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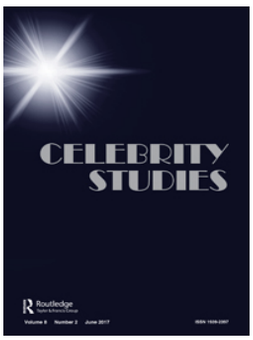
Schneider, F.A.



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CULTURAL REPORT

China's 'Big V' bloggers: how celebrities intervene in digital Sino-Japanese relations

Florian Schneider

Faculty of Humanities, Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, the Netherlands

Digital information and communication technologies (ICT) are today ubiquitous in the People's Republic of China (PRC), shaping political communication in complex ways. Next-generation information and communication technologies are one of China's designated 'pillar industries' (Han 2012), and Chinese spending on information and communication technologies was estimated to reach US$465 billion in 2015 (Welitzkin 2014), which is equivalent to the Gross Domestic Product of a mid-sized country like Austria. Yet the spread of digital media, accompanied by its ease of access and speed of transmitting information, has given the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reason to be wary. Hot-button events frequently fan nationalist outrage in Chinese social media, at times spilling into the streets in the form of violent protests. The potential to incite popular sentiments, possibly against the leadership, is one of the reasons why the ruling party and the Chinese state carefully regulate what happens on China's Internet (Deibert *et al*. 2010, pp. 449–487). China's leaders consider control over public discourse to be paramount to their success, and they view alternatives to their political narratives with great scepticism.

Such alternatives can be readily found on China's most popular micro-blogging platform, the privately-owned Sina Weibo (Sullivan 2014). With its hundreds of millions of users, the service has become a major outlet for grievances, citizen-journalism, and moral outrage, often affecting public discussion more broadly and shaping how officials make choices. Particularly noteworthy in this context are Weibo's most influential users, the celebrities and public figures who are collectively known as 'Big Vs' due to the letter 'V' that marks their accounts as verified. Such celebrity users often have millions of followers, and they are powerful in the sense that they are located centrally within digital social networks. In fact, their digital power scales according to its own logic, which scholars of networks call the 'power law'; that is, 'the natural tendency of the web (and of many similar networks) […] to link very heavily to a small number of sites: the web picks winners' (Halavais 2009, pp. 914–918). Analogous to the Web, power on social networking sites like Sina Weibo is subject to self-perpetuating cycles of celebrity status, user attention, network properties, and design choices that can push some of the user statistics into dizzying dimensions, garnering some celebrities more followers than the UK has citizens.

This makes it a particularly pressing concern for China's leaders to control what these celebrity users do with their privileged digital status. After all, such users are often in a position to decide where symbols and discourses are going to circulate, and they are

CONTACT Florian Schneider f.a.schneider@hum.leidenuniv.nl

able to influence which arguments or ideas become conceived of as 'shared' – a capacity that the CCP traditionally monopolises. Indeed, in recent years the authorities have progressively tightened their restrictions regarding social media behaviour, and Sina has implemented these restrictions by censoring posts (Ng 2013) and cracking down on influential users that it believed were 'spreading rumours' online (Svensson 2014, pp. 170–172). That the hunt for 'rumour-mongers' has also ensnared a number of vocal activists who had been challenging the authorities on protracted social and legal issues is bound to be viewed as a positive side-effect by China's leaders, although it is unclear how much of a motivation this provided for originally rolling out new restrictions in 2013 (The Economist 2013).

An open question remains whether the concerns of the regulators are warranted. Are Big V celebrities really the kind of blight on public decency and social stability that the CCP makes them out to be? The events of the 2012 East China Sea dispute provide a useful case for studying the activities of celebrity opinion leaders at a time of popular Weibo outrage.

The 2012 East China sea dispute and celebrity micro-blogging

Over the past years, a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea, called Diaoyu in Chinese and Senkaku in Japanese, has emerged as the object of arguably one of the most volatile security issues in Asia. The islands have long been an issue of contention between China, Japan, and Taiwan, with each side claiming sovereignty over these territories. At the same time, it is not merely governments that have been clashing over who owns these contested territories, but private actors and organisations have also contributed to the issue by constructing this conflict over national sovereignty online. The outcome of these complex processes is a mix of conflicting statements and actions that showcases to what degree agents other than traditional government actors can shape foreign relations. In an age of information, it is not solely politicians, administrators, and diplomats who influence politics but increasingly 'non-traditional' actors like the spouses of politicians, the aides and secretaries who work behind the scenes, the journalists and bloggers who cover political events, the designated experts who inform decision-makers about policy issues, the public intellectuals who criticise politics, and the celebrity activists who intervene in public debate. Such complexity was indeed on display in 2012, when online debates were accompanied by large-scale anti-Japanese protests across hundreds of Chinese municipalities following the controversial decision of the Japanese government to buy one of the islands from its private Japanese owner.

