

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chinese Celebrities' Political Signalling on Sina Weibo

Dan Chen¹  and Gengsong Gao² 

¹Department of Political Science, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia, USA. and ²Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures, University of Richmond, Richmond, Virginia, USA. ggao@richmond.edu

Corresponding author: Dan Chen, email: dchen@richmond.edu

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Abstract

In China, celebrities can dominate public discourse and shape popular culture, but they are under the state's close gaze. Recent studies have revealed how the state disciplines and co-opts celebrities to promote patriotism, foster traditional values and spread political propaganda. However, how do celebrities adapt to the changing political environment? Focusing on political signalling on the social media platform Sina Weibo, we analyse a novel dataset and find that the vast majority of top celebrities repost from official accounts of government agencies and state media outlets, though there are variations. Younger celebrities with more followers tend to repost from official accounts more often. Celebrities from Taiwan tend to repost less than those from the mainland and Hong Kong, despite being subject to the same rules. However, the frequent political signalling by the most influential celebrities among younger generations suggests that the state has co-opted celebrity influence on social media to broadly promote its political objectives.

摘要：

在中国，名人可以主导公共话语并塑造流行文化，但他们处于国家的密切关注之下。最近的研究揭示了国家如何惩戒和利用名人来促进爱国主义、培养传统价值观和强化政治宣传。但名人如何适应不断变化的政治环境呢？集中于在微博上发送政治信号这一现象，我们分析了一个新的数据集，发现绝大多数顶级名人都会转发政府机构和官方媒体的微博博文，但是这种转发行为也有差异。拥有更多追随者的年轻的名人倾向于更多地从官方账户转发。尽管受到相同规则的限制，台湾名人的转发率往往低于大陆和香港名人。然而，年轻一代中最具影响力的名人频繁发出政治信号表明，国家已经利用名人在社交媒体上的影响力来更广泛地促进其政治目标。

Keywords: celebrity; political signalling; social media; political control; China

关键词: 名人; 政治信号; 社交媒体; 政治控制; 中国

The 11th National Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles 中国文联第十一次全国代表大会 and the 10th National Congress of Chinese Writers' Association 中国作协第十次全国代表大会 opened at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on 14 December 2021.¹ Renowned writers, actors, musicians, dancers, television hosts and other performing artists were invited to attend the meeting, listen to President Xi Jinping's speech and share their aspirations for aligning their work with public interests and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP)² expectations.

1 "Xi Jinping zai Zhongguo wenlian dishiyici quanguo daibiao dahui, Zhongguo zuoxie dishici quanguo daibiao dahui kai-mushi shang fabiao zhongyao jianghui" (Xi Jinping delivered an important speech at the opening ceremony of the 11th National Congress of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the 10th National Congress of the Chinese Writers' Association), Xinhua News Agency, 14 December 2021, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-12/14/content_5660777.htm. Accessed 8 January 2022.

2 The CCP, the Party, the government and the state are used interchangeably in this article.

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The CCP's use of entertainment celebrities to serve its political agenda has a long history. During the 1930s, the CCP made concerted efforts to transform the commercialized movie industry and cultivate leftist script writers, directors, producers and actors in creating "anti-feudal" and "anti-imperialist" revolutionary works of art. The top movie stars, such as Ruan Lingyu 阮玲玉 and Hu Die 胡蝶, began to appear in various progressive and left-leaning movies.³ After taking over political power in 1949, the CCP continued to criticize the commercialized celebrity culture for its association with "corrupted lifestyles, loftiness, individualism, and liberalism" while transforming movie stars into "movie workers" to propagate socialist values and promote state policies.⁴ Meanwhile, the CCP was committed to elevating ordinary workers, peasants, soldiers and low-level cadres (e.g. Shi Chuanxiang 时传祥, Dong Cunrui 董存瑞, Lei Feng 雷锋, Jiao Yulu 焦裕禄) as socialist role models for mass emulation.⁵

In the post-Mao era, market-oriented reforms led to a re-emergence of commercialized celebrity culture, a sharp departure from the socialist role models. On the demand side, market-oriented reforms brought about economic prosperity, urbanization and a growing middle class eager to consume celebrity-centred fashion, films, music, TV dramas and entertainment news. On the supply side, partial commercialization⁶ incentivized the media to produce and promote celebrities to meet audience desires and generate profits, which helped address financial difficulties caused by reduced state subsidies. Moreover, the market opening attracted a massive inflow of celebrities from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West.⁷ With the growth of celebrity influence, the CCP sees certain emerging celebrity behaviours as pernicious, such as excessive individualism, extravagance, involvement in sex scandals and tax evasion. To correct these behaviours and leverage celebrity influence for its political agenda, the CCP has taken active measures to regulate and co-opt celebrities. Since 2005, various government agencies have issued regulations and notices to ban celebrities embroiled in scandals and require them to set moral and patriotic examples.⁸

Existing studies on Chinese celebrities focus on how the state uses various political and legal measures to govern and co-opt celebrities.⁹ They echo the emphasis on the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Xi leadership observed in recent scholarship on Chinese politics. However, from the celebrities' perspective, how they respond to the growing political control and what factors shape their responses remain underexplored. Unlike the performing artists in the Maoist era who followed very similar career paths by working within the state-owned studios, troupes and theatres, entertainment celebrities in today's China come from diverse backgrounds and vary significantly in influence, age, place of origin and route to stardom. The existing scholarship has examined different types of celebrities (e.g. military, internet, entrepreneur and literary celebrities)¹⁰ and their philanthropic engagements.¹¹ However, we have yet to explore celebrities' political significance as a group phenomenon while considering the differences therein. Furthermore, Chinese celebrities' social and cultural influence has been growing.¹² In 2020, China became the largest market in the global film industry, surpassing the box office returns of the United States.¹³ Therefore, it is important to understand Chinese celebrities' political orientation and behaviour.

