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# UN celebrity diplomacy in China: activism, symbolism and national ambition online

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China's influence in the UN system has been growing rapidly in recent years. Its increasing activism in the UN, in both more and less visible forms, is raising Asian and western eyebrows at a time of China's more outspoken geopolitical manoeuvring. From the other side of the looking glass, the UN's visibility and hence its potential influence in China may also be growing, a point that has been largely ignored. The UN is pursuing this goal by means of its public diplomacy efforts, which aim at greater visibility for the UN in China.

A question to be answered is how Beijing's authoritarian government is responding to the UN's outreach and potential UN influence inside China.<sup>1</sup> One of the areas in which the UN has invested most is China's own cyberspace. Sina Weibo, the social media platform that is home to China's most vibrant online community, has seen the UN's presence expand rapidly in the past decade.<sup>2</sup> Here the UN is operating in a realm governed by national rules, in which the party-state maintains a firm hold on national cyber infrastructure and a degree of social media surveillance that has a disciplining effect on all corners of society. How challenging is this environment for the UN?

UN online representation in China relies on more than 20 active official accounts on Weibo, coordinated by an overarching official account @lianheguo ('United Nations') that has over 10 million followers. The individuals on whom the UN has relied most to amplify its messages on Weibo are Chinese celebrities engaging with their own society on behalf of the UN and acting as informal UN goodwill ambassadors. The origins of this scheme date back to 1953;<sup>3</sup> but

\* The authors would like to thank Charlotte Blanc for her excellent online research support in this project.

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Louis Bishop and Zhang Xiaotong, 'Why is China a reluctant leader of the World Trade Organization?', *New Political Economy* 25: 5, 2020, pp. 755–72; Rosemary Foot, *China, the United Nations, and human protection: beliefs, power, image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Christian Kreuder-Sonnen, 'China vs the WHO: a behavioural norm conflict in the SARS crisis', *International Affairs* 95: 3, May 2019, pp. 535–52.

<sup>2</sup> Yuan Ren, 'Know your Chinese social media', *New York Times*, 19 Nov. 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/19/fashion/china-social-media-weibo-wechat.html>; UN Environment Programme (UNEP), 'UN environment and Weibo join forces to launch Young Champions of the Earth in China', press release, 23 April 2018, <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/press-release/un-environment-and-weibo-join-forces-launch-young-champions-earth>; UN Development Programme, 'On United Nations Weibo campaign, Jet Li shares the future he wants', press release, 7 May 2012, <https://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2012/05/on-united-nations-weibo-campaign-jet-li-shares-the-future-he-wa.html>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 22 March 2021.)

<sup>3</sup> Andrew F. Cooper, *Celebrity diplomacy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008), pp. 18–20.

it was only at the turn of the millennium that the then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan gave the greatest impulse to the goodwill ambassadors' scheme.<sup>4</sup> For the symbolic honorarium of US\$1 a year, volunteer celebrity diplomats engage with the UN on a rolling, two-year contract and—remarkably considering their non-specialist profile—are considered by the UN as 'experts on mission' when travelling with a specific purpose related to their UN role.<sup>5</sup> The UN goodwill ambassadors are to be distinguished from the smaller group of 'messengers of peace': in the latter scheme, launched in 1997, renowned individuals from different walks of life are invited to promote the UN's work in a more general sense.<sup>6</sup>

Outside the West the UN has a longstanding tradition of employing goodwill ambassadors for advocacy purposes aimed at generating public support. Global media coverage and the western-dominated academic literature on celebrities erroneously suggest that this is a fundamentally western phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> This narrow academic scope has severely limited our understanding of celebrity diplomacy in a global perspective, and there is still very little empirical work on celebrity diplomacy in many vibrant parts of the world outside the West.<sup>8</sup> In China, celebrities' visibility and influence have provided the UN with a convenient, even necessary, bridge through which the UN can enhance its presence in the Chinese public sphere. Today, the UN employs around 30 Chinese celebrities as global or regional goodwill ambassadors. Many of these individuals have a large following on Weibo, and they help the UN to amplify its messages by reposting messages from UN headquarters and by participating in online UN initiatives. The Chinese celebrities include mainland Chinese, Hong Kong and Macau citizens. It is very common for Chinese-speaking celebrities to operate simultaneously in these three regions.

China allows its citizens little scope for discussion and debate on global issues, and it is part of our central argument that, as a result, UN celebrities' activism

<sup>4</sup> UN, *Goodwill ambassadors* (New York, Oct. 2020), <https://www.un.org/en/mop/>; Mark Alleyne, 'The United Nations' celebrity diplomacy', *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 25: 1, 2005, p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> Secretary-General of the UN, *Guidelines for the designation of goodwill ambassadors and messengers of peace* (New York, 2003), [http://www.un.org.ua/images/documents/4193/Guidelines\\_for\\_the\\_designation\\_of\\_Goodwill\\_Ambassadors\\_and\\_Messengers\\_of\\_Peace.pdf](http://www.un.org.ua/images/documents/4193/Guidelines_for_the_designation_of_Goodwill_Ambassadors_and_Messengers_of_Peace.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> UN, *Goodwill ambassadors*; Papa Louis Fall and Guangting Tang, *Goodwill ambassadors in the UN system* (Geneva: Joint Inspection Unit, 2006), <https://undocs.org/en/JIU/NOTE/2006/1>.

<sup>7</sup> See Alleyne, 'The United Nations' celebrity diplomacy'; Alison Anderson, 'Sources, media, and modes of climate change communication: the role of celebrities', *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2: 4, 2011, pp. 535–46; Lucy Bennett, '“If we stick together we can do anything”: Lady Gaga fandom, philanthropy and activism through social media', *Celebrity Studies* 5: 1–2, 2014, pp. 138–52; Andrew F. Cooper, 'Beyond Hollywood and the boardroom: celebrity diplomacy', *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 8: 2, 2007, pp. 125–32; Heribert Dieter and Rajiv Kumar, 'The downside of celebrity diplomacy: the neglected complexity of development', *Global Governance* 14: 3, 2008, pp. 259–64; Douglas Kellner, 'Celebrity diplomacy, spectacle and Barack Obama', *Celebrity Studies* 1: 1, 2010, pp. 121–3; Lauren Kogen, 'For the public good or just good publicity? Celebrity diplomacy and the ethics of representation', *Mass Communication and Society* 18: 1, 2015, pp. 37–57.