What role, then, did celebrity micro-bloggers play during this complex dispute? To answer this question, I have identified the most influential verified Weibo users during the month of September 2012, which marked the height of mass protests and riots in the PRC. Who counts as most influential is not at all self-evident. It is, to my knowledge, not possible to list users by their number of followers. The Sina Corporation does, however, calculate a ranking of top users, which it calls the 'Weibo charts'. The index from which these charts are calculated is not visible for all users, but Sina provides a real-time top-50 ranking on its website and lists four variables that shape the index: number of mentions, number of interactions, number of searches, and number of 'likes'.[1] The index provides an impression of whom Sina

Table 1. Top 10 Sina Weibo Users in 2012 (adapted from Zhou 2013).

Rank 2012	Name	Chinese	Gender	Location	Occupation	Followers (January 2016)	Posts (January 2016)
1	Lee Kai-Fu	李开复	Male	PRC	Venture capitalist	49,991,639	14,521
2	He Jiong	何炅	Male	PRC	TV presenter	74,519,727	7361
3	Xie Na	谢娜	Female	PRC	TV presenter	79,352,452	8456
4	Ren Zhiqiang	任志强	Male	PRC	Real estate mogul	36,828,824	89,667
5	Charles Xue	薛蛮子	Male	PRC	Angel investor	10,939,141	99,248
6	Yao Chen	姚晨	Female	PRC	Actress	78,876,891	8356
7	Amy Cheung	張小嫻	Female	Hong Kong	Novelist	63,716,607	3177
8	Yang Mi	杨幂	Female	PRC	Actress	58,389,582	3255
9	Pan Shiyi	潘石屹	Male	PRC	Real estate mogul	17,840,048	22,733
10	Ashin	阿信	Male	Taiwan	Singer	19,452,960	1402

considers to be powerful in its own network. Based on these figures, the *South China Morning Post* released a top 10 for the year 2012 (Zhou 2013), reproduced in Table 1 with additional information from the time of writing.

On Weibo, I have examined more closely how these 10 users behaved during the height of the 2012 East China Sea dispute. For technical reasons, I am limiting this study to a qualitative assessment of relevant tweets at the time. This is a very real limitation because the medium would allow for interesting 'small data' research, for instance by systematically tracking a particular post or mapping the follower networks of the celebrities. However, the company's application programming interface that allows such a study is currently not available to me. Receiving access to the application programming interface requires an accredited account, and, for reasons that remain obscure, my attempts to acquire accreditation through Sina's byzantine bureaucratic procedures have yet to be successful.

How Big V celebrities reacted to popular nationalism

What characterises the way that different Big V micro-bloggers reacted to the island dispute in September 2012? Interestingly, several of the 10 celebrities did not feature information on the developments in their blog feed at all. TV hostess Xie Na or starlet Yang Mi, for instance, posted pictures of cute animals or animation characters, alongside updates on China's pop scene or their own careers, but side-stepped any political controversies. Likewise, author Amy Cheung posted pictures of the moon or of flower bouquets, accompanied by her musing about love and life. Three of the four female celebrities thus remained apolitical in the face of events that turned out to be PR minefields for some (see Coates in this issue). This is also true for the only other celebrity from outside the mainland, Taiwanese singer Ashin, who did not mention the dispute in his feed.

For the other users, reactions were mixed. Many tweets were simple observations or retweets that the respective celebrities did not discuss in detail; for example, TV host He Jiong retweeting a news item that shows more than a thousand Chinese fishing boats getting ready to challenge Japanese maritime claims in the East China Sea, advising his followers to 'pay close attention'.[2] Real-estate tycoon Pan Shiyi posted a picture of a boarded-up Japanese restaurant draped in Chinese flags, commenting only: 'Beijing's Japanese restaurants – all have the same decoration'. Such ambiguous posts leave it to users to attribute meanings and debate the issue, which hundreds do in often nuanced

ways in the comment sections. Posting a simple photo or retweeting official media is thus a safe way to show concern for current affairs but without the risk of stepping on anyone's proverbial toes.

However, not all posts played it safe. Actress Yao Chen, the only female celebrity to get involved in the issue, complicated the picture on 18 September, China's commemoration day for the start of the Sino-Japanese war. One of her posts recalled the story of a war veteran who was later mistreated during the Cultural Revolution; an arguably unusual take on a topic of major relevance to patriotic discourse in China. She accompanied her news tweets with comments like 'patriotism – please start by loving every single person!' – a sentiment that is a far cry from the collective fervour on display in China's streets at the time.