3 Pang 2002.

4 Lin and Zhao 2020; He and Wang 2021.

5 Lin and Zhao 2020.

6 Stockmann 2013.

7 Sullivan and Kehoe 2019.

8 Xu and Yang 2021.

9 Schneider 2017; Xu and Yang 2021; Lu and Pan 2021; Lin and Zhao 2020; Sullivan and Kehoe 2019.

10 Edwards and Jeffreys 2010.

11 Jeffreys 2015a; 2015b; 2016; Deng and Jeffreys 2018; Hassid and Jeffreys 2015; Jeffreys and Xu 2017.

12 Kokas 2017.

13 Patrick Brzeski, "It's official: China overtakes North America as world's biggest box office in 2020," *Hollywood Reporter*, 18 October 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/its-official-china-overtakes-north-america-as-worlds-biggest-box-office-in-2020-4078850/>. Accessed 18 February 2022.

In this study, we examine a specific type of celebrity behaviour that has emerged since Xi's second term – signalling political loyalty on social media – to understand how celebrities adapt differently to the state's expectations for them to be patriotic and moral exemplars. We built a novel dataset consisting of the demographic and professional characteristics of the 218 most popular Chinese celebrities on the social media platform Sina Weibo (in terms of followers) and their reposts of official messages on the platform between June and November 2021. We used linear regression models to examine the correlation between individual characteristics and the tendency to repost official messages. We find that most celebrities (85.3 per cent) reposted official messages from government and state media accounts on Weibo to signal political loyalty between June and November 2021, but some celebrities did not repost anything. To explain the variation, we examine three individual-level factors: celebrities' influence, age and place of origin. We find that among the celebrities who reposted official messages, those who have more Weibo followers, are younger and are from the mainland and Hong Kong reposted more than those who have fewer Weibo followers, are older and are from Taiwan. The findings suggest that celebrities adapt to state demands differently despite operating in the same political environment. However, the frequent political signalling by the most influential celebrities, primarily those who are popular with younger generations, suggests that the state has co-opted celebrity influence on social media to broadly promote its political objectives. Some celebrities have become willing political actors in the promotion of official messages, policies and values. Stardom, social media and political control co-operate to produce mutually beneficial relationships that support the fame and wealth of celebrities and the political control of the CCP. The rise of the celebrity industry thus amplifies the CCP's grip on social mores and its ability to extract expressions of political support.

Our research has implications for studying China's evolving authoritarian rule and celebrity politics in general. In the digital age, celebrities and social media wield tremendous influence in the public discourse. Capturing celebrity influence on Weibo not only tames a potential source of competition for the state but also amplifies state messages and promotes the brand value of official accounts. Official messages reposted by celebrities may be more persuasive than posts coming from official accounts because celebrities are liked and followed by millions of fans. In this way, politics is celebrityized as celebrities become more involved in politics and exert more political influence.¹⁴ Furthermore, co-opting celebrity influence on social media has been an effective strategy for the state to remain relevant in the digital sphere of information overload. The increasing blend of popular culture and politics thus manifests China's evolving authoritarian rule.

Our research also has implications for the study of celebrity politics in general. With most studies on celebrity politics focused on democracies, scholars have debated the implications of celebrities' political participation. Some contend that celebrities undermine democracy by trivializing politics and shifting public attention from policies and structural problems to personalities, images and rhetorical "spin."¹⁵ Others argue that celebrities enhance democracy because they are less complicit with politically vested interests and more likely to break the hold of established elites on political agendas as mobilize otherwise indifferent citizens.¹⁶ Offering a study of celebrity politics from an authoritarian political system, our research shows that Chinese celebrities operate under the state's close gaze and have become powerful disseminators of state messages. Therefore, Chinese celebrities are reliable defenders of the Chinese government rather than agents to propel China's democratic transition.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. To provide a context for the new phenomenon of celebrities' political signalling on Weibo, this article first outlines the growing celebrity influence in the reform era and the subsequent government crackdown on and co-optation of them. It then explains why celebrities are incentivized to signal political loyalty in light of tightening political control and why the social media site Weibo has become a dominant space for celebrities to

14 Marsh, Hart and Tindall 2010.

15 Van Zoonen 2006.

16 Cowen 2000; West and Orman 2003.

construct their public image. After setting up the context, this article explores individual-level factors that correlate with celebrities' political signalling behaviour. It then discusses the data and the statistical results. The article concludes with a summary of the findings and the implications.

The Rise of Chinese Celebrities

A celebrity can be defined as “a person whose name, image, lifestyle, and opinions carry cultural and economic worth, and who are first and foremost idealised popular media constructions.”¹⁷ In China, performing artists' participation in commercial activities at the beginning of the reform era marked the (re-)emergence of the celebrity industry. In the 1980s, market-oriented reforms cut down state subsidies for state-owned movie studios, theatres and troupes,¹⁸ which led many artists to engage in commercial performances for profit. In 1988, actors Pan Hong 潘虹 and Li Moran 李默然, who were among the first to use their celebrity status for commercial gain, appeared in TV advertisements for cosmetics and medicines.¹⁹ Meanwhile, many artists left state-owned cultural institutions to join the private sector, while an inflow of overseas Chinese singers and actors, mainly from Hong Kong and Taiwan, pursued entertainment careers in mainland China. For example, Hong Kong singer Cheung Ming-man 张明敏 and Chinese American singer Kris Phillips 费翔 were among the first overseas Chinese artists to appear in the widely watched China Central Television (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala in 1984 and 1987 respectively and became household names overnight.²⁰