<sup>8</sup> See Andrew F. Cooper, Hugo Dobson and Mark Wheeler, 'Non-western celebrity politics and diplomacy: introduction', *Celebrity Studies* 8: 2, 2017, pp. 312–17. For exceptions, see Olga Fedorenko, 'Korean-wave celebrities between global capital and regional nationalisms', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18: 4, 2017, pp. 498–517; Elaine Jeffreys, 'Translocal celebrity activism: shark-protection campaigns in mainland China', *Environmental Communication* 10: 6, 2016, pp. 763–76; Marc Owen Jones, 'Nation branding and celebrity diplomacy in Bahrain', *Celebrity Studies* 8: 2, 2017, pp. 324–30.

in China is increasingly symbolic. Although officially accredited by the UN to support its external communications, Chinese celebrities are aware of their national leadership's expectations that they display vigorous patriotism in their messaging. China's special attention to its domestic public as an integral part of public diplomacy antedates, by and large, western practices and academic research taking heed of this dimension.<sup>9</sup> The impact of local conditions on foreign public diplomacy efforts has, however, been largely ignored in public diplomacy studies. Interesting recent research has started to examine the discrepancy between the content of public diplomacy, as intended by the initiating state, and the alteration of narratives and perceptions on the other side of the looking glass, among the recipient audiences.<sup>10</sup> Our focus on celebrity diplomacy in an authoritarian society highlights the impact of structural socio-political conditions on the public diplomacy efforts of a foreign actor, in our case not a state but the UN. In *theory*, this may place locally engaged Chinese celebrities at an interesting juncture, as agile juggling agents between principals with diverging interests. We are interested in empirically establishing the complexities of how this plays out in *practice*, with a focus on communication in the digital sphere.

Existing studies have analysed how the UN goodwill ambassadorship scheme functions in western surroundings, but their conclusions are often not applicable to a country that is so culturally and politically different from these.<sup>11</sup> While China's global influence in the UN is currently expanding, with more than one-quarter of UN agencies led by Chinese representatives, under President Xi Jinping's leadership its domestic public sphere has simultaneously been shrinking. This presents Chinese celebrities with collective norms and expectations regarding their individual behaviour, which are generally understood with or without governmental guidance and instruction.

Chinese celebrities, many of whom work in the creative industries, are probably the most visibly affected group in China's present shift towards collectivism and away from individual freedom and debate. It is hard to overestimate the restraining nature of these conditions for them. Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to examine how these celebrities are working in their capacity as the UN's message-amplifiers on Weibo, perhaps China's most heavily censored social media platform, while also seeking favour with the party-state. What are the special characteristics of Chinese UN ambassadors' online communications, and how do

<sup>9</sup> For an authoritative Chinese academic statement on China's public diplomacy, see Kejin Zhao, 'The China model of public diplomacy and its future', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14: 1–2, 2019, pp. 169–81. On the recent politicization of China's public diplomacy, see Ingrid d'Hooghe, 'China's public diplomacy goes political', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 16: 2–3, pp. 299–322. See also Ellen Huijgh, *Diplomacy at home: domestic dimensions* (Leiden: Brill–Nijhoff, 2019).

<sup>10</sup> Molly Krasnodebska, 'The Ukraine crisis as an unintended consequence of the EU's public diplomacy: reception of EU narratives in Ukraine', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 13: 3, 2018, pp. 345–65; Natalia Chaban and Ole Elgström, 'A perceptual approach to EU public diplomacy: investigating collaborative diplomacy in EU–Ukraine relations', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15: 4, 2020, pp. 1–29.

<sup>11</sup> Cooper, 'Beyond Hollywood and the boardroom'; Mark Wheeler, 'Celebrity diplomacy: United Nations' goodwill ambassadors and messengers of peace', *Celebrity Studies: Celebrity and the Transnational* 2: 1, 2011, pp. 6–18; A. Trevor Thrall, Jaime Lollo-Fakhreddine, John Berent, Lana Donnelly et al., 'Star power: celebrity advocacy and the evolution of the public sphere', *International Journal of Press/Politics* 13: 4, 2008, pp. 362–85.

these contrast with the understanding of western celebrity politics and diplomacy, presented largely uncontested in the literature? This case throws new light on the contradictions existing in the UN goodwill ambassadorship scheme and highlights the politics of celebrity diplomacy.

We seek answers to these unexplored questions by interrogating Weibo activism by UN-affiliated Chinese celebrities since 2013, the year when Xi Jinping came into office. We examine and try to make sense of how these celebrities navigate the online environment in both transnational and national spaces in the face of diverging demands and expectations. Our two-part research question is this: *Have Chinese celebrities become more active in their capacity as UN ambassadors in China's digital space? And do the content and tone of their online communication in recent years reveal any significant change?* To help answer this question, we collected data from a sample of Chinese celebrities' Weibo profiles and analysed them with a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches explained in the methodological section below. We have deliberately not taken into account the substitution effect introduced by the rise of other social media platforms, including WeChat and video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and Kuaishou. We analyse the number of advocacy-related posts, which is declining in a few of the nine cases examined in this study, and *not* the total number of Weibo posts—regardless of their content—which has been increasing over the years for most of the celebrities that we examined.

The findings of our study help correct the western and Anglocentric bias in existing celebrity diplomacy research, which Andrew F. Cooper emphasized in his short 2008 monograph.<sup>12</sup> Our research is intended to encourage more academic study of non-state diplomacy in non-western conditions. The Chinese case helps to shed light on the dynamics of authoritarian states' engagement with and response to the UN goodwill ambassadorship scheme, and what this means for the UN celebrities' diplomatic-cum-political role in their home environment. After all, the UN may be dominated by liberal democracies, but it accommodates many authoritarian countries. Can they be seen to serve the transnational goals of the UN as the sending organization as well as the national interests of the receiving country? This study may also help UN policy-makers to fine-tune their celebrity diplomacy in authoritarian societies, and will provide the Chinese government with insights into the role of non-state actors in China–UN relations.

The first section introduces our case-study and its special characteristics. Next comes a review of the literature on celebrity diplomacy, emphasizing among other things the importance of a conceptual distinction between celebrity *politics* and multilayered celebrity *diplomacy*. The methodological section then introduces our main hypothesis and the quantitative methods we used to investigate social media data. In the penultimate part, we discuss the results of our social media analysis. Finally, our conclusions aim to foster a less parochial study of celebrity diplomacy in a global perspective, and we offer a brief evaluation of policy implications.

<sup>12</sup> Cooper, *Celebrity diplomacy*.

## Celebrity diplomacy with Chinese characteristics

No study has to date specifically investigated UN celebrity diplomacy in China, although there are many studies on celebrity culture and celebrity philanthropy.<sup>13</sup> This gap is remarkable, as the number of UN-affiliated Chinese celebrities has grown rapidly in recent years, both because of China's growing engagement with the UN and because the UN celebrity diplomacy initiative has expanded as a global project. This discrepancy can be explained to some extent by the fact that, compared to their western counterparts, Chinese celebrities operate in a politically and culturally isolated environment. Many of them are present almost exclusively in the Sinophone world and have little projection outside. If *transnational* mobilizing power is to be considered the hallmark of celebrity diplomacy, one might be tempted to ask whether some Chinese celebrities are conducting such diplomacy at all.

