CHAPTER 5

Culture

INTRODUCTION

When online traffic becomes monetizable, it also becomes someone’s faith. Catching attention is the “bible” of many “wanghong”. 10,000 likes can drive some of them to go against science and common sense; With 100,000, they may ignore social justice and moral ethics; When it goes to 1 million, they will dare to challenge our social order and law.

CCTV (2019)

Many people call me wanghong, but what makes me different is that I have something real. I never attempt histrionics but do things step by step. I’m taking this seriously. People like me because I’m simple and direct, with nothing garish. This’s also how I view myself: I’m just an ordinary person—a cook. On the right platform, at the right time and by the right expertise, I became a so-called “wanghong”, yet I still prefer people addressing me as a cook. This title wanghong actually doesn’t matter.

Wang Gang (2018)

The complexities of wanghong we have explored so far, involving governance, the industry, platforms, and labor, cannot be fully understood without an account of its culture, its textuality, and the intersubjective relations developed in its vigorous cyberspaces. Its immense popularity, coupled with the rich diversity, has given rise to as much discursive
controversy as economic and social vibrancy. Anyone might be a wanghong, as we suggested at the end of Chap. 3, yet as the epigraphs to this chapter testify, it has also been stigmatized to the extent that almost no one will faithfully identify with this notorious job description.

This surrounding stigma testifies to the cultural dilemma of wanghong in today’s China. On the one hand, wanghong have often been criticized by the public media and elites for being irresponsible and hedonistic, with regard to the materialistic values that are practiced by these grassroots individuals who obtain popularity and financial success in such a short time, without sufficient, or professional, training. The success of amateurs offends the deeply Confucian value placed on education, but it should not be forgotten that many of the stars of Western tech and entertainment were often dropouts. Ostensibly, wanghong signify a commercial culture that is deeply depoliticized and non-revolutionary, far distanced from those rebellious youth of the May Fourth movement as well as those Red Guard youth active during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s. It is individualism and consumerism that defines the values and lifestyles performed by these online influencers and their fans.

On the other hand, suggested by the remark on the official Chinese TV channel CCTV in the epigraph, in the eyes of the authorities the vibrant mass participation and inclusiveness of wanghong also pose a potential threat to the social, political, and cultural order fashioned by China’s one-party system. The focus on domestic consumption and the digital economy, as we saw in Chap. 2, is the cutting edge of national restructuring and employment, yet the diversity and creative spirit shown in wanghong culture also may unleash disruptive expression that may undermine the legitimacy of a “harmonious” national culture.

Skepticism from the elites and the state has never managed fully to inhibit the online vibrancy of wanghong culture, yet it does point to, and genuinely reflect, the paradoxical nature of its reception. Fundamentally, if consumerism and commodified entertainment culture embedded in wanghong practice is 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? To address this question and to unravel the cultural dilemma of wanghong, we need to take the poetics and politics of wanghong seriously. We first need to locate it in the trajectory of cultural history in contemporary China.
The birth of wanghong can, arguably, be recognized as the continuation of the transforming “revolutionary” youth culture of previous decades. Consumerism and individualism did not originate when China went online, but was ultimately the cultural result of China’s marketization reform program and its one child policy since the 1980s. From the indie rock music in late 1980s to Wang Shuo’s “hooligan” novels and to Han Han’s online blogs, a cynical yet euphoric, rebellious and anti-hegemonic posture intermingles with consumerism and individualism facilitated by the burgeoning market economy (Rofel 2007; de Kloet 2010; Clark 2012; Strafella and Berg 2015; de Kloet and Fung 2017).

There is a bright line to be drawn from these phenomena to *A Bloody Case Caused by a Steamed Bun* (Hu 2006), a viral video widely circulated online in 2006 which marked the inception of Chinese online participatory culture. Saturated with parody, mimicry and remix, the video spoofs Chinese “official” culture in the form of Chen Kaige’s film *The Promise* (2005) in its bricolage of CCTV news program, entertainment shows and popular music. At first sight, the aesthetics of *A Steamed Bun* are amateurish: the rough visual quality and the non-professional editing of footage, thus echoing the often-claimed authenticity of user-generated content, or “grassroots creation”, as referred to by the video’s creator Hu Ge himself (Xiong 2018).

This grassroots aesthetic pinpoints the inauthenticity of Chinese blockbuster cinema, represented by Chen Kaige’s film. Besides this, in Hu Ge’s mimicry of the CCTV program *Report on Chinese Rule of Law*, we can also trace a more muted implication of inauthenticity in the supposed solemnity of the state media, teased and dissolved into the amusing and entertaining effects of the video. The playful use of visual and vocal language is subversive in the sense coined by Haiqing Yu: it is a form of “light-hearted resistance”, which does not “challenge the mainstream culture (be it political or business), but rather deconstructs it through playful (mis)use (and often juxtaposition) of the available resources” (Yu 2007, p. 429).