The reforms gained momentum after Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992, leading to increased prosperity and leisure activities, transnational cultural flows and the development of market-driven mass media.²¹ The cultural and entertainment industry emerged in this context and experienced rapid growth: more private studios and entertainment companies were established; a professional agent system gradually formed; more artists left state-owned studios while a growing number of self-taught artists emerged; and more overseas Chinese artists entered the mainland entertainment market. Among the most popular idols in the 1990s were the “Four Heavenly Kings” (*sida tianwang* 四大天王: Jacky Cheung Hok-yau 张学友, Andy Lau Tak-wah 刘德华, Leon Lai Ming 黎明, Aaron Kwok Fu-shing 郭富城) from Hong Kong. In the 21st century, however, the growth of the internet and the mainland entertainment industry produced a great number of grassroots celebrities (e.g. Furong Jiejie 芙蓉姐姐), reality show celebrities (e.g. Li Yuchun 李宇春) and internet celebrities 网红. Furthermore, the increasing commercialization of the industry has produced a competitive hierarchical structure wherein celebrities have different levels of visibility and business value. The composition of the Chinese celebrity community has become more diverse than ever. Meanwhile, problematic behaviours emerging with the booming celebrity culture and the rise of nouveau riche entertainers – tax evasions, sex scandals, conspicuous consumption and politically incorrect opinions – have invited the state's regulatory attention.

Governance of Celebrities

Since the start of celebrity culture in the reform era, the CCP has taken measures to limit or ban what it perceives as “problematic” entertainers and cultural products. For instance, Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木, a member of the Politburo in the 1980s, criticized movie star Liu Xiaoqing's 刘晓庆 memoir *My Road* 我的路 as a glorification of capitalistic “personal struggle” that disregarded Party principles.²² Despite her enormous popularity among Chinese urban youth, Teresa Teng's 邓丽君 songs

17 Redmond 2013, 5.

18 Li 2016.

19 Yu and Deng 1999.

20 Gold 1993.

21 Xu and Yang 2021.

22 Xiaoyu Lei, “Liu Xiaoqing plays Liu Xiaoqing,” GQ, 16 December 2013, https://www.gq.com.cn/celebrity/news_19257b093d152f4d.html. Accessed 20 February 2022.

were denounced by the government as a “decadent sound” that conveyed poisonous “bourgeois values” during the anti-spiritual-pollution campaign in the early 1980s.²³ However, while Teresa Teng’s songs and Liu Xiaqing’s movies and TV dramas were officially banned, they remained accessible. In general, the CCP did not take systematic and harsh measures against the “problematic” celebrities during the first two decades of the reform era.

Entering the 21st century, the CCP tightened its control of celebrities. Since 2005, an explicit and elaborate policy and legal framework has taken shape to regulate and control celebrities, their cultural products, media platforms, fan groups and professional associations.²⁴ For example, “banning” (*fengsha* 封杀) celebrities is an extra-legal means to remove celebrities from the public view, such as removing related films and songs and terminating commercial contracts and public appearances, as a punishment for celebrities’ breach of legal, ethical or political obligations. Such ban notices are typically distributed internally from the top by one or more central government agencies such as the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), the Ministry of Culture or the Cyberspace Administration of China, under the guidance of the Central Publicity Department of the CCP.²⁵

In 2014, the precursor to the NRTA – the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television – issued the “Notice on Strengthening the Management of the Production and Dissemination of Related Radio and TV Programmes, Film and TV Dramas, and Network Audio-visual Programmes” (*Guanyu jiaqiang youguan guangbo dianshi jiemu, yingshiju he wangluo shiting jiemu zhizuo chuanbo guanli de tongzhi* 关于加强有关广播电视节目、影视剧和网络视听节目制作传播管理的通知), requiring all broadcasting platforms to block “tainted artists” (*lieji yiren* 劣迹艺人) and their entertainment products. According to the notice, “tainted artists” are those in the entertainment industry who engage in drug use, prostitution or other illegal behaviours. Because celebrities are public figures, these illegal behaviours can generate a harmful social impact and mislead young people. Since then, the phrase “tainted artists” has entered the public discourse, where ordinary citizens have started to use the phrase to judge and criticize celebrities. This public participation adds further disciplinary power to the state regulation of celebrity behaviour. In addition to drug use and prostitution, other problematic behaviours of “tainted artists” include tax evasion, political incorrectness (such as supporting the independence of Hong Kong or Taiwan), involvement in official corruption cases, extramarital affairs and promoting religion.²⁶

More importantly, the term “good-quality artists” (*youzhi yiren* 优质艺人) has become a topic of wide discussion, making merely refraining from bad behaviour appear inadequate. For example, in August 2021, the CCTV website published an opinion piece arguing that “it is time to get serious” about making public figures shoulder social responsibilities and become role models.²⁷ It revisits the notion of “professional excellence and moral integrity” (*deyi shuangxin* 德艺双馨), a lofty ideal promoted by the CCP for socialist artists and cultural workers, and argues that this notion should not be a lofty goal anymore but a professional standard pursued by every artist.²⁸ In addition, the state has actively promoted “good-quality artists” such as the boyband TFBoys, who have been featured in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala and promoted by the Communist Youth League’s official Weibo account. The United Nations in China even presented TFBoys member Wang Yuan 王源 with an award for his proposal on education reform.²⁹ Under the state’s demand

23 Lin 2017.

24 Xu and Yang 2021.

25 Sullivan and Kehoe 2019; Xu and Yang 2021.

26 Xu and Yang 2021.

27 Jing Zhao, “Yangshi ping yulequan yinggai shenmeyang: guanzhong xuyao youzhi yiren he zuopin” (CCTV comments on what the entertainment industry should be: audiences need good-quality artists and works), *Sina.com*, 29 August 2021, <https://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/2021-08-28/doc-iktzscycx0967315.shtml>. Accessed 8 January 2022.