Existing studies on Chinese celebrities have largely been limited to the domestic context.<sup>14</sup> We examine three topics concerning the workings of Chinese celebrities: (1) their relationship with the party-state; (2) their social roles; and (3) the production and consumption of celebrities. The first theme is unique to the Chinese case and has informed the design of this research, while the latter two themes are relevant to studies dealing with Chinese celebrities and also celebrities from other regions.

In China, celebrities operate under the supervision of two government entities: the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, which have the power to regulate celebrities' public appearances in the mediascape and online.<sup>15</sup> This power relationship also manifests itself in a more subtle way and brings commercial success into the mix for the celebrities involved.<sup>16</sup> While Chinese celebrities are not actively compelled or nudged to endorse government policies, choosing to do so will massively boost their careers in China's highly competitive entertainment industry. This entertainment–politics nexus implies that Chinese celebrities have relatively limited agency as celebrity diplomats, and in fact also as entertainer–entrepreneurs. Any form of political activism must fall within the bounds set by the state if it is to boost or even maintain their celebrity status—the very platform that allowed them such influence in the first place.

In Chinese society, celebrities are expected to play the role of moral leaders who have personal integrity and actively contribute to good social causes, such

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Jeffreys and Louise Edwards, 'Celebrity in China', in Elaine Jeffreys and Louise Edwards, eds, *Celebrity in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), pp. 1–20.

<sup>14</sup> Some examples are: Elaine Jeffreys, 'Political celebrities and elite politics in contemporary China', *China Information* 30: 1, 2016, pp. 58–80; Jonathan Sullivan and Séagh Kehoe, 'Truth, good and beauty: the politics of celebrity in China', *China Quarterly*, vol. 237, 2019, pp. 241–56; Jonathan Hassid and Elaine Jeffreys, 'Doing good or doing nothing? Celebrity, media and philanthropy in China', *Third World Quarterly* 36: 1, 2015, pp. 75–93; Johanna Hood, 'Peng Liyuan's humanitarianism: morality, politics and eyeing the present and past', *Celebrity Studies* 6: 4, 2015, pp. 414–29; Elaine Jeffreys and Jian Xu, 'Celebrity-inspired, fan-driven: doing philanthropy through social media in mainland China', *Asian Studies Review* 41: 2, 2017, pp. 244–62.

<sup>15</sup> Sullivan and Kehoe, 'Truth, good and beauty'.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffreys and Edwards, 'Celebrity in China', pp. 1–20.



as poverty alleviation and education. Patriotism, too, is still highly relevant in east Asian societies,<sup>17</sup> and ranks very high on the Chinese public's mental checklist. This strong social dimension of China's celebrity culture has already been addressed by a large variety of studies focusing on celebrity philanthropy ('celanthropy') and celebrity activism in China.<sup>18</sup> Along with *political* expectations from the party-state, *public* expectations are a key variable shaping China's celebrity culture and, we assume, profoundly influencing Chinese celebrities' online presence and communicative behaviour.

How do governmental and public expectations, then, interact with celebrities' activity as UN ambassadors? Remarkably, despite the universally accepted label 'celebrity diplomacy' used to describe this non-governmental practice, it has mostly been discussed outside the field of diplomatic studies and as a political occurrence rather than a diplomatic phenomenon. This state of affairs needs to be remedied, as celebrity diplomacy across the world has by no means reached its peak yet.

## The celebrity phenomenon as diplomatic practice

The interdisciplinary study of celebrity diplomacy does seem to have peaked in the Anglosphere, with relatively little original scholarly work since 2013.<sup>19</sup> There has been remarkably little attention given to the *international* engagement of celebrities among students of diplomacy, particularly since celebrity diplomacy is commonly seen as a subset of public diplomacy, which itself has been the most researched aspect of diplomatic practice since the turn of the millennium.<sup>20</sup> Such scholarly input as there has been has come mainly from disciplines and fields such as political communication, culture studies and political science/public administration.

Scholars of celebrity diplomacy owe a great deal to the imaginative and exploratory work of Cooper.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Mark Wheeler has served readers with his integrating studies.<sup>22</sup> We suggest that there is now a strong case for more empirical

<sup>17</sup> Fedorenko, 'Korean-wave celebrities between global capital and regional nationalisms'.

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Hood, 'Peng Liyuan's humanitarianism'; Johanna Hood, 'Celebrity philanthropy in China: the political critique of Pu Cunxin's AIDS heroism', in Lisa Ann Richley, ed., *Celebrity humanitarianism and North-South relations: politics, place and power* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 106–28; Elaine Jeffreys, 'Modern China's idols: heroes, role models, stars and celebrities', *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 9: 1, 2012, pp. 1–32; Elaine Jeffreys, 'Celebrity philanthropy in China: rethinking cultural studies' "big citizen" critique', in Anthony Elliott, ed., *Routledge handbook of celebrity studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 227–42.

<sup>19</sup> There are a few exceptions: see e.g. Kogen, 'For the public good or just good publicity?'; Alexandra Cosima Budabin, 'Celebrities as norm entrepreneurs in international politics: Mia Farrow and the "Genocide Olympics" campaign', *Celebrity Studies* 6: 4, 2015, pp. 399–413.

<sup>20</sup> For this omission, see recent textbooks on public diplomacy: Nicholas J. Cull, *Public diplomacy: foundations for global engagement in the digital age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019); Ilan Manor, *The digitalization of public diplomacy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Jan Melissen, 'Public diplomacy', in Pauline Kerr and Geoffrey Wiseman, eds, *Diplomacy in a globalizing world: theories and practices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 199–218.