Fast forward more than a decade and this light-hearted resistance continues to be detected in Chinese cyberspace. For example, a special genre of visual culture that has become widely popular on the platform Bilibili is named guichu (鬼畜) videos, which literally means Ghost Beast. Similar to mashups widely popular on western platforms, guichu refers to those
online videos remixing a variety of existing audio-visual clips to create highly amusing content (see Chap. 4 and Fung and Yin 2019). Moreover, as we will show in this chapter, with increasing capitalization and state territorialization of the Chinese internet, social media spaces have witnessed a massive expansion in wanghong expressive genres or, “verticals”. In the western context, as we have seen, the three verticals native-to-SME culture are categorized as vlogging, gameplay and Do-It-Yourself (how-to videos) (Cunningham and Craig 2019). Chinese wanghong culture, however, includes a greater diversity in formats and content verticals, from old-fashioned text-image-based online writing (mostly circulated on Weibo, WeChat and Douban) to more visualized short videos (mostly notably on Douyin, Kuaishou, Xigua and Bilibili) and live-streaming (Douyu, Huya and Kuaishou).

Across these different platforms, we identify three categories of wanghong content: cultural, creative, and social (see Figs. 5.1 and 5.2). Cultural

Fig. 5.1 Taxonomy of Wanghong content
wanghong content refers to those performers, genres, and formats highly related to the established media industries and mainstream heritage culture, including genres of celebrity (pop stars active on wanghong platforms), education (various contents promoting popular science, knowledge, language, and professional skills), and positive values (channels run by Chinese state-media and official institutions promoting the so-called positive values (正能量 zheng nengliang)). Creative wanghong content, in comparison, includes more diverse and vernacular creative genres on the platforms, including DIY and vlogging (such as unboxing, cooking, beauty and fashion), creative skills (magic, cosplay, gameplay, crafting, rural living, and singing) and comedy (fictional short sitcoms, talk shows, and food commentaries) (Fig. 5.2). The creators of the content fall in the creative wanghong category as identified in Chap. 4 (see Fig. 4.1). Finally, social wanghong content is characterized by the social nature of online content and their emphasis on the social skills (instead of cultural and creative expertise). Among them, most notably are the

**Fig. 5.2** The main genres of content
various shows documenting creators’ pets, travel and food tasting, livestreaming shows featuring beautiful girls’ and boys’ performance and interaction with their online followers, and more recently live commerce (as shown in the following, Li Jiaqi’s livestreaming channel resembles the traditional television shopping shows, but offers a seemingly more objective comparison and evaluation of products, as well as a more convenient shopping experience).

As we also stated in Chap. 4, the boundary between these categories are not always well-defined. There are both commonalities and overlaps that bridge cultural, creative, and social content. Primarily, behind such an immense and diverse pool of content is the deepening of commodification of the platform economy (van Dijck et al. 2018) that also manages to offer widespread opportunity to all manner of individuals in a “participatory” and “convergence” culture (Jenkins 2006; see also Jenkins et al. 2013). Wanghong culture constitutes an extension and intensification of the cultural industries and the commercial popular culture, in which cultural production and commodification have been expanded to incorporate the vernacular creativities (Burgess 2006) of massive numbers of individuals from almost all social classes. Typifying Sarah Banet-Weiser’s (2012) account of brand culture, commercial interests are no longer seen as separate from cultural meaning but are inherent in the motivation and practice of symbolic creation.

The anti-hegemonic spirit embedded in the youth culture of previous decades has continued but morphed into a version of Yu’s light-hearted resistance which we read through the lens of Esther Peeren’s notion of “boredom creativity” (Peeren 2019). The current generation of wanghong creators, such as Huanong Brothers, Wang Gang, Li Ziqi, and Li Jiaqi, exhibit a content aesthetics in which “the product of creativity is not valued aesthetically but solely in terms of whether it draws and engages the attention of the nominally bored” (Peeren 2019, p. 105). What kind of boredom drives millions of online followers to watch cooking, fishing, unboxing, gaming and even sleeping videos made by wanghong creators? Wanghong, similarly bored by their routine and often marginalized lives, turn those lives and routines creatively into entry-level light-hearted resistance. As we show in the following sections, this “boredom culture” 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.
The two dynamics that energize and underpin wanghong popularity are their claims to authenticity and the “unlikeliness” that such marginalized people could rise to such prominence. The widely shared discourse of authenticity is performed through creators’ accents, dress, speech, and tools, leading to user participation and social intimacy between creators and their followers. Claims to authenticity are reinforced by the unlikeliness of such creators—in the sense that those marginal and previously voiceless Chinese individuals have become popular online figures and, as we will see, their tedious everyday experiences are transformed into “grotesque”, “useless”, “spectacular”, “meaningless”, but creative and entertaining content. Wanghong culture is characterized, like Chinese youth culture portrayed by de Kloet and Fung (2017, p. 27), by a “paradoxical co-creation” between individuals, the state, and the market. It produces spaces for “experimenting with different cultural repertoires” (2017, p. 16), while not necessarily qualifying as “anti-hegemonic struggles”. Instead, this vibrant online culture, evidenced also by de Kloet and Fung’s discussion of memes (2017, p. 86), provides “a joyful playground” for Chinese netizens to “express what cannot be expressed” in the established screen culture.