28 Xu and Yang 2021, 203.

29 Karoline Kan, “In China, it’s the Party that keeps the boy band going,” *New York Times*, 6 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/06/world/asia/china-tfboys-boy-band.html>. Accessed 9 January 2022.

for “good-quality artists,” celebrities are incentivized to publicly signal that they are trying to be the kinds of role models expected by the state.

Celebrities’ Political Signalling

In the existing research on Chinese politics, the concept of signalling has been used to refer to the state’s signalling towards different audiences, including the signalling of coercive power towards its citizens³⁰ and the signalling of political intentions towards foreign governments during international crises.³¹ In addition, local officials may signal their political loyalty and competence to political superiors for career advancement.³² Given the historical and political context of celebrity politics in China, we define political signalling as celebrity behaviours that publicly express support and loyalty towards the state and its policies.

Celebrities signal their political loyalty towards the state to create a more conducive environment for their professional and commercial gains. Indeed, unlike their Western counterparts who are incentivized to satisfy the market, Chinese celebrities have fostered “a neoliberal subjectivity with Chinese characteristics,”³³ where pleasing the state has become an effective way to reach the market. Those endorsed by the state are offered rare opportunities to perform on state television, star in state-sponsored films and TV dramas, serve ambassadorial roles for government agencies and attend important national conferences. Participation in these widely watched activities and artistic works can boost celebrities’ visibility and increase their commercial value in the competitive entertainment industry. Therefore, celebrities have strong incentives to satisfy state demands in pursuit of career, fame and wealth. Meanwhile, it is important to acknowledge that some celebrities may sincerely support the government and genuinely desire to promote its policies.

Given the compelling reasons for celebrities to signal political loyalty, what are the specific ways for them to do so? Celebrities can engage in political signalling in and outside their professional work. In their professional work, celebrities can play characters in patriotic films and TV dramas, sing songs for official events such as the 2022 Winter Olympics and perform at anniversary celebrations of the founding of the CCP, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Outside their professional work, celebrities can promote public interest initiatives, post patriotic messages on social media and serve on official bodies such as the People’s Congress and the People’s Political Consultative Conference at both the national and regional levels.

Among these various forms of political signalling, we focus on promoting official messages on Weibo. This political signalling behaviour is selected based on two methodological considerations. First, all celebrities should be able to engage in political signalling on Weibo if they so choose, regardless of their status or occupation. In contrast, if a celebrity is not well known or qualified enough to star in patriotic films, that celebrity would not have an opportunity to signal political loyalty in that way. However, every celebrity can register a Weibo account and repost official messages, thus providing an ideal way to compare celebrities’ signalling behaviour. Second, reposting on Weibo is a measurable behaviour, allowing a quantitative study of this topic. Moreover, making self-drafted political statements can be risky, so celebrities are more inclined to amplify political messages from official sources than to create original content.³⁴ Understanding the varying frequencies of celebrities’ reposting of official messages will shed light on how they adapt to the current political and regulatory environment.

30 Huang 2015.

31 Weiss 2013.

32 Chen 2020, Ch. 3; Shih 2008.

33 Xu and Yang 2021.

34 Zilinsky et al. 2020.

Weibo as a Site of Political Signalling

Why do Chinese celebrities use Weibo as their social media platform to engage the public and signal political loyalty? Weibo is a microblogging platform launched by Sina Corporation in August 2009. As of June 2021, it has 566 million monthly active users.³⁵ During the first decade of its existence, Weibo has become a digital platform with substantial commercial, cultural, social and political influence. Celebrities' political signalling on Weibo, therefore, constitutes a very public act that not only displays their political loyalty to the state but also shapes the public discourse due to their large numbers of followers and extensive networks.

Weibo has become such an important site of public discourse that the government has developed a palpable presence there.³⁶ Many government agencies and state media outlets have set up their official accounts on Weibo. Weibo not only provides a more affordable venue to publicize official messages, but it is more accessible to ordinary citizens. Furthermore, the effects of state propaganda, defined as inaccurate, exaggerated or fabricated information or rhetoric that favours the regime or disfavours its antagonists,³⁷ can be more easily measured and assessed using the numbers of views, likes, comments and reposts.³⁸

Besides government agencies and state media outlets, celebrities have the most visible influence on Weibo, as shown by the large numbers of followers and user interactions. Since Weibo was launched in 2009, celebrities have shown a strong preference for Weibo, as opposed to other social media platforms, when making important announcements, promoting their work and conducting commercial activities. For example, when actor Wen Zhang 文章 was found to have an extramarital affair in March 2014, he publicly apologized to his wife, actress Ma Yili 马伊琍, on Weibo, where Ma Yili's response was also posted. When Wen Zhang and Ma Yili divorced in July 2019, their announcements were again first made available on their Weibo accounts. These sensational announcements attracted huge media attention and became widely discussed celebrity gossip.³⁹ As this process demonstrates, Weibo allows celebrities to have full control over the messages they share while benefiting from the massive public attention. In addition to personal announcements, Weibo has become an important venue to promote celebrities' work, including films, TV dramas and music. It has also become an effective way to disseminate advertisements to large numbers of followers.

When celebrities repost official messages, we consider it a behaviour that reflects celebrities' different political sensibilities. While the government has fostered the notion of "good-quality artists" who can exemplify patriotic and traditional values, there is no evidence to indicate that the government specifically requires celebrities to repost official messages on Weibo. For instance, television host Meng Fei 孟非 and singer Na Ying 那英 did not repost any official messages from June to November 2021, but they were not penalized. Meng Fei even received a prestigious broadcasting industry award – the Golden Voice Award 金声奖 – from the NRTA in 2022. Therefore, celebrities' political signalling on Weibo reflects their different adaptations to state demands.