<sup>21</sup> Cooper, *Celebrity diplomacy*.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Wheeler, *Celebrity politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Mark Wheeler, 'Celebrity diplomacy', in Costas Constantinou, Pauline Kerr and Paul Sharp, eds, *The Sage handbook of diplomacy* (London: Sage, 2016) pp. 530–39.

and theoretical research on celebrity diplomacy. First and foremost, this field needs to be taken out of the Anglosphere. Furthermore, it will have to move beyond the normative discussion of western cultural icons' activism as cultural imperialism and 'celebrity colonialism'.<sup>23</sup> Transcending this narrow linguistic scope and these limited cultural critiques is a condition for a better understanding of what celebrities do and how they communicate as informal diplomats. What is remarkable from our study's point of view is that the literature focusing on western celebrities or the North–South divide has largely overlooked the particularly vibrant celebrity culture in Asia—the world's most highly populated mega-region and the one with the most energetic social media environment. As a result, existing literature has yet to analyse how local political and cultural conditions affect the form and scope of celebrity diplomacy.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the most prominent feature of celebrity activity in the past decade is that it has largely moved online. Stars without a presence on the internet are rare, and celebrities tend to prioritize engagement with their followers through social networking sites, particularly microblogs, via both global sites like Twitter and regional and national ones such as Weibo. Celebrities' conversion to internet-based advocacy constitutes a change with important social and political ramifications. Research that interrogates the intervention of new technologies is therefore essential, in order to inform our understanding of celebrity diplomacy as an evolving concept. This study is a contribution to recent academic work that stresses the importance of understanding diplomacy in the digital age. So far, this literature has not looked into celebrity diplomacy.<sup>25</sup>

Third, there is a clear case for building on the normative critiques of transnational celebrity activity and its effectiveness,<sup>26</sup> with a greater and more systematic research focus on celebrities' communicative *practices*. This would improve

<sup>23</sup> Cooper, *Celebrity diplomacy*; Andrew F. Cooper, 'Celebrity diplomats: differentiation, recognition, and contestation', in P. David Marshall and Sean Redmond, eds, *A companion to celebrity* (Malden, MA: Wiley, 2015), pp. 258–72.

<sup>24</sup> This is also recognized in Cooper et al., 'Non-western celebrity politics and diplomacy'. An exception is the work of Florian Schneider, 'China's "Big V" bloggers: how celebrities intervene in digital Sino-Japanese relations', *Celebrity Studies* 8: 2, 2017, pp. 331–6. Nevertheless, this work is concerned with one particular bilateral relationship.

<sup>25</sup> For relevant work published in the last three years, see Corneliu Bjola, Jennifer Cassidy and Ilan Manor, 'Public diplomacy in the digital age', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14: 1–2, 2019, pp. 83–101; Michèle Bos and Jan Melissen, 'Rebel diplomacy and digital communication: public diplomacy in the Sahel', *International Affairs* 95: 6, 2019, pp. 1331–48; Emillie de Keulenaar and Jan Melissen, 'Critical digital diplomacy and how theory can inform practice', in Volker Stanzel, ed., *New realities in foreign affairs: diplomacy in the 21st century* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2019), pp. 63–70; Constance Duncombe, 'Digital diplomacy: emotion and identity in the public realm', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14: 1–2, 2019, pp. 102–16; Constance Duncombe, 'Social media and the visibility of horrific violence', *International Affairs* 96: 3, 2020, pp. 609–29; Ilan Manor and Rhys Crilley, 'The mediatization of MFAs: diplomacy in the new media ecology', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15: 1–2, 2020, pp. 66–92; Efe Sevin and Diana Ingenhoff, 'Public diplomacy on social media: analyzing networks and content', *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 12, 2018, pp. 3663–85; Damien Spry, 'From Delhi to Dili: Facebook diplomacy by ministries of foreign affairs in the Asia-Pacific', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14: 1–2, 2020, pp. 93–125; Maja Simunjak and Alessandro Calandrio, 'Twiplomacy in the age of Donald Trump: is the diplomatic code changing?', *Information Society* 35: 1, 2019, pp. 13–12.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Dieter and Kumar, 'The downside of celebrity diplomacy'; Thrall et al., 'Star power'; Ilan Kapoor, *Celebrity humanitarianism: the ideology of global charity* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012); Kogen, 'For the public good or just good publicity?'; and Wheeler, 'Celebrity diplomacy'.



our understanding of the influence of celebrities in international politics and their roles in more networked and campaign-oriented processes of diplomacy. Practice research could also act as a stimulus for greater engagement with social theory, which has so far been limited.

Fourth, there is much to be gained from studying celebrity diplomacy in authoritarian public spaces. Our study shows that we need to improve our understanding of how authoritarianism curbs the potential of *celebrity* diplomats in particular.

We agree with the dominant view of celebrity diplomacy as a subset of public diplomacy, with its 'new public diplomacy' emphasis on the role of non-state actors of various kinds and on dialogue-based communication.<sup>27</sup> It therefore makes sense for any discussion on celebrity advocacy and activism to stay abreast of recent debates on public diplomacy, which have recently given particular emphasis to the impact on transnational dialogue of rampant disinformation and the conceptual merger between public diplomacy and domestic outreach, overriding the traditional distinction between the two.<sup>28</sup>

The difference between politics and diplomacy, as separate but overlapping domains, matters for our definition of celebrity diplomacy, as does the variance between the (once again intersecting) activities of diplomatic practice and policy-making. We take Wheeler's description of celebrity diplomacy as a starting point: 'the employment of well-known or famous individuals to publicize international causes and to engage in foreign policy-making circles'.<sup>29</sup> This leaves us, however, without a substantive answer to the questions about *how celebrities work* and *what they do*. Our diplomatic studies perspective is interested in the celebrity phenomenon as diplomatic practice. Cooper initiated the discussion of celebrities with both an essentialist, actor-centric IR perspective on their role, underscoring their growing agency in the transnational public sphere, and a relationalist diplomatic studies outlook on their interactions and relationships.<sup>30</sup> In this study, we define celebrity diplomacy as *informal diplomatic practice consisting of the engagement of famous*

<sup>27</sup> Jan Melissen, 'Public diplomacy', in Kerr and Wiseman, eds, *Diplomacy in a globalizing world*, pp. 199–218.

<sup>28</sup> For recent academic work that aims to gain a better understanding of the disinformation challenge in a public diplomacy perspective, see e.g. Corneliu Bjola and Krysianna Papadakis, 'Digital propaganda, counter-publics and the disruption of the public sphere: the Finnish approach of building digital resilience', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33: 5, 2020, pp. 638–66; Yevgeni Golovchenko, Mareike Hartmann and Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'State, media and civil society in the information warfare over Ukraine: citizen curators of digital disinformation', *International Affairs* 94: 5, 2018, pp. 975–94; Erik C. Nisbet and Olga Kamenchuk, 'The psychology of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns and implications for public diplomacy', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14: 1–2, 2019, pp. 65–82; Joseph S. Nye, 'Soft power and public diplomacy revisited', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14: 1–2, 2019, pp. 7–20; Sophie L. Vèriter, Corneliu Bjola and Joachim A. Koops, 'Tackling COVID-19 disinformation: internal and external challenges of the European Union', *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 15: 4, 2020, pp. 569–82. On public diplomacy in the domestic environment, see Huijgh, *Diplomacy at home*; Paul Sharp, 'Domestic public diplomacy, domestic diplomacy, and domestic foreign policy', in Gunther Hellmann, Andreas Fahrmeir and Milos Vec, eds, *The transformation of foreign policy: drawing and managing boundaries from antiquity to the present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 263–84.

