hosts, whose revenue streams are reliant less upon specific knowledge and DIY skills than upon their ability for online socialization, converting attention, engagement, and play into commercial value.

The “Big V” creators secure vast remuneration from social+ business models like social tipping and social commerce. Wanghong creators are the stars of China’s globally advanced games and esports industry. Livestreaming zhubo are influencing the sale of everything from lipstick to rocket systems. An industry of “virtual girlfriends” converts lonely guys into paying customers in exchange for online intimacy otherwise denied to millions of lonely souls floating over China’s bustling megalopolises. These same conditions have afforded a class of “unlikely creators” to secure greater social mobility across the platforms. Tens of thousands of wanghong firms, coined “MCNs”, operate as management intermediaries
between platforms, creators, brands, and services. Whereas these firms were “synonymous with failure” (Rapp 2019) in the SME industry, Chinese MCNs have flourished. With more diverse types and practice than their SME counterparts, and the assistance of MCNs, wanghong creators have become “gateways to Chinese consumers” (Fan and Backaler 2018) and vital facilitators of China’s digital economy. Media accounts suggest that Chinese creators “yield much better returns than their Western counterparts” (WalktheChat 2019) and provide “lessons we can learn from the Chinese influencer ecosystem” (Schwarz 2020).

Even as Chinese platforms have scaled globally, their hyper and inter-platformization strategies in China have proven less viable outside, where national industries in retail, marketing, banking, credit, and advertising are more mature and influential and are aided by protectionist government regulations eager to thwart Chinese competition. For example, Alibaba’s international platform is AliExpress, which operates in direct competition with Amazon but lacks the advantages of its China-only consumer-to-consumer (C2C) Taobao stores. As we saw in Chap. 3, wanghong creators not only thrive from selling e-commerce through their Taobao stores linked across all their platforms and channels, but Taobao has incorporated livestreaming functions for wanghong creators directly on the platform. As Zhang Dayi, once the most prominent wanghong creator in China, described, extending her online brand and business abroad has proven challenging. This is due to the difference in ecommerce infrastructure and retail buying patterns: “They are not used to buying things on Taobao, so it takes time. But now we’re focusing on growing followers on social media and will work on getting to the transaction later” (Pan 2017).

In Chap. 5, we explored how wanghong creators, once held in contempt, have secured greater cultural value, whether through appeals to vernacular or traditional Chinese culture or by symbolizing the rise of modern Chinese cosmopolitanism. This radical shift in cultural value is epitomized by the extent to which established media celebrities now plan to extend their profile (and income) by engaging with and through the wanghong ecology. But the significance of wanghong culture, we argue, is captured best by the rise of the “unlikely” social class of rural creators, emerging out of agrarian, manufacturing, and service-based economies as platformed labor and entrepreneurs. The bucolic everydayness of their content proves to be intrinsic to their success and sustainability, part of a longer tradition in Chinese popular culture that values rurality and authenticity.
But, where creative impulses meet platformed economic and cultural power, so does exposure and political precarity. Most notably, social creators risk backlash and censorship from the very same state-based policies and the platforms that empowered them. Driven towards ever-increasing practices of commercialization, and comparable to Western critiques of “aspirational” creator labor (Duffy 2017), Chinese creators progress towards the performance of personality, or renshi, for greater profit. Yet, in the poetics of lighthearted resistance in wanghong culture, we also witness often contradictory dimensions of modern Chinese culture. Wanghong creators may adhere to hyperconsumerism and the commodification of the social. But they have also been afforded the means for both greater social mobility and self-representation. Further contrast from the conditions within established media industries, wanghong culture may also comprise a break from the normative patterns of China’s traditional hierarchical society, as outlined in Chap. 5.

This includes the most unlikely of classes, creators operating at the grassroots level, some of whom have also transformed into commercially successful YouTubers. As cited in earlier chapters, rural creators like Li Ziqi (Fig. 6.2) and Dianxi Xiaoge have become successful at promoting traditional and rural Chinese culture and lifestyles across wanghong

Fig. 6.2 Li Ziqi making food in her video
platforms. They have also emerged across SME platforms to secure millions of subscribers and views. People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (Li 2020, Jan 1), praises creators like Li Ziqi for “opening a new window to let the world see the beauty of China” and their success serves as “a valuable model to study Chinese international cultural communication”. The vernacular and performed “authenticity” of these wanghong culture seems to not only resonate with the everyday life experiences of domestic Chinese population but also holds great appeal to the international audiences.

How are these creators understood by international audiences? Who are their followers on YouTube—Chinese expats, cosmopolitan foodies, and cultural tourists? As compared to culturally affirmative Chinese domestic blockbusters like Wolf Warrior 2 and The Wandering Earth, are these creators consumed as yet another instance of Western Orientalism in the sense elaborated by Edward Said (1978)? If so, how does this align with the cultural soft power ambitions of the state to promote a modern China?