Weibo has become an important site of public discourse where the presence of government agencies, state media outlets and celebrities powerfully shape public attention and discourse. It has also become a site of public discussion and information diffusion.⁴⁰ Celebrities' political

35 Wang Hai, "Weibo Q2 yingshou 5.7 yi meiyuan, yuehuoyonghu tupu 5.6 yi" (Weibo's Q2 revenue reaches US\$570 million; monthly active users exceed 560 million), *Diyi caijing*, 18 August 2021, <https://www.yicai.com/news/101145102.html>. Accessed 8 January 2022.

36 Schneider 2017; Xu and Yang 2021; Lu and Pan 2021; Lin and Zhao 2020; Sullivan and Kehoe 2019.

37 Huang 2018.

38 Lu and Pan 2021.

39 "Wen Zhang wei chugui fa Weibo daoqian – Ma Yili: qie xing qie zhenxi" (Wen Zhang apologizes for his extramarital affair – Ma Yili: cherish what you have at the moment), *Guangming wang*, 31 March 2014, <https://news.sohu.com/20140331/n397460834.shtml>. Accessed 8 January 2022.

40 Nip and Fu 2016; Zhang, Liu and Rong 2018.

signalling on Weibo thus carries unique significance in our understanding of celebrity politics in China. So how does this signalling behaviour vary among Chinese celebrities?

Celebrity Characteristics and Political Signalling

Celebrity influence

Existing research on American celebrities suggests that more star power correlates with a larger amount of advocacy work for social welfare and other political causes, as celebrities tend to benefit from a positive public image while interest groups tend to reach out to influential celebrities.⁴¹ In the Chinese context, existing research finds that influential celebrities' philanthropic engagements can mobilize their fans and generate virtual participatory communities and offline volunteering communities.⁴² Based on the pattern that influential celebrities tend to engage in social and political advocacy, we expect a positive correlation between the level of celebrity influence and the level of political signalling on Weibo. We have several specific reasons for this expectation.

First, nationalist sentiments are becoming more visible in the Chinese online discourse.⁴³ This political context helps to normalize celebrities' promotion of official messages, which tend to resonate with the public. Second, celebrities with more influence tend to attract more disciplinary attention and co-optation attempts from the state, as celebrity influence can be perceived as "vying for visibility" and potentially dangerous if used to foment political dissent.⁴⁴ Therefore, more influential celebrities should have stronger incentives to signal political loyalty under the tightening legal and regulatory framework. Indeed, celebrities are "more anxious to be officially recognized and co-opted by the state and join the competitive 'mainstream' entertainment circle" to survive in the precarious entertainment industry.⁴⁵ Third, celebrities may benefit from earning opportunities to appear in state-sponsored events, which would increase their commercial value. Therefore, celebrities are positively and negatively motivated to display alignment with the government on social media.

Meanwhile, some celebrities may signal political loyalty first and are rewarded with valuable professional opportunities, allowing them to gain more public influence. For instance, TFBoys started to reach beyond the music industry and the band's members have started to receive offers to star in films in recent years. One of its members starred in the nationalist war film *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (*Changjin hu* 长津湖) in 2021, the highest-grossing Chinese film of all time,⁴⁶ suggesting that celebrities who propagate the government's "positive values" are rewarded professionally and financially.

Regardless of the causal direction, we should observe a correlation between a celebrity's degree of influence on Weibo and the frequency of their political signalling. We measure celebrity influence on Weibo by (1) the number of followers and (2) the number of user engagements, including likes, comments and reposts. Celebrities display their alignment with the Party by reposting messages from official accounts. This discussion leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *Celebrities' number of Weibo followers positively correlates with their number of reposts from official accounts.*

Hypothesis 2: *Celebrities' number of Weibo engagements positively correlates with their number of reposts from official accounts.*

41 Thrall et al. 2008; Zilinsky et al. 2020.

42 Jeffreys and Xu 2017, 259.

43 Woods and Dickson 2017; Weiss 2019.

44 Lu and Pan 2021.

45 Xu and Yang 2021.

46 Bill Bostock, "A Chinese propaganda film about the defeat of the US Army is set to become the country's highest-grossing film ever," *Business Insider*, 18 October 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-movie-defeating-us-army-becoming-highest-grossing-ever-2021-10>. Accessed 29 June 2022.

Celebrity age

Reposting official messages on Weibo is a unique type of political signalling. Unlike playing war heroes in patriotic films or singing songs promoting government projects, reposting on Weibo is outside celebrities' professional work. It is tailored to a specific realm of online public discourse dominated by Weibo users who are primarily young (born after 1990), urban (concentrating in the following five urban clusters: Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei, the Yangtze Delta, the Fujian Triangle [Xiamen–Zhangzhou–Quanzhou], the Pearl River Delta, and Sichuan and Chongqing), entertainment-minded and “star chasers” (*zhuixing zu* 追星族).⁴⁷ Therefore, contrary to the impression that celebrities stand out from the ordinary people for their bold individualism and independent spirit,⁴⁸ younger celebrities in China may find Weibo a fitting space to signal political loyalty. This is due to several factors.

First, younger celebrities are savvier about Weibo, which only came into existence in 2009 and became popular in the 2010s. Younger celebrities are digital natives and more confident about effectively using Weibo to their advantage. Although celebrities tend to have public relations teams who manage their online images and social media accounts, they still have control over their Weibo posting. Our interviews with two cultural content producers in China, who have many Weibo followers and are familiar with celebrities' Weibo operations, suggest that both celebrities and their agents may participate in drafting Weibo posts. However, ultimately the posts need to be approved by the celebrities. Therefore, celebrities' Weibo posts should reflect their own opinions and attitudes.