<sup>29</sup> Wheeler, 'Celebrity diplomacy', p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Cooper, *Celebrity diplomacy*. See also Liza Tsaliki, Christos Frangonikolopoulos and Asteris Huliaras, 'Making sense of transnational celebrity activism: causes, methods and consequences', in Liza Tsaliki, Christos Frangonikolopoulos and Asteris Huliaras, eds, *Transnational celebrity activism in global politics: changing the world* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), pp. 295–312.

persons, either on behalf of established international actors or as independent entrepreneurs, in transnational advocacy work, public dialogue and political mobilization for purposes of global causes and modern norms.

Various typologies of celebrity diplomacy have been helpful in generating interdisciplinary interest in and understanding of this relatively new object of study.<sup>31</sup> The often normative discussion and ideological critique in the literature, as well as the wider polemic surrounding celebrity activism, extending to both mainstream and social media, may have tainted celebrity studies as an academic pursuit, at least to some extent. There has also been harsh academic criticism from within. As early as 2010, David Marsh, Paul 't Hart and Karen Tindall maintained that the literature on celebrity politics tends to be 'rarely systematic; more often it is superficial and anecdotal'.<sup>32</sup> Some good work was published in the years immediately following these authors' critical appraisal, but in our view there remains a case for more systematic analysis and theorizing, and indeed, this work is vital to move celebrity studies forward.

Existing disciplinary boundaries are likely to have contributed to a degree of analytical compartmentalization of celebrity diplomacy activity, which is in fact defying traditional political boundaries. Political scientists and public administration scholars' contributions tend to be limited to the interaction of celebrities with domestic politics and the formal political sphere. Marsh, 't Hart and Tindall's typology, which identifies celebrity endorsers, celebrity advocates and celebrity politicians seeking office, for instance, is driven by an interest in political *outcomes*. The focus of their interest is on what famous individuals can bring to politics in terms of electoral or policy gains. Political participation and engagement—areas of the *informal* political process that are of greater interest for celebrities—fall outside the scope of their study.<sup>33</sup> Equally, some of the early research on celebrities in political communication that was undertaken around a decade ago focused on the traditional political realm and established politicians, rather than on celebrities as outsiders entering and transforming the political sphere.<sup>34</sup>

John Street makes a valid case for more comprehension of 'the impact of celebrity politics on citizens',<sup>35</sup> referring to celebrity diplomacy in *democratic* political contexts. Our case-study shows that there is a need for parallel academic research on celebrity diplomacy in *democratic and authoritarian* public spaces, and this applies especially to the social impact of current communication technologies as the most significant recent development. That brings us right back to our own study on the online activities of Chinese UN celebrities on Weibo.

<sup>31</sup> See e.g. David Marsh, Paul 't Hart and Karen Tindall, 'Celebrity politics: the politics of the late modernity?', *Political Studies Review* 8: 3, 2010, pp. 322–40; Oliver Driessens, 'Celebrity capital: redefining celebrity using field theory', *Theory and Society* 42: 5, 2013, pp. 543–60.

<sup>32</sup> Marsh et al., 'Celebrity politics', p. 322.

<sup>33</sup> Marsh et al., 'Celebrity politics'.

<sup>34</sup> Aeron Davis and Emily Seymour, 'Generating forms of media capital inside and outside a field: the strange case of David Cameron in the UK political field', *Media, Culture and Society* 32: 5, 2010, pp. 739–59.

<sup>35</sup> John Street, 'Do celebrity politics and celebrity politicians matter?', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14: 3, 2012, p. 356.

## Our methodological approach

We have identified social media as an important venue for the conduct of diplomacy. Researchers into digital diplomacy have used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to study the social media activities of diplomatic actors, including content analysis (which we performed for this article), discourse analysis and various quantitative methods.<sup>36</sup> Our choice of research methods complements the existing celebrity diplomacy literature's heavy reliance on anecdotal information. Our study's sample size of nine cases explains the focus on general statistical trends, rather than a quantitative analysis involving multiple variables, that underpins our significant empirical results.

More than their western counterparts, Chinese celebrities operate within the bounds of constant political discipline, as well as an exceptional, by western standards, degree of observation by society over the acceptability of their attitudes and conduct. It is the duty of UN-affiliated celebrities in general to help the UN institution amplify its messages. In the dynamic context of Beijing's increasing engagement with the UN, moreover, Chinese celebrities have incentives to satisfy two other demands when joining the UN discourse in China's online space. First, because much of China's collaboration with UN agencies is official, Chinese celebrities' amplifying of UN messages constitutes a direct endorsement of the Chinese government and is thus indirectly rewarding for the celebrities themselves. Second, celebrities can use their UN activism to fulfil the social obligations placed upon them by Chinese civil society, which is historically preoccupied with moral virtues, in a global as well as a national setting. With more and more Chinese people exposed to and supporting narratives on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is only a matter of time before Chinese celebrities feel pressured to integrate these causes into their public personas.

These strong incentives for China's goodwill ambassadors to act as UN diplomats, combined with their constrained agency—as imposed by China's political system and the Chinese public's moral anxiety—present a fascinating puzzle for research. We seek to answer the following question: have China's UN-affiliated celebrities been playing a more active diplomatic role on Weibo, and can we discern changes in their online communication against the backdrop of China's growing activism in the UN? To help find the answer, we pose the following hypothesis:

*If celebrity diplomats are constantly looking to meet the heterogeneous expectations of the UN, the party-state and the Chinese public, they should not have significantly increased their UN-related activism under conditions of a shrinking public space. Instead, they are expected to have adopted an ever more 'diplomatic' approach, employing tact and reticence when fulfilling their duties as UN ambassadors.*

To test this hypothesis, our empirical investigation focused on the Weibo activity of a sample of nine Chinese celebrities affiliated with the UN during the period from 2013 to 2019, under Xi Jinping's presidency. We chose the micro-

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes, *Digital diplomacy: theory and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

blog platform Sina Weibo because it is one of the biggest social networking sites in China, with 516 million monthly active users in the fourth quarter of 2019.<sup>37</sup> Despite being subject to government monitoring and regulation, Sina Weibo has been designed as an open platform that shares many common features with its western counterpart Twitter. It is also the platform that—as well as the UN—other international organizations, national embassies and foreign entities use to reach out to the Chinese public through their official accounts.