**Wanghong as Authentic**

In September 2019, a video titled *One Hundred Reasons to Eat Bamboo Rats* went viral on Chinese social media. In this video, creator Liu Suliang stands inside the farm shed and “teases” the bamboo rats he raises. Some have sunstroke, he remarks dryly, some are depressed, some have lost their fight, and some have eaten too much. All these “misbehaviours” lead to the same destiny: they will be cooked into a nice meal, either barbecued, steamed, or braised. Aside from few critiques of being cruel to animals, most online viewers find amusing Liu Suliang’s deadpan style of interaction with bamboo rats. Since 2017, Liu Suliang and his partner Hu Yueqing have launched their channel Huanong Brothers (华农兄弟) on Xigua and Bilibili, two of the most popular wanghong video platforms in China. Their videos document their everyday life on their farm, such as feeding and petting the bamboo rats, pigs, and dogs, as well as exploring local fruits and vegetables grown in their village. By 2020, they have managed to obtain over 5 million followers on Bilibili, 3 million on Xigua and 500 thousand on YouTube, becoming one of trendiest wanghong teams in China. Liu Suliang expertly appears shy in front of the camera, and the
non-professional production and the rough quality of their videos add to the claimed “authenticity” of their online aesthetics. Everything looks and feels real in the video: Liu Suliang is a real farmer, as well as his animals (Fig. 5.3). It is this authentic documentary of life in the countryside that attracts followers—“it brings us the simple happiness of country life” (Short Video Factory 2018, n.p.).

Huanong’s videos represent a widely popular group of wanghong contents we call simply “countryside life” (see Fig. 5.2). Popular creators such as Grandpa Amu (wood crafting), Dianxi Xiaoge (cooking), and A Feng and Lao Si (fishing) are other exponents of this category. These creators often choose short videos and livestreaming as main formats to document their everyday rural life and authenticity is produced through exotic food, local accents, as well as unfashionable clothes and no make-up. These videos are both creative and social (see Fig. 5.2), demonstrating the interplay of vernacular creativity coupled with online sociality.

Fig. 5.3  Liu Suliang and his bamboo rat
Authenticity is not only produced by creators’ appearance and demeanor, but also by epitomizing deeply-held, residual symbolic values. Li Ziqi provides a sharp contrast to the aesthetics represented by Huanong Brothers. Li Ziqi’s videos are also made in the Chinese countryside yet showcase a much more exquisite, professional aesthetic. If the key feature of Huanong content is raw authenticity, Li’s videos invoke traditional Chinese watercolor portraiture of country life. Soybean, peanut, pomelo, cotton, bamboo, corn, rice—familiar everyday ingredients are made into delicate dishes or artefacts through her extraordinary artisanal handiwork framed in the videos’ evocative visual language (Fig. 6.2, see Chap. 6). In these typically 10-minute shows, Li rarely speaks but performs her proficient cooking and crafting skills in the scenes that are elaborately set and filmed. These spectacles of the Chinese country life echo Chinese traditional idyll verses like *In people’s haunt I build my cot; Of wheel’s and hoof’s noise I hear not* by the ancient poet Tao Yuanmin (translated by Xu Yuanchong, Ye 2016), whose poems have been read as depicting the utopian dreams of Chinese traditional intellectuals.

The popularity of Li Ziqi, according to her followers, is attributed to her archaic depiction of nature, falling into the imagined tranquility of the pastoral in the eyes of those who live a hectic urban life (Wang 2018). In comparison to the Huanong Brothers, the embellished rurality in Ziqi’s videos enacts a different sense of authenticity, which is constructed in the classic dichotomy between the mechanistic urban-and the organic-natural. The performative character of her authenticity thus becomes necessary, given the fact that the real village life can be as much mechanical and arduous as urban life. In any case, the actual production work of either Huanong Brothers or Li Ziqi takes intensive work.

Aside from content depicting countryside life, the authenticity approach is widely adopted by almost all forms of wanghong contents across the three categories (Fig. 5.2) mapped earlier. On Douyin, for example, the well-known Chinese film actress Zhou Dongyu posted short videos of her funny moment with an elephant in the zoo, her imitation of Papi Jiang (a popular wanghong comedian), or the simple food she cooked at home. In stark contrast to characters that she played in her films, Zhou’s Douyin content goes “off-screen” to depict her home life in all its simple banality. She even uses her phone camera and the built-in editing tools offered by the platform.

*Zhu Yidan’s Boring Life* traverses the border between fiction and non-fiction, documentary and scripted, and cultural, professionally-generated
Fig. 5.4 One episode of Zhu Yidan’s Boring Life

wanghong content and amateur, creative, content. Like series television, Boring Life is a scripted, comedic web series inspired by real-world accounts of boss Zhu Yidan and his employees. Yet, as shown in Fig. 5.4, Yidan cast amateur actors in all the roles and the series is shot in real-world offices, restaurants, and streets with little cinematic or artificial production design. Coupled with simple directing and minimal editing, this production has found a loyal fan following through its appeals to authenticity in the storytelling and production values.