Second, Weibo is populated by younger generations. According to the 2020 Weibo User Development Report published by Sina Corporation, in 2020 users born after 1990 constituted close to 80 per cent of all Weibo users.⁴⁹ In the entertainment industry, the fanbases of older celebrities tend to be older, while the fanbases of younger celebrities tend to be younger. Therefore, younger celebrities may find Weibo a more fitting space to engage their fans, conduct commercial activities and signal political loyalty.

Third, pro-government and nationalist online discourses from Chinese youth – younger celebrities' fanbase – have become commonplace, providing a conducive environment for younger celebrities to connect with their fans and signal political loyalty. A recent study finds that digital revamping of the state media, expansion of government Weibo and official promotion of patriotic bloggers have encouraged netizen participation, including reposting, sharing and creating content to promote official messages.⁵⁰ In this environment, the phenomenon of “little pinks” (*xiao fenhong* 小粉红) emerged in 2016, illustrating the younger generations' nationalist expression in cyberspace.⁵¹ In a recent study of quotidian expressions of nationalism during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zhao finds that Chinese netizens on Zhihu 知乎, a Q&A platform whose users are primarily educated young urbanites, exhibit a confident and rational but confrontational and xenophobic posture in their quotidian discourses.⁵² Furthermore, a recent study of Chinese public opinion finds that the Xi Jinping generation, i.e. those who came of age in the past decade, is more oriented towards authoritarianism than its preceding generations, suggesting genuine political support for the state among Chinese youth.⁵³ Not only are younger celebrities part of the Chinese youth, but their fans also belong to this group. Therefore, we expect younger celebrities to engage Weibo for political signalling more than older celebrities.

Hypothesis 3: *Younger celebrities tend to repost more from official accounts than older celebrities.*

47 Sina Technology 2021.

48 Marsh, Hart and Tindall 2010.

49 Sina Technology 2021.

50 Repnikova and Fang 2018.

51 Fang and Repnikova 2018.

52 Zhao 2021.

53 Jin and Zhou 2021.

Celebrities' place of origin

At the beginning of the reform era, popular culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan swept the mainland, so much so that the term *Gang Tai liuxing wenhua* 港台流行文化 was coined to refer to this phenomenon.⁵⁴ Though the influence of *Gang Tai liuxing wenhua* has waned in recent decades as the mainland cultural industry rapidly grows, a substantial number of celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan continue to operate on the mainland.

Celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan are subject to the same rules and regulations when they work on the mainland.⁵⁵ Indeed, there have been cases where celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan were censured due to their political incorrectness. For example, Chou Tze-yu 周子瑜 and A-mei 张惠妹, Taiwan singers, were compelled by their industry employers to apologize for singing the anthem of the Republic of China and waving its flag.⁵⁶ Denise Ho 何韵诗, a Hong Kong singer and actress, was arrested in December 2021 by the national security police for supporting Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement.⁵⁷

Despite being subject to the same regulatory framework, we expect celebrities' political signalling on Weibo to differ depending on their place of origin. First, Hong Kong celebrities may depend more on the mainland market than Taiwan celebrities, as Hong Kong's local market (7 million people) is much smaller than Taiwan's (23 million people). Therefore, we should expect a stronger incentive for Hong Kong celebrities to signal loyalty to the Chinese government than Taiwan celebrities.

Second, celebrities from Taiwan are arguably in a different position than celebrities from Hong Kong and the mainland. Hong Kong and the mainland are under the control of the Chinese government. Hong Kong's autonomy has given way to central control, especially after the protests in 2019 and the subsequent imposition of the National Security Law in 2020. In contrast, Taiwan remains a self-ruled island with its own political and legal system. If a Taiwan celebrity violates rules set by the Chinese government, commercial interests may impel that celebrity to apologize and rectify his or her behaviour. However, legal punishment is rare unless the celebrity is physically in the mainland when the violation occurs.

Third, in Taiwan, though most citizens favour maintaining the status quo regarding the relationship with the mainland, there are more citizens that favour independence than those who prefer reunification in recent years.⁵⁸ Thus, many citizens dislike Taiwan celebrities aligning with the Chinese government and becoming its propaganda instruments. For example, Taiwan celebrities who participated in the CCP's centennial and the PRC's National Day celebrations in 2021 or expressed pro-China and pro-reunification views, such as Ouyang Nana 欧阳娜娜 and Angela Chang 张韶涵, were harshly criticized and ridiculed by Taiwan officials, media and citizens for fawning on China to make money.⁵⁹ Therefore, the politics within Taiwan may also propel Taiwan celebrities to refrain from openly displaying alignment with the Chinese government.

Though some Taiwan celebrities may feel the need to signal political loyalty to the Chinese government in order to continue their careers on the mainland, on the whole, their need should be weaker than celebrities from Hong Kong and the mainland. This discussion leads to the following hypothesis:

54 Gold 1993; Lin 2017.

55 Xu and Yang 2021.

56 Sullivan and Kehoe 2019.

57 Jessie Yeung, "Hong Kong pop star Denise Ho arrested by national security police," *CNN*, 29 December 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/29/asia/denise-ho-wan-see-arrest-hong-kong-intl-hnk/index.html>. Accessed 30 December 2021.

58 Tsai, Wang and Weng 2019.

59 "Ouyang Nana, Zhang Shaohan: Taiwan yiren xianchang Zhongguo dalu guoqing wanhui yinfa zhengyi" (Ouyang Nana and Zhang Shaohan: Taiwanese artists sing the National Day Gala in mainland China, causing controversy), *BBC News* (Chinese edition), 29 September 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-54340476>. Accessed 9 January 2022.