Our close examination of some 300 posts used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. We extracted social media posts relevant to a celebrity's diplomatic role—that is, those that either mention the UN in the body text or that interact with UN accounts, hashtags and posts, including retweeting. Weibo's built-in search function facilitated a keyword search in a user's posts and reposts. Two types of posts were extracted. The first contained the keyword 'United Nations' (*lianheguo*). This keyword can appear in the body text (including in the repost), as (part of) a Weibo handle or as a hashtag in an extracted post. Since all names of UN agencies begin with these three characters in the Chinese language and the UN's official Weibo accounts all have these three characters in their handles, the number of these posts will most directly reflect a celebrity's level of activity as the UN's message-amplifier. The second batch of posts presents celebrities' online activism beyond their UN ambassadorial roles. We extracted these posts by using search words pertaining to celebrity diplomats' specialized issue areas.<sup>38</sup> We manually excluded posts containing the keyword 'United Nations' from this batch to avoid an inflation of the numbers. We subsequently examined the respective numbers of these two kinds of posts and their content. Apart from these advocacy posts, we paid attention to content endorsing government narratives and posts interacting with non-UN activist/philanthropic groups, so as to understand how celebrities navigate different roles and expectations.

Our sample contained nine celebrities, not selected randomly but chosen because of the similarity of their activity on Weibo. A randomly selected sample of celebrities who post several times a week and those who hardly post anything would not have enabled a statistically viable analysis and would therefore not have led to any meaningful conclusion.<sup>39</sup> Also, we selected only celebrities working in the entertainment industry (for example, musicians, stage actors and directors). They constitute the majority of the list of UN-affiliated Chinese celebrities and their presences on social media tend to be similar, which helped us identify common trends regarding their UN ambassador roles. Table 1 (overleaf) displays the profile information of the selected celebrities. Our empirical design thus enables us, first, to reveal whether and how UN-affiliated Chinese celebrities have been engaged

<sup>37</sup> The data were derived from Statista, *China: MAU of Sina Weibo 2020* (New York, 29 May 2020), number of monthly active users of Sina Weibo from 4th quarter 2017 to 3rd quarter 2020 (in millions): <https://www.statista.com/statistics/795303/china-mau-of-sina-weibo/>.

<sup>38</sup> For example, in the case of the UNEP ambassador Li Bingbing, the keywords used were earth (*diqu*), environment (*huanjing*), sustainability (*kechixu*), pollution (*wuran*) and climate (*qihou*).

<sup>39</sup> An additional issue was that some UN-affiliated Chinese celebrities, such as Peng Liyuan and Gong Li, do not have verified official Weibo accounts, while others, such as Yao Chen, have opted to display only their most recent posts (for example, from the past six months). This made random sampling not a feasible option.

in Weibo activism, and second, to assess whether any change can be observed in Chinese celebrities' communication since 2013. The next section will discuss the results of our online analysis.

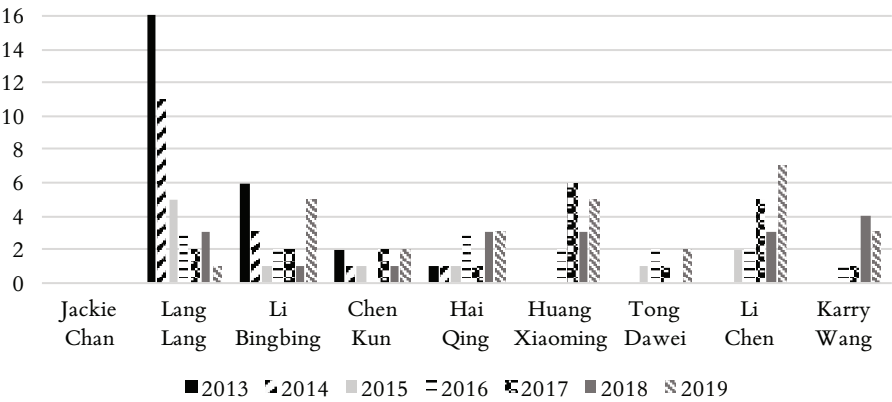
**Table 1: Selected celebrities' profiles, listed chronologically by date of UN affiliation**

| <i>Name</i>    | <i>Profession</i> | <i>UN affiliation</i>         | <i>Start of affiliation</i> | <i>No. of Weibo followers (million)</i> | <i>No. of Weibo posts (ooo)</i> |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Jackie Chan    | Actor             | UNICEF                        | April 2004                  | 31                                      | 1.1                             |
| Lang Lang      | Pianist           | UNICEF/<br>messenger of peace | May 2004/<br>Oct. 2013      | 15                                      | 2.6                             |
| Li Bingbing    | Actress           | UNEP                          | July 2010                   | 43                                      | 5                               |
| Chen Kun       | Actor             | UNICEF                        | Sept. 2010                  | 93                                      | 6.2                             |
| Hai Qing       | Actress           | UN Women                      | Oct. 2015                   | 14                                      | 2.1                             |
| Huang Xiaoming | Actor             | UNAIDS                        | Nov. 2016                   | 61                                      | 4                               |
| Tong Dawei     | Actor             | UN Women                      | Nov. 2016                   | 27                                      | 3.6                             |
| Li Chen        | Actor             | UNEP                          | Sept. 2017                  | 56                                      | 7.7                             |
| Karry Wang     | Singer            | UNEP                          | April 2018                  | 78                                      | 1.3                             |

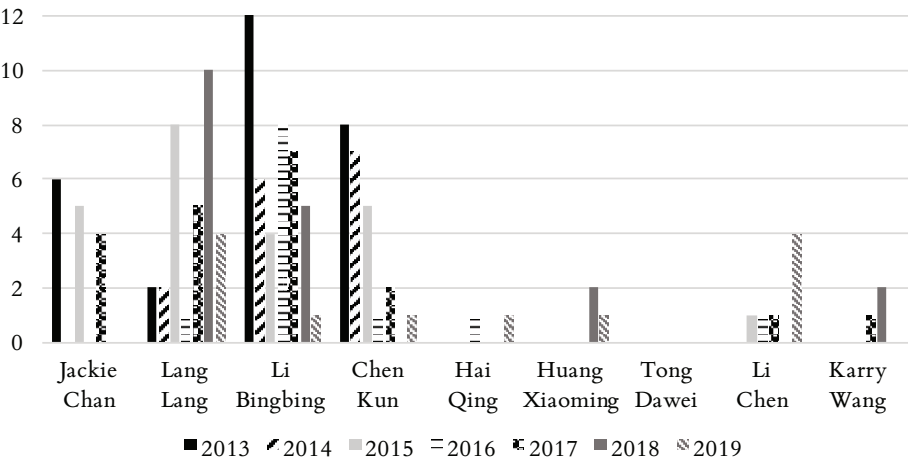
## Results and discussion

Figures 1 and 2 display the number of advocacy posts by our selected celebrities in each year from the period 2013–19. Figure 1 shows the number of 'UN advocacy posts', which were extracted using the keyword 'United Nations'; figure 2 shows the number of posts containing keywords pertaining to issue areas not using the keyword United Nations (hence labelled as 'non-UN advocacy posts' for convenience).