The question of wanghong authenticity occupies a space in a long tradition of Chinese popular culture. Directors active in the independent documentary movement in the 1990s, for example, also trumpeted their work as creating a sense of “xianchang” (现场 on-the-spot) through their
work of filming on location. This practice was chosen by these indie directors as a resistance to their predecessors in the Maoist era when films and documentaries had to serve the propaganda and educational rules and thus were mostly made in studios with pre-planned scripts or archival footages (Zhang 2006; Robinson 2013). Documentaries characterized by xianchang are recognized as independent and alternative to the mainstream Chinese cinema because they attempt, Luke Robinson observes, “a certain spontaneous quality understood as inherent to such filmmaking, for since what happened on the physical space of ‘the scene’ was beyond the control of the filmmaker, xianchang as a practice was considered to be intrinsically open-ended and indeterminate” (2013, p. 5). The aesthetics of xianchang thus emphasize the authenticity of their filming and challenges the dominant cinematic ideology. But compared to Chinese independent documentaries, wanghong content in contemporary China is by and large apolitical and is intricately involved in commercial, mainstream society. Its amateurish spirit echoes populism instead of the elitism as practiced by the 1990s indie directors. Their authenticity is invoked and relies on the online interaction and participation to create emotional, intimate, and inter-personal relevance with online communities. It is more entertaining than documentary or educative.

The authenticity adopted by Chinese wanghong creators also has its own specificities compared to the SME creators in the West. If certain content is regarded authentic, it also denounces, either implicitly or explicitly, something inauthentic, the identification of which is both social-historical and personal. But this political aspect can only be apprehended by unravelling the hidden cultural and political contexts in which these authenticities are performed and received. To do so, we need to delve into the specific aesthetics of wanghong culture (interactive content) and situate it in the landscape of contemporary Chinese cultural politics, which together weaves these narratives of authenticity. At the same time, as Stuart Cunningham and David Craig argue, the authenticity of SME always lies in the online practice of community building as the basis for any possibility for commercial branding (2019, p. 156). It is sociality and branding that distinguishes the culture of social media entertainment from established forms of professional cultural production such as television and film. As we have reiterated throughout this book, the wanghong economy has developed a similar, more salient, social dimension, enabled by both state governance and particular affordances of wanghong platforms. Branding and social functions have become indispensable for
wanghong content and creator practice. This intersection of sociality and branding further complicates the politics of wanghong culture, given the state’s both protective and restrictive role in governing the wanghong economy as we analyzed in Chap. 2.

To explicate the specificities of wanghong culture, especially the ambivalence of its politics, the following two sections will introduce the concept of “unlikely creativity” (content) and “sociality culture” (participation) as two distinctive features charactering Chinese wanghong authenticity and its cultural politics.

**Wanghong as Unlikely Creators**

Shougong Geng (Handcraft Geng) is a popular wanghong channel on Bilibili and Kuaishou that posts videos of handcraft inventions made by Geng Shuai, a local farmer from Baoding, Hebei province. Named bizarrely as “head knocker”, “Gatling gun”, “robotic washing machine” and “handstand hairwasher” (Fig. 5.5), these inventions are all ingeniously designed and crafted yet are mostly “useless” in everyday life. For instance, “handstand hairwasher” allows Geng Shuai to wash his hair when doing a handstand; “smile assistant” is a device that can “assist” those who do not like to smile; “robotic washing machine” is made of a waste gas cylinder that can automatically wash clothes with its electric mechanical arms. These sophisticated yet quirky instruments have made Geng Shuai very popular online. By late 2020, he had 4.3 million followers on Bilibili, 4.5 million on Kuaishou and over 2 million on Weibo. His fans make fun of him as “the useless Thomas Edison”, “the most miserable wanghong” (all of his inventions seem torturous to use) and “jeans lover”. In the videos, Geng Shuai introduces the design and “uses” of his devices, often in a self-deprecatory tone, with his “provincial” Hebei accent. Together with his iconic jean overalls, thick and long hair and big round eyes, these videos generate a particular sense of absurd humor, which according to Geng imitate Hongkong Mo lei tau comedy, represented by Stephen Chow’s films (Zhu 2019).

Geng’s inventions were inspired by his early, itinerant working-class life. Prior to his wanghong career, his average income was around RMB 900 per month and saw him moving to five different cities taking all kinds of jobs including as a plumber, a construction worker, and a phone seller. His dream through all that was to open a fireworks factory. Geng mocks himself for being part of “the mobile builder of Chinese cities”: either
working on remote construction sites or on his way to the next job. Later, learning from his father, Geng became a skilled welder, working for the local railway. In 2016, tired of his mundane working life, Geng built a studio to build his machinery-inspired artwork. After he launched channels on Kuaishou and Bilibili, fascination with his “useless” inventions secured millions of viewers.