Hypothesis 4: *Celebrities from Taiwan tend to repost from official accounts less than celebrities from Hong Kong and the mainland.*

Data and Results

We analysed more than 16,300 Weibo posts published between June and November 2021 by the 218 most popular Chinese celebrities on Sina Weibo (in terms of followers). These celebrities are selected based on two criteria. First, they were named on the Forbes China Celebrity List at least once between 2004 and 2020. The Forbes China Celebrity List, first launched in 2004, is an annual list (except in 2016 and 2018) that ranks celebrities based on their influence, measured by income and exposure in the media.⁶⁰ Starting in 2010, the list includes celebrities born in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries and regions besides the mainland.⁶¹ It is a comprehensive list that includes actors, singers, presenters, directors, writers, models, athletes and other celebrities. Second, we used the number of Weibo followers to discern the most influential celebrities in 2021. Given the landscape of celebrities on Weibo, we chose 10 million followers as a cut-off point for selecting celebrities with broad influence in society. In the Chinese celebrity industry, purchasing fake followers and using “bots” to generate engagement on social media are common, but faking 10 million followers is too costly and algorithmically difficult. While some celebrities with more than 10 million followers may have purchased bot-driven followers to enhance their reputation and commercial value, their visibility and influence are indisputable.

After collecting the Weibo posts, we conducted content analysis to code reposts from official Chinese state accounts between June and November 2021. We used the following criteria for coding: (1) the post should be a repost from another account, and (2) the original account in the repost should be an official account. The official accounts used in our content analysis include *People’s Daily* and its website, CCTV News and other CCTV channels, Xinhua News Agency and its website, Xinhua Finance, China News, *Global Times*, *Liberation Daily*, *China Daily*, *China Youth Daily*, *China News Weekly*, *Guangming Daily*, the Central Military Theater, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson’s Office, CGTN Journalists (CGTN 记者团), the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics, China Fire, the PLA Navy, the Supreme People’s Procuratorate, the Ministry of Public Security and the Communist Youth League.

The six-month period from June to November 2021 witnessed several high-profile political events and anniversaries, such as the CCP’s centennial, Army Day, National Day, the anniversaries of Japan’s invasion and surrender, the Tokyo Olympics and the launch of the *Shenzhou* spacecraft. State media outlets and government agencies actively posted about these events and anniversaries to tout state achievements, boost nationalist sentiments and enhance political legitimacy. Thus the six-month period provides an opportunity conducive to gauging celebrities’ differing levels of political signalling. The number of reposts from official accounts is our dependent variable. It measures the frequency of celebrity signalling towards the government during the six months.

Official accounts, including those of state media outlets and government agencies, publish approximately 10–40 posts every day on both political and non-political content. Non-political content comprises weather, traffic, food and entertainment news. Political content covers political leaders’ activities, government-led achievements, public policies and politically significant anniversaries. In addition, political content covers international news, though much of this category is negative, such as racist incidents, social unrest, public health crises and political protests. Overall, official accounts seek to boost nationalism and political legitimacy by portraying a rosy picture of China and a gloomy picture of Western democratic countries. When celebrities repost from official accounts, the messages are strategically selected. Politically important messages, such as the CCP’s centennial, National Day and Chinese athletes winning Olympic medals, are commonly reposted. In

⁶⁰ Jeffreys and Edwards 2010.

⁶¹ Jeffreys 2015a.



Figure 1. Examples of Celebrity Reposts
Source: Weibo.

addition, celebrities may repost messages to advance the public interest, such as reposting ways to help prevent and respond to natural disasters. The negative news about Western democratic countries is typically not reposted. Figure 1 shows examples of celebrity reposts.

While Chinese athletes winning Olympic medals is an outcome of a sports event, it has significant political meaning. First, sports and politics are intimately imbricated with each other. The Chinese government invests heavily in training Olympic athletes. It is estimated that the government invested about 15.7 million yuan (US\$2.34 million) for each gold medal won at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.⁶² Indeed, government spending on sports is a determining factor for China’s Olympic success.⁶³ In turn, the government harnesses Chinese athletes’ achievements to boost regime support.⁶⁴ Second, the political signalling is conspicuous when celebrities repost official messages about Chinese athletes winning Olympic medals rather than posting a “non-official,” self-drafted message to congratulate the athletes.

Among the 218 celebrities in our dataset, 85.3 per cent reposted from official accounts at least once between June and November 2021, while 14.7 per cent did not repost anything during the same period. Among those who reposted, the frequency of reposts varies from one to 33 during the six months. Figure 2 summarizes the distribution of the reposts.

We use linear regression models to test the hypotheses to understand the variation in the frequency of celebrity reposts. Our goal is to examine the correlation between variables rather than to discern causation, as we are interested in understanding which celebrities tend to repost from

62 Chen Weisheng, “Tiyu zongju fu juzhang: guojiajiang jiangli jinpai xuanshou mei ren 35 wan” (Deputy director of the General Administration of Sport: the state will award each Olympic gold medalist 350,000 yuan), *Guangzhou ribao*, 25 August 2008, <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-08-25/064216167626.shtml>. Accessed 18 June 2022.