**Figure 1:** Number of UN advocacy posts made by each celebrity in each year



**Figure 2:** Number of non-UN advocacy posts made by each celebrity in each year



### *The invisible ambassador*

It is immediately clear from the above statistical analysis that the nine celebrity diplomats under study are not equally active in their UN ambassador roles, at least not on Weibo. Most notably, Jackie Chan has not made any UN advocacy posts during the seven-year period, in fact not at all in his entire posting history on Weibo, while maintaining a steady posting frequency of around several times a month. In comparison, Lang Lang, who was appointed a UNICEF ambassador the same year as Chan, has been much more active. While this limited sample



hardly permits any definite causal inference, a possible explanation of Chan's total inactivity might be that he is from Hong Kong, which distinguishes him from all of the other celebrities in the sample. As a Hong Kong citizen, one is constantly scrutinized for one's political stance in China's highly politicized public sphere. We feel it is safe to speculate that in order to secure popularity among his Chinese audience and potentially also Chinese government support, Chan has chosen to prioritize the construction and exhibition of his Chinese, People's Republic of China identity over his cosmopolitan identity as a UNICEF ambassador. If 'China' (*zhongguo*) instead of 'United Nations' had been used as the search word, 35 posts would have been extracted, many of them containing strongly nationalistic content. For example, on 13 March 2018 Chan retweeted a post by @CCTVFinance, an official account of China's largest state-owned broadcaster, saying:

I am proud that I come from China, a place to entrust in my heart. There is a motherland behind me wherever I go, looking at me with caring eyes. These are the most touching lines of lyrics that I know ... After the reunification, I can say I am Chinese wherever I go.<sup>40</sup>

It is important to note that while the word 'Chinese' can mean both 'from China' and 'belonging to the Chinese ethnic group' in English, in this and many other Weibo posts, Chan used the Chinese word that has only the first of these two meanings: *zhongguoren*. Since *zhongguo* means 'the Chinese state'—that is, the People's Republic of China—this declaration by UN goodwill ambassador Jackie Chan is unmistakably nationalistic.

Beyond his UN role, Chan—as the founder of two charitable foundations—has made a moderate effort to raise netizens' awareness of child poverty and education, as figure 2 suggests. It would therefore be accurate to describe Chan as an invisible rather than inactive UNICEF ambassador on Weibo. However, even his non-UN advocacy has seemed to be declining in the past few years, which can be considered an indirect answer to the main question driving this study regarding Chinese UN celebrity diplomacy since the watershed year 2013.

### *The generation gap*

The figures display a clear divide between the 'old-generation' UN ambassadors—Jackie Chan, Lang Lang, Li Bingbing and Chen Kun, all of whom were appointed before Xi Jinping came into office—and the newly appointed UN goodwill ambassadors. In comparison to the newly appointed group, old-generation ambassadors' online communication is characterized by three distinct features.

First, their activism extends further, beyond their UN roles, in terms of both posting frequency and the content of their posts. They engage with a wider range of issues and interact with a wider variety of parties, including many local activist and/or philanthropic organizations. For example, apart from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Li Bingbing interacts frequently with

<sup>40</sup> Jackie Chan, Weibo, 10 March 2018, [https://weibo.com/1234552257/G6lWu6vVF?from=page\\_1006051234552257\\_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment](https://weibo.com/1234552257/G6lWu6vVF?from=page_1006051234552257_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&type=comment).

the China Green Foundation (*zhongguo lühua jijinhui*) and the Starlight Charity Alliance (*xingguang gongyi lianmeng*) on Weibo and, in addition, makes yearly posts about the Earth Hour annual grassroots movement for the environment.<sup>41</sup> The other three celebrity diplomats of her generation are also deeply involved with China's local activist networks in their respective issue areas. The new-generation ambassadors, by contrast, have been rather inactive outside their UN roles. Tong Dawei is an extreme example, having posted nothing at all on women-related issues in a non-UN context. The search words that we used in this case were 'gender' (*xingbie*), 'women/females' (*nüxing/funü*) and 'equality' (*pingdeng*), all of which appeared frequently in his UN-related advocacy posts.

Moreover, the older generation's activism shows more consistency when compared to that of the new-generation ambassadors, who give the impression of conducting ad hoc activism, especially outside their UN roles. As can be seen from figure 2, their posting patterns display a high level of irregularity and there are clear 'gap years' in which no advocacy posts have been observed.

The intensity and consistency of the old-generation ambassadors' activism can be explained as a simple result of years of accumulated work. However, returning to the key research question of this study—that is, whether UN-affiliated celebrities have become more active as ambassadors on Weibo—there is a third communicative pattern that sets the two generations of celebrities apart. While the new-generation diplomats, from Hai Qing to Karry Wang, have generally become more active in UN-related activism in the selected time-frame, the number of UN advocacy posts made by the old-generation ambassadors has not visibly increased. In the context of the UN's own expanded Weibo activity (via its official accounts) in recent years, this lack of increase in absolute post numbers indicates *a decline in real activism*.

This is most apparent in the case of Lang Lang, a UNICEF goodwill ambassador since 2004 and UN messenger of peace since 2013, whose UN advocacy has fallen from a peak of 16 posts in 2013 to just one in 2019. Li Bingbing's environmental activism displays the same pattern. While her UNEP advocacy seems to have experienced a revival in 2019, when viewed in connection with the low number of non-UN advocacy posts that she made in the same year, the revival seems contentious. Chen Kun has never posted many UNICEF-related posts, while his activism beyond his UN role has been steadily declining. Jackie Chan, our 'invisible UNICEF ambassador', has essentially stopped all activism on Weibo. All this leads us to one conclusion: for the old-generation UN ambassadors, China's changing political environment has had a greater influence on celebrities' online presence than the growing incentive to be an advocate for the UN's cosmopolitan values.

### *Between activism and symbolism*

Why have the new-generation ambassadors not been frustrated in their efforts to amplify the UN's messages? As mentioned above, their UN activism seems

<sup>41</sup> An appendix with a selection of sample posts and their translation is available from the authors.

to be increasing. One explanation that suggests itself is that their activism has become more symbolic and, arguably, that the use of symbols to represent ideas is inevitably on the rise in a party-state in which the room for individual activism is circumscribed.