The story, and aesthetics, of Geng Shuai’s online creations illustrate wanghong’s “unlikely creativity”. As we saw in Chap. 4, participatory social media platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou and livestreaming apps have enabled an “unlikely creative class” that expands Chinese popular cultural production among more marginalized groups of population: working class, less-educated, living in rural China or on the peripheries of
urban society (Lin and de Kloet 2019). Wanghong culture in that sense does not necessarily map to well-established critical categories such as youth culture, urban culture, or subculture. Chinese popular culture of the 1990s and early 2000s—that is, before its platformization—was mostly produced in or from cities, “especially large conurbations on the eastern seaboard were the nodes through which international and other new influences presented themselves to young Chinese” (Clark 2012, p. 7). Wanghong culture has expanded beyond such spatial segregation and the urban imagery of popular culture. It resonates with what Henry Jenkins terms convergence culture, “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (2006, p. 2).

As well as working class, grassroots and marginal individuals like farmers, migrant workers, teachers, students, women, and older Chinese forming an unlikely creative class, convergent wanghong culture also influences mainstream entertainment culture, in a process of the “wanghongization” of celebrity (a popular subgenre in cultural wanghong content, see Fig. 5.2). In another trend in the platformization of culture, established, professional celebrities such as film actors and pop stars are now opening channels on social media platforms and creating tailored, wanghong-style content. Besides the case of Zhou Dongyu cited earlier, Chen He, a popular actor known for his casting in the trendy television series *iPartment*, has attracted over 60 million followers on Douyin, where his posts adopt the wanghong vernacular of light-hearted, everyday amateurism. When film and television production was heavily disrupted by the novel coronavirus outbreak in early 2020, television networks (for example, Hunan TV) and online portals such as Tencent Video, Youku and Iqiyi have aligned to create “wanghong-style” reality shows by inviting celebrities to document their performance at home or in their private studios (Cai 2020). *Eat Well*, for example, a show that runs on Youku, invites celebrities such as Zhao Benshan, Pan Changjiang, Lin Yongjian and Ma Weiwei to livestream their cooking and dining experiences with their family members at home. In these new reality shows, we observe an increasingly fluid boundary between wanghong and celebrities.

The formation of an unlikely creative class brings with it the formation of an unlikely aesthetics. Offering a significant break with the solemn, predictable content on broadcast media, the creative repertoire of wanghong absorbs everyday experiences from hugely disparate individual
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backgrounds. Like Geng Shuai’s inventions, those that might be viewed as “bizarre”, “useless” and “nonsensical” in the mainstream culture are celebrated by their followers as authentic, funny, and creative. Such upending of notions of what counts as culture can be seen across most of the wanghong content categories (see Fig. 5.1). In his unboxing videos, we see Xiao Xiangge (vlogging and unboxing) using a traditional corn-popper to cook crawfish, nibbling a RMB 3,000 king crab, and getting stuck by a light bulb lollipop (Fig. 5.6). A Feng and Lao Si (countryside life) display the fishes, crabs, and shrimps they have caught from the choppy sea in their short videos and vlogging shows. In his daily livestreaming on Taobao, Li Jiaqi (DIY culture and live commerce) brags about his selected lipsticks and cosmetic products from L’Oréal, SK-II, Armani, and such. On Douyin, we find a divergent mixture of trendy dances, music and comical performances, while on Kuaishou we learn magic tricks, cooking and crafting. Even high school teachers like Li Yongle (knowledge sharing) can catch attention from his 9 million fans through his popular science lectures such as *Do aliens really exist? Why is fart so smelly? Can we create a time machine?*

The state also “participates” fulsomely in wanghong culture. There are numerous “official” channels widely circulated on social media platforms. And they appear to be popular. According to data analytics company NewRank (https://www.newrank.cn/), People’s Daily and CCTV, the

Fig. 5.6 Xiao Xiangge eating a light bulb lollipop
two most important state propaganda outlets, are the most subscribed channels across all short video platforms including Kuaishou, Douyin and Bilibili. On Douyin, for example, People’s Daily has attracted over 100 million followers (by September 2020). Videos posted here include not only video clips from the news reports published on its own website, but also native content designed and produced for the short video platform. In a video paying tribute to an old veteran who fought during the Korean War in 1950, a younger solder was filmed saluting the “old hero”; the military medals were shown to the camera and some upbeat pop song was used as background music with a subtitle stating “Salute to veterans; Respect to heroes!” (People’s Daily 2020)

This range of style and content and the embeddedness of official, positive value content within it underscore the “unlikeliness” of wanghong culture as a component of China’s peculiar cultural system. The above-analyzed creativities are unlikely not because that they are impossible to organize or make, but simply because of the unlikeliness of their presence in Chinese popular culture. From television to commercial cinema, the production of Chinese screen culture for decades has been dominated by state-owned television networks and film studios. The national discourse of “double responsibilities” (Lin 2019)—generating revenue alongside conforming politically—makes the autonomy of creative labor highly contingent and places responsibilities on creative workers to “be creative for the state”. The participatory nature of the online cultural economy, in contrast to the established media industries, has unleashed vast creative impulses from below. Though by no means de-territorialized—outside the Chinese cultural system—and thus not immune to censorship and calls to conform to official culture, the wanghong economy operates as a platform for vernacular creativity (Edensor et al. 2009, p. 10)—the “neither extraordinary nor spectacular” but “mundane, intensely social practices”—to thrive, shifting the dynamics of Chinese popular cultural production from the professional and the state to the vernacular and the individual.