Witness these tensions in a 2020 scandal regarding estimates of Li Ziqi’s fortune. When a tech blogger claimed in a viral video that Li Ziqi makes USD 24 million from YouTube, the news stirred a backlash in China. Li Ziqi quickly dismissed the claims, perhaps out of fear of state retribution which had previously praised her for “promoting traditional Chinese to an international audience”. However, Li Ziqi’s parent company claimed to have secured a million dollars from YouTube advertising, and USD 50 million from the sales of her branded products on Alibaba’s Tmall ecommerce platform (Yan 2020).

Other factors such as cultural discount, particularly around language, may still play a factor in the success of wanghong creators abroad. Whereas English-speaking gamers like Ninja, Markiplier, and Pewdiepie dominate global scaling SME, Chinese gamers are trapped within their Mandarin commentary systems. Yet, these gamers have little cause to go out while rising up the ranks of China’s game and esports industry (which is the biggest national industry in the world) and securing lucrative salaries on competing gameplay platforms like Huya and Douyu. As mentioned in Chap. 5, gamer Buquiren has half a million followers on YouTube in addition to eleven million on Huya.

Other Chinese verticals and classes of wanghong creators see little opportunity, or need, to compete against SME creators or to demand a position in the competition between these industries. Chinese travel
Wanghong, for example, deliver their virtual postcards directly on wanghong platforms available from abroad, although most can only be downloaded through Chinese app stores. Cross-border practices between SME and wanghong creators have more readily flowed in the opposite direction. Western creators, like Israeli entrepreneur Raz Gavin or 9-year-old American Gavin Thomas, are “riding China’s e-celebrity wave” (Yu 2020), claiming millions of followers on Chinese platforms. However, these accounts, featuring prominently in state-run media such as China Daily and CGTN, may be as much propaganda as profiteering. But the United States media, like CNN, which claimed that the infant Thomas had “struck a chord with millions of Chinese internet users” (Wang and Kleinhenz 2018), have been happy enough to go along.

Rather, the demand is from outside China, with commercial interests looking to use wanghong creators’ profiles to tap into China’s rising middle class. In 2018, Japanese department store Matsuya Ginza hired Candy Lian, a Chinese lifestyle creator, to livestream on Weibo and WeChat from within Tokyo’s upscale shopping district. The result was a 20-fold increase in subscribers on Ginza’s online shopping site designated solely for Chinese consumers (Yoshizawa 2018). While conducting interviews with the United States-born CEO of Parklu, a Chinese MCN based in Hong Kong and Shanghai, we witnessed a Taiwanese creator livestream simultaneously for an hour across six Chinese platforms at a makeup counter, selling out the latest brand of perfume from a French supplier.

**Wanghong Futures**

China displays a bedrock adherence to the depth of its culture that is expressed through consistent deployment of cultural industries frameworks. It has been investing hugely in reforms to oversee the growth of especially the digital creative industries. And it arguably has led the world in what we have called social industries. Drawing these themes together, we have sought to provide a critical media industries account of the rise of this creator and platform-driven industry. Through cultural, creative, and social policies, the wanghong industry has been protected, incubated, and controlled, before extending out beyond the wall. The rise of Chinese platform and portal power includes the accelerated advance towards the affordances of social presence that feature social+ business models commercially empowering wanghong creators and management firms. Wanghong culture has emerged even under ever-increasing state and
platform-based scrutiny and surveillance to include “unlikely” creativity from the rural margins of Chinese society, and to be called on by the authorities to discharge responsibility for generating work and careers amongst those marginalized. It also increasingly sits centrally in the advancement of China’s tech innovation and leadership and the stimulation of its consumer economy.

We write at a time—late 2020—which is witnessing rising tensions that are far deeper than the concerns raised about media globalization. The backlash towards—potentially escalating to attempted banishment from certain jurisdictions of—Chinese tech, platforms, and apps, including consumer technology and telecommunications firms like Xiaomi and Huawei, has focused notably around the global success and data management of Bytedance-owned platform, TikTok. Such extreme backlash is usually couched as threats to national security and cybersovereignty. It is also motivated by emerging forms of platform nationalism that trigger less free trade and less open borders. In seeking to limit Chinese going-out, the ironic result may be the beginnings of other national, regional, or alliance-based “firewalls”. There is already firm prognostication of two internets—by ex Google CEO Eric Schmidt—and a “splinternet” (Wright 2019). We are cognizant of and not unsympathetic to the forces questioning the claims of unalloyed benefit heralded by globalization that have resulted in the rise of right-wing populism and authoritarianism in many countries in recent years. But the major infrastructural underpinning for global, bottom-up, popular cultural communication is threatened by the balkanization of the internet and with it, diminished hope for the liberalization of cultures and communities. 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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