This symbolism reveals itself in the *delocalization* and *sloganization* of the content of the new-generation ambassadors' UN-related posts. In fact, the more recent posts made by the three old-generation ambassadors who have ever posted UN-related advocacy content display the same tendencies. Delocalization refers to the tendency of addressing 'global' problems instead of China's domestic problems. A good example is Chen Kun, who, as UNICEF's goodwill ambassador for China, once made a series of posts about his official visit to a poverty-stricken region in southwest China and reported in detail children's living conditions there between 2012 and 2013. He also made a post in 2013 about a local case of child abuse, mentioning UNICEF's official account. The keywords used to investigate these two cases were 'children/kids' (*ertong/haizi*) and 'little friends' (*xiaopengyou*), the latter being a very informal and intimate way of referring to children in the Chinese language. It is striking that, as shown in our research, Chen Kun stopped mentioning children-related problems in China in his UN-advocacy posts after 2013.

Sloganization, on the other hand, means a tendency in celebrities' Weibo advocacy to circumvent the stage of rationalizing an action, which entails exposing and debating an issue, and to move swiftly to a call for action. This tendency is reflected most directly in these celebrities' increasing interest in celebrating UN anniversaries and international commemorative dates that relate to their respective issue areas. To take Chen Kun as an example again, the three UN posts he made in 2018 and 2019 are all commemorative posts calling for more action for children's welfare, while addressing no specific problems at all.

We argue that Chinese celebrities' symbolic UN activism offers a way out of a difficult problem, as it enables them simultaneously to assume the moral leadership expected of them by their domestic public, fulfil their obligations as UN ambassadors and endorse the party-state's UN discourse. This compromise seems to be unavoidable in today's China. We predict further harmonization of these aims in the form of even greater resort to symbolism in Chinese celebrities' UN activism as the tacitly sanctioned, officially tolerated mode of communication. In China's current public space, the advocacy styles of old-generation and new-generation UN goodwill ambassadors are bound to become increasingly aligned in their greater embrace of symbolism on Weibo.

## Conclusions

Against the backdrop of China's increasing engagement with the UN during Xi Jinping's presidency, our research aimed to answer the question of whether Chinese UN-affiliated celebrities have become more active ambassadors and have changed their presence and communication on Weibo. Our analysis of social media data has shed light on how Chinese celebrities navigate the diverse and sometimes

conflicting expectations of three parties. First, there is the UN as the accrediting international organization, all of whose strategies and policies are geared towards the propagation of universal values. Second, there is China's government, which has an overriding interest in using Chinese stars and role models to promote nationalist narratives, and offers little scope and tolerance for deviant messaging in China's infosphere. Third, there are Chinese societal expectations of national heroes, which lead to the wider public in China casting 'their' celebrities as moral role models.

Our research unveiled some interesting patterns of online behaviour by Chinese celebrity ambassadors. Those appointed before 2013 have reduced their activism, while conversely latecomers appointed during the current presidency have become more active. Next, Chinese celebrities acting as informal UN representatives appear to be tiptoeing in a profoundly political online space, and have turned to the use of linguistic tools in a semantic public arena much more attuned to nuance than the West. We have noted increasing symbolism in Chinese celebrity ambassadors' recent activism, reflected in their tendency to delocalize or universalize the content of their posts. Any previously existing opportunities for Chinese UN goodwill ambassadors to *discuss* work towards the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals within China have all but evaporated. Chinese UN celebrities have also progressively employed sloganization as a linguistic tool in their online presence. Their strategic use of calls for action in the form of non-dialogical slogans has the effect of steering clear of Weibo's deliberative potential, which does not seem coincidental. Finally, and further accentuating the domestic politicization of UN celebrity activism in China, our research suggests the distinct possibility of a causal relationship between a Hong Kong identity and inactivity as a UN ambassador on Weibo on the part of Chinese celebrities.

The results of our empirical study provide the UN with some important insights into the status of its celebrity diplomacy project in China, and give rise to some recommendations for the UN and for the Chinese government. Chinese celebrities prefer to hold back in their communications on UN issues. Celebrities' commercial success and personal standing in the community are closely tied to the official sanctioning of their online behaviour, and they hence opt for symbolic activism and sloganization. This suggests that UN headquarters would benefit from an evidence-based understanding of how apparently straightforward central messages unfold in the special case and local circumstances of China. The related UN communications strategy should therefore not be limited to global messaging and narration from the centre, but should also critically examine the translation and adaptation of central messages by its goodwill ambassadors in receiving countries. This is a condition for the future practical and effective use of UN goodwill ambassadors in the public space of China and, indeed, many other authoritarian member states of the UN. In China, we see very clearly how diplomatic volunteers for the UN are navigating the respective demands of their sending organization's interests and their own national identity, loyalties, political calculations and commercial interests.

The Chinese government can perhaps also gain some insights from this so far unexplored facet of China–UN relations. Agenda-setting is clearly the business of the party-state, but the number of *sui generis* non-state actors is bound to increase, as is China's engagement with the UN. Far from being trivial players, China's celebrities—if empowered as *affective* diplomats—have much to contribute in gaining domestic support for China's global ambitions. Considering the factors identified in our research, it nonetheless remains doubtful, though yet to be established, whether the Chinese celebrities themselves benefit from any form of enhanced agency as a result of their informal diplomatic activity—as opposed to what is generally assumed regarding celebrity agency in democratic settings.

One obvious limitation of this study is that it does not benefit from comprehensive statistical analysis. We propose that a larger, follow-up project could consider questions about the effectiveness of 'symbolic activism', in terms of message amplification and generating conversations; about how Chinese celebrities' UN activism connects discursively with government narratives and grassroots online initiatives; and about how celebrity diplomacy on Weibo differs from that conducted on western social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Our research additionally enlightens the study of public diplomacy. This article lends empirical support to the suggestion that students of public diplomacy should pay more attention to both national diplomatic actors' domestic spheres and what happens to the public diplomacy messages and narratives of states and international organizations in receiving countries. Significant learning can be expected from *empirically* examining these two dimensions of public diplomacy activity more thoroughly, instead of privileging the sending strategies, policies and practices of public diplomacy actors.

As this article shows, the UN goodwill ambassador scheme is not just a challenge for China, in the sense that UN ambassadors need to stay on message, but is equally a creative opportunity in terms of stealthily aligning UN communication with the Chinese government's domestic communications on global issues. Ultimately, it can be seen as a success for the party-state that Chinese UN goodwill ambassadors on Weibo have increasingly loaded their online messaging with symbolic and nationalist content so as to harmonize their UN messaging with official Chinese party-state narratives.

Finally, our research substantiates the argument for more and better research on celebrity diplomacy. The issue of how systematic empirical research informs our conceptual understanding and theorizing of social phenomena is often overlooked. Here, the limitations of existing research on celebrity diplomacy are a case in point. This study represents an implicit yet important argument in favour of more research outside the linguistic and cultural straitjacket of the Anglosphere. It underlines the importance of more scrutiny of celebrity diplomacy in authoritarian spaces, as no country on Earth seems to escape the marvel of celebrities.