This wanghong creativity distinguishes from professional and legacy forms of creativity in the sense that it is arises from the vernacular, grassroots, and banal everyday life. It can be seen as a form of “boredom creativity”—the participation of creators and their followers in the wanghong culture functions as both resistance to and reproduction of the very state of boredom. Following Esther Peeren (2019), to find something boring is to devalue and critique it as “inadequate and unfulfilling” and in contemporary Chinese capitalism boredom has become both a stigmatized
shameful experience and a productive force. The incorporation of this often idle and even redundant labor force into wanghong creator labor, as Chaps. 3 and 4 noted, echoes the expectations of the state’s agenda for “Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation” (The State Council 2015). While for creators, wanghong creativity and subjectivity also become desirable alternatives to the work and title as cook, farmer, high school teacher or college graduate waiting to be hired by companies. The banality of the everyday has been converted into the productive footage of their online creativity, signifying a moment when boredom, creativity and career converge.

Demonstrated by Geng Shuai’s case, his “grotesque” inventions only become meaningful and “creative” when they are shown in his videos and catch the attention of his millions of bored followers. Together with his accent, dresses and gestures, the nonsensical devices invented all transfer into comical authenticity contributing to “unlikely” but productive wanghong creativity. The subjectivity of wanghong thus constitutes a mixed process of becoming, transcending the simple identity of either their “authentic”, everyday job or the professionalized creative worker. Through accessible digital platforms, these online visual contents create a cordial resonance with their viewers’ similarly mundane and boring life and fills their empty time that is both unavoidable and intolerable. Wanghong culture light-heartedly reframes mundane everyday life and legacy screen culture, both of which can be experienced as “boring” within the Chinese hierarchical social, cultural, and economic order. Its scale, diversity and sheer energy makes the guardians of this order nervous, as suggested by the CCTV remark with which we started the chapter. Without however posing a direct challenge to that social and cultural order, it absorbs them into its own production.

**Sociality as Culture**

Wanghong’s authenticity, appeal and energy lie not only in its creators’ socio-economic profiles and content aesthetics, but also in the relationship between creators and spectators. Powered by affordances that, as we saw in Chap. 3, create the conditions for social presence, wanghong constantly reinforce its viewers as followers, fans, and community participants. “Come on Laotie! Double click, 666 and subscribe to my channel!” Laotie is a popular slang originated from North-East China, meaning “brother” or “old friend”. The action of double clicking on a video equals a “like”
“666” in Mandarin is homophonic to liu (溜), referring to “cool” or “awesome”. This mode of intimate address is not only overtly spoken by creators in their online shows, but is encoded into the entire process of content production. Wanghong’s mode of address is designed to produce a consistent personality, whether outspoken, righteous, fun, gentle, humorous, which contributes to sustained intimacy between creators and their followers. In his videos posted on Bilibili, A Feng is not only a local skilled fisherman, he also helps his disadvantaged neighbors, shares fishing skills with his friends, treats his fans with nice seafood meals and volunteers to deliver food for people in quarantine during the coronavirus outbreak. He is humble and not greedy. Occasionally, fans are invited for a fishing boat tour with him, which always ends with a seafood feast. As a result, A Feng becomes a friendly and virtuous figure, beloved by his fans and also his fellow villagers.

For celebrity wanghong, their personalities are often depicted as cool, fashionable, trustworthy, or even patriotic. In August 2019, for example, famous Chinese actors and actresses such as Zhang Yixing, Liu Yifei (playing Mulan in Disney’s 2020 film Mulan), Yang Mi, Huang Xiaoming and Lu Han posted on their Weibo accounts with lines such as “I stand with Hong Kong police”, “I love Hong Kong and I love China” or “Hong Kong is part of China”. The great online popularity and the social nature of wanghong culture seem to have forced these celebrities to publicly perform their “patriotism” to echo the surging online nationalism. A consistent performance of personality proves to be even more crucial for social wanghong production. As mentioned in Chap. 4, livestreaming shows are characterized by the live interaction between streamers and fans and social skills often outweigh other creative skills in obtaining online success. Buqiuren, a well-known PUBG livestreaming gamer on Huya, often claims he is more of an entertaining zhubo (livestreamer) than a professional game player. His good-looking appearance, gentle and polite communication style has won him over 11 million subscribers on Huya and 510 thousand subscriptions to his YouTube English Channel.