Several of the celebrities also took a stand more explicitly as the anti-Japanese protests turned violent. The events that unfolded in Xi'an on 15 September in particular received the bloggers' attention. During this particularly gruesome episode of anti-Japanese rioting, protesters demolished the car of a local family and bludgeoned the 51-year-old owner within an inch of his life (Chubb 2012). He Jiong posted twice on the topic, in neither case posting any specific news item but clearly referencing the events of that day:

> patriotism is a very noble word. Those people who smash the cars of our compatriots, or who eat their fill at a Japanese restaurant and then skip out on the bill, all foul-mouthed, or randomly beating up foreigners at their door step – don't insult patriotism! The islands are of course ours, but our actual dignity is also in your and my hands! @何炅, 15 September 2012, 05:56.

And:

> Some vile persons have emerged from the water, it makes the back of your neck crawl! Patriotic compatriots, don't forget your original intentions. Don't get taken in by all the beating, smashing, and looting. Smashing the cars and restaurants outside your door won't get us back our islands! @何炅, 15 September 2012, 16:59.

On the same issue, actress Yao Chen retweeted several newspieces (including a video that was later deleted, probably due to its graphic content) and comments: 'scum! Something not even the devils [i.e. the Japanese imperial soldiers during WWII] would have done. Those swine!' Meanwhile, celebrity entrepreneur Charles Xue used the opportunity to debate with his followers where responsibility for the events should lie, taking the strong view that the local authorities escalated the situation and should be blamed (he would later be arrested on charges of solicitation).

In a somewhat different vein, venture capitalist Lee Kai-fu intervened on a self-reflective note:

> Xi'an, I'm sorry. Today, your virtuous spirit of 13 dynasties was trampled underfoot. The great breadth of mind of your Tang dynasty was sullied. Your ancient allies and beautiful streets were altogether crushed by thugs. Please pardon my incompetence. It's like being crushed by an oncoming vehicle. I am like all these other people who grieve for you. Today we failed to defend your 1000-year-old honour, but in the process we have come to understand ourselves. We have awoken to new life and will wash the stinking blood stain from your scars. I want to say: Xi'an, I'm sorry. @李开复, 16 September 2012, 08:44.

Judging by the comment sections (usually with thousands of remarks), the fans generally shared these concerns and interpretations of their idols.

The power of the Big Vs

Sina Weibo may be populated by hundreds of millions of users, but the power to guide online discourse is distributed unevenly in this medium, and influential celebrities have significantly more power to infuse large networks of people with ideas – an issue that at least partially informs the CCP's attempts to regulate such digital networks. What is interesting is that China's most influential micro-bloggers, the 'Big V' users who are often accused of irresponsible self-promotion and egregious rumour-mongering, complicated the 2012 anti-Japanese events in China through nuanced and socially aware commentary. This commentary seems to have resonated with their followers, who received the messages of their idols in the tens of millions, with thousands sending support and feedback. It seems that at least on Weibo, the discourse surrounding China's relation with Japan was not 'hijacked' by aggressive nationalists, but was used by the most powerful actors to inspire debate about the nature of patriotism and the responsibilities of modern citizenship.

This brief examination of celebrity tweets still leaves many open questions, and future research would be well advised to find technically and mathematically involved ways to systematically study what happens when a celebrity user posts a comment that reframes the meaning of patriotism in China. It may also prove fruitful to probe in more detail whether certain kinds of celebrity status lead to specific social media roles and behaviours; many of the Big V celebrities examined here are what Rojek (2001, p. 184) calls 'achieved celebrities', meaning that they derive their status from being 'recognized as individuals who possess rare talents or skills'. It is conceivable that such recognition generates pressures for the celebrity actors or their public relations teams to construct engaged yet measured responses to socially relevant issues online. These are issues that this short report had to side-step, but despite these shortcomings the dynamics illustrated here are nevertheless noteworthy, particularly if we take seriously the idea that politics are today constructed through the complex processes of meaning-making that take place in advanced communication networks (Castells 2009). We need to ask how meta-narratives like nationalism are negotiated in the mediated environments of the Internet, who has the power to intervene in such environments, and to what effect.

If my initial interpretation of celebrity activities on Sina Weibo is correct, then Chinese nationalist discourse in 2012 was subject to a dampening influence from highly central, achieved users of China's largest network of public exchange. However, the authorities seem to have drawn a very different lesson from Weibo's online discussions, stepping up their attempts to reign in celebrity users (Mozur 2013). Ironically, their efforts may not only have stifled public discourse on this important pressure valve of public opinion (Bai 2015) but may also have disabled many actors with the clout to spread precisely the kind of measured commentary that CCP public opinion 'guidance' has such a hard time authentically replicating.

Notes

1. Available in Chinese from: http://chart.weibo.com/?rank_type=5 [Accessed 30 August 2016].
2. All translations are my own.

Notes on contributor

Florian Schneider, PhD, Sheffield University, is University Lecturer for the Politics of Modern China at Leiden University. He is the managing editor of the academic journal Asiascape: Digital Asia and the author of Visual Political Communication in Popular Chinese Television Series (Leiden & Boston: Brill 2013). His research interests include questions of governance, political communication, and digital media in China, as well as international relations in the East Asian region.

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