This community-oriented, relational, and relatable nature of wanghong creation is driven by the inherent business model of the wanghong economy. As a central platform mechanism, commercial social media transforms “online and offline objects, activities, emotions, and ideas” into tradable data through the process of datafication: “the massive amount of user data collected and processed by online platforms provide insight into
users’ interests, preferences, and needs at particular moments in time” (van Dijck et al. 2018, p. 37). The datatification allows platforms to generate substantial revenue through advertising while also empowering creators to become entrepreneurs and monetize the online traffic of their content (subscriptions, likes, shares, comments, and so forth). As we saw in Chap. 3, many platforms, including YouTube, Bilibili and Kuaishou, have adopted “traffic-based incentive models” to facilitate a highly interactive creator culture. Besides platform incentives, creators also collaborate with multichannel networks (MCN) and creator agencies to further exploit online traffic to seek for more sustainable monetization such as e-commerce and advertising. This “micro-platformization”, according to Jonathan Hutchinson (2019, p. 11), ensures “the advertisers receive the most appropriate influencer for their products or services”. Similar to the process of platformization that “makes data platform ready”, “micro-platformization makes influencers brand ready” (Hutchinson 2019). Sophia, a wanghong MCN manager based in Shenzhen, confirms this during our interview that their job is to “pair up” their creators with the right platform:

We differentiate the platforms for different wanghong needs. Live streaming platforms like Yizhibo, Lang Live, and Douyu are where you make money based on the gifts that the viewers give you. Short video platforms such as Weishi, Douyin, Kuaishou are where you get paid like on YouTube based on views and followers and engagement combined with commercials being added. Weibo and the Little Red Book is where money comes from brand-making posts for soft marketing and also building a bond with followers and turning that into actual value. (Sophia 2020)

Fans, community, and interaction thus become crucial for transforming creator culture into a sustainable wanghong business. If the unlikely creativities investigated in the previous section construct authenticity at the aesthetic level, wanghong authenticity is further reinforced by the community-building and interactivity inherent in the process of wanghong production, in which branding culture both characterizes and circumscribes such discourses of authenticity. To do so, wanghong creators often choose to develop a special “renshe” (人设 character)—to perform a certain personality—that can fit into the imagined audience and community that creators want to address. Through quite performative creative practice such as language, accent, dress, gesture and even props used,
wanghong content adopt highly interactive formality that will affect and provoke intimacy among viewers, who will later become their followers, fans and even consumers of their promoted brands. In terms of social wanghong content, income is secured through virtual gifting or online ecommerce. Here, the “coin of the realm”, so to speak, is personal charisma. The more outgoing, charming, and trustworthy, the more followers.

For creative wanghong, success relies more on some form of skill or talent, whether performing a funny character or generating innovative creative projects. Among thousands of food bloggers on Bilibili, for example, we can identify a wide range of creator personalities. Most notably, Xiao Xiangge mocks himself as “Guizhou Eddie Peng1”. Ge combines the affective and the corporeal, including silly facial expressions and chubby body shape, with comedic skill, using an array of accents and clever one-liner while experimenting with kitchen appliances. Combined, Ge has secured over 2.7 million followers on Bilibili and 615K subscribers on YouTube. In contrast, Da Xiangge features a more curated food channel with higher production values, if still securing a high following comparable to Ge. Set in a newsroom-like studio, his food shows are beautifully edited, the food selected is mostly expensive and his narration is delivered in a somber tone. As a result, Da Xiangge is regarded as a serious, knowledgeable, and professional food vlogger.

For most of this online content, a frequent discourse that often emerges out of their diverse stylizations is “real-life” and “jiediqi” (接地气 down to earth); these personalities should be relevant, but not identical, to the everyday life of digital users. Becky Li (Li Beika, DIY culture and beauty blogging), a popular Chinese on-line writer, posts articles on fashion and luxury wear on Chinese platforms WeChat and Weibo, using the name “Li Beika’s fantasy world”. After four years of operation, her account has become one of most popular wanghong channels in the vertical of fashion. In August 2020, her WeChat account had about 3 million visits per month on average and over one million active followers on WeChat and over 6 million Weibo followers in total. Afforded by the large fan group and data traffic, Becky became a favorite of both domestic and international fashion and luxury brands and advertisers. Unlike popular stars and celebrities, Becky used to be a political and entertainment journalist at Southern Metropolis Daily, a Chinese newspaper based in Guangzhou.

1 Eddie Peng is a Canadian Chinese film actor who has been famous for his handsome appearance.
The success should be attributed to her mastery of “renshe” through her individualized writing style. As one of her followers shares, “it is her style of writing that is the most attractive. She always affectionately teaches us what you should buy, in a tone like a caring little sister. This tone really attracts fans, with high loyalty” (Guiqulaixi 2018).

The same approach has also been employed by Viya and Li Jiaqi in their livestreaming shows (DIY culture and beauty blogging, livestreamer). Belonging to the category of DIY culture (Fig. 5.1), their promotion of various products and brands follows the “authenticity approach” through their outspoken and ostensibly objective review of products, yet all of this is realized through their extraordinary social skills and appealing personalities. “Oh my god! The matte look of this lipstick does not feel dry at all!” “It doesn’t look old-fashioned on yellow skins, absolutely not!” “There is a feeling of first love, thanks to its moist texture: exquisite and smooth, even with a slight honey peach smell. A must buy for elegant ladies!” “What so special is its velvet violet colour—the lekvar purple. Wear it and you’ll be a lady!” “The very high-class strawberry colour makes it perfect for big occasions! It gives you an absolute disposition as a confident hostess!” “Yellow skin? White skin? No bother. This is for you!” These are the words uttered by Li Jiaqi in his livestreaming shows to promote lipstick on Taobao and Douyin. As many commentators point out, Li’s success is largely by virtue of his special way of communication with the online audience. The exaggerative, assertive, and authoritative tone demonstrates his knowledge of cosmetic products and brands, while his male identity and his impeccably crafted appearance (skin care, hairstyle, dress, and so forth) gives him further credibility with his mostly female followers. Interpellated in his narratives as “elegant lady”, “princess”, “first love” and “hostess”, followers of Li Jiaqi are mobilized into an imagined community that, bonded by Li’s provocative while “reliable” online branding shows, actively participates and contributes to his wanghong business.

Moreover, behind all these commercial branding elements we can also identify an intriguing politics of gender and sexuality played by Li Jiaqi and his interaction with fans. His try-out and promotion of lipsticks and cosmetics have ostensibly reinforced his “feminine” outlook, the presence of which in Chinese online space at least implicitly displays the “queerness” or homosexuality that has long been underrepresented in Chinese popular culture. His forthright embracing and promotion of consumption echoes the individualism and consumerism deep-seated in the Chinese youth culture since the 1980s (de Kloet and Fung 2017). Such
individualist, consumerist and even “cosmopolitan” outlook, however, distances from his revolutionary predecessors and thus does not promise a dissent, resistant culture. Li’s livestreaming is by no means an undisguised, radical “coming-out” that pose a direct challenge to the existing gender and sexual norms; instead, the way in which he promotes beauty products and addresses hetero ladies reinforces the existing heteronormativity and gender stereotypes. This resembles, though in a different way, what Shuaishuawei Wang (2019) discovers in his ethnographic study of gay live streamers on Chinese homosexual dating platform Blued. As Wang notices, virtual gifting as the main monetizing affordance of Blued not only enables a transformation of the online participation of gay users and their affective intimacy into tradable data of the platform economy, but does indeed cultivate a virtual community and fosters online intimacy among Chinese gay individuals, whose gender and sexual identity seems more circumscribed in the offline society.

**Conclusion: The Power and Politics of Wanghong**

Seeking to understand wanghong culture, we need to avoid viewing this particular form of online culture as a contingent unity held together by authoritarianism, nationalism, and censorship. Unravelling the poetics and light-hearted resistance of wanghong helps us move beyond paranoid and simplistic descriptions of Chinese culture that “not only identifies an ideological enemy to the liberal-democratic West, but also precludes any patient or meaningful engagement with the many dimensions, such as culture, of a living society” (Tang 2015, p. 7). Relatedly, following Xiaobing Tang, we also avoid the “dissidence hypothesis” that views cultural politics in China as political dissidence and “therefore worthy of sympathy and outside support”. Hypercommercial branding cultures and the prevalence of censorship online may have seen historically more overt dissident politics diluted into more subtle, ostensibly apolitical forms. From the early video of “the steamed bun” to Geng Shuaï, Li Jiaqi and the like demonstrate that “light-hearted resistance” coined by Haiqing Yu (2007) has carried on in Chinese cyberspace during the past decade. It is less of a form of resistance and politics that directly challenges the power of the state and mainstream culture, but more of trivialized practices of discontent with everyday quotidian lives, which can be experienced as “boring” within the Chinese hierarchical social, cultural, and economic order. Wanghong as career and identity offers a massive number of Chinese a
window from which they may see and experience alternative futures of work and life, which all appear “unlikely” and “grotesque” in offline society where everyone fits a class, profession, gender, or demographic position.

The power of wanghong culture reaches beyond the realm of popular culture and media production. It sparks the creative impulse of vast numbers from below and fosters potential upward social mobility that seems to allow wanghong to imagine and organize their lives outside of the normalized hierarchical structure of Chinese society. It disrupts the micro-social fabric in which Chinese populations are organized: the established division between urban and rural, rigid social distinctions in terms of profession, class, and education. This disruptive power is amplified by the commercial nature of wanghong production as it aligns with the state’s agenda of economic development and employment while being at least of regular concern in terms of political order and social stability. In their study of YouTube, Burgess and Green point out:

The commercial drive behind and the hype around YouTube may have produced the possibility of participation in online video culture for a much broader range of participants than before. This idea allows us to shift our concern away from the false opposition between market and non-market culture…. YouTube is generating public and civic value as an unintended and often unsupported consequence of the practices of its users. (Burgess and Green 2018, p. 66)

Burgess and Green question whether this “unintentionally produced cultural, civic and social value of YouTube” is “being truly valued and supported by the platform” (Burgess and Green 2018, p. 66). We would ask if the social and economic value of wanghong culture is truly valued most particularly by the state—platforms seem to have a decent grasp of its value. Given the increasing uncertainty of the contemporary world and Chinese society, which is only exacerbated by the pandemic and the geopolitical tensions, we are unable to deliver a clear answer but would affirm the vibrant and schizophrenic state of becoming in the subjective formation of wanghong creators and culture. It is a culture that results from the state-platform-capitalism complex but also may, if not disturb it, then at least distress it, from within and below.
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