63 Li, Meng and Wang 2009.

64 Chen and MacDonald 2020.

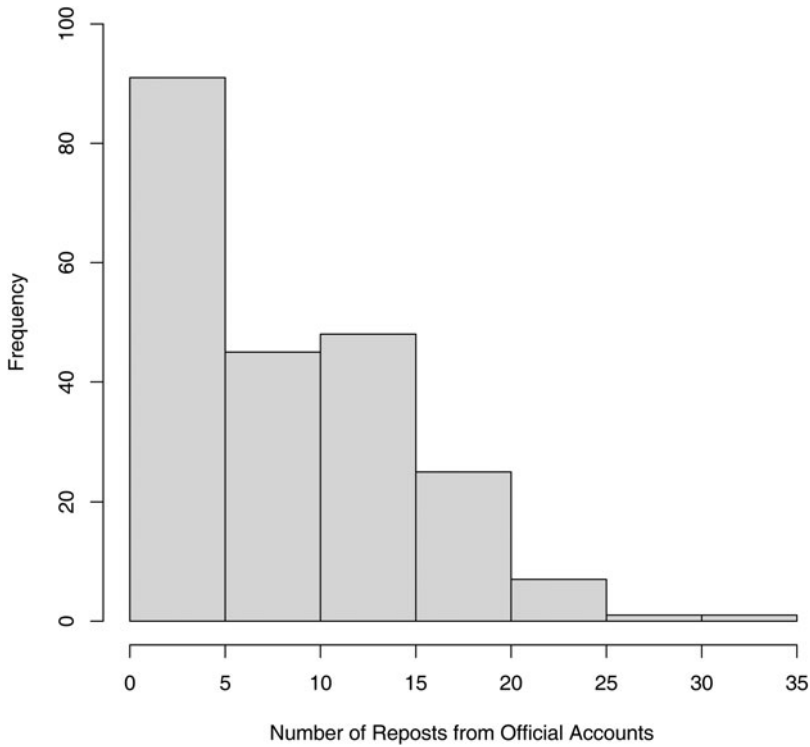


Figure 2. Frequency of Celebrity Reposts
 Source: Authors' dataset.

Table 1. Summary Statistics for Numeric Variables

Variable	Mean	Median	Min.	Max.	Std. dev.
Reposts from official accounts	8.22	7.00	0	33.00	6.97
Number of followers (in 1,000,000)	32.90	24.72	10.08	130.00	23.06
Number of engagements (in 1,000)	62.60	13.41	0.22	1049.09	139.83
Age	39.15	39.00	20.00	67.00	8.93

Source: Authors' dataset.

official accounts more (or less). Our independent variables include a celebrity's number of followers on Weibo, the average number of Weibo engagements (including likes, comments and reposts), age and place of origin. In addition, we include gender, generation and education as control variables, the data for which come from publicly available sources. Summary statistics are presented in **Table 1** for numeric variables and **Figure 3** for categorical variables.

To test our hypotheses, we first examine bivariate associations using linear regression models, summarized in **Figure 4**. The results support our hypotheses. At a statistically significant level, Model (1) shows that every million additional followers are associated with 0.08 more reposts from official accounts between June and November of 2021; Model (2) shows that every thousand additional engagements on Weibo are associated with 0.01 more reposts from official accounts during the same period; Model (3) shows that every year of reduction in a celebrity's age is associated

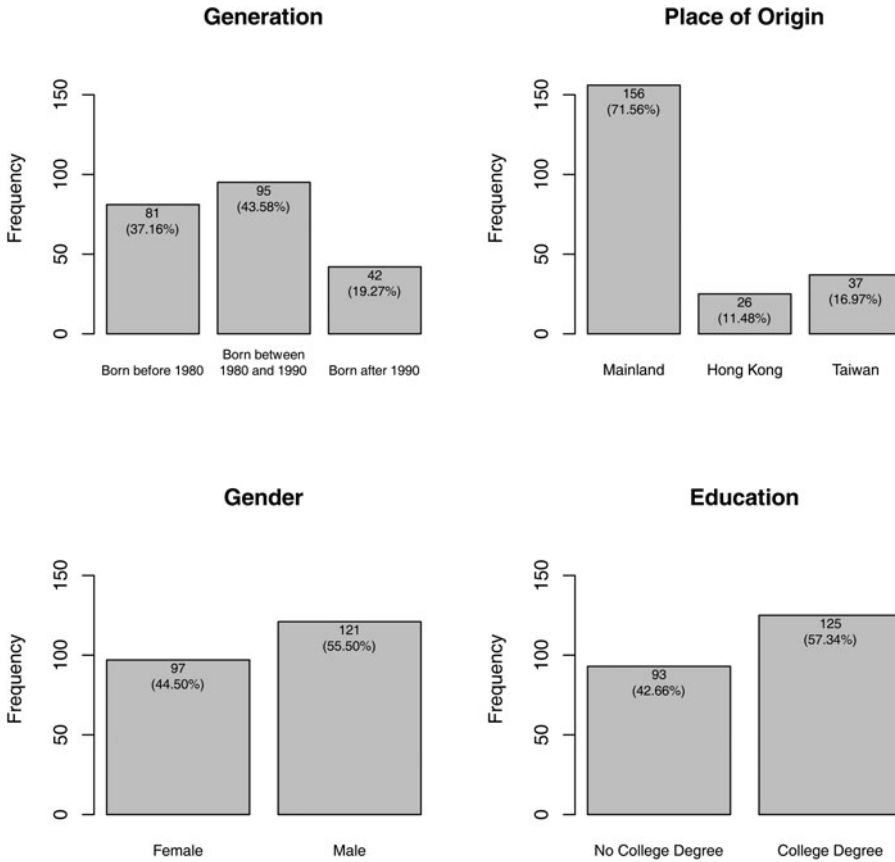


Figure 3. Summary Statistics for Categorical Variables
 Source: Authors' dataset.

with 0.38 more reposts from official accounts during the same period; Model (4) shows that there is a statistically significant difference not only between Taiwan and mainland celebrities but also between Hong Kong and mainland celebrities. Compared to mainland celebrities, on average Taiwan celebrities had 7.83 fewer reposts from official accounts between June and November of 2021, while Hong Kong celebrities had 3.87 fewer reposts during the same period.

Since all three factors are correlated with the number of reposts from official accounts, it is important to examine the relative importance of these factors. Table 2 summarizes the results of multivariate regression models. Results from Model (5) show that, when we account for all four independent variables in the same model, the number of Weibo engagements and the difference between mainland and Hong Kong celebrities are not statistically significant anymore. In contrast, the statistical significance and direction of the other variables remain the same. Overall, the results still provide support for our hypotheses.

In Model (6), we control for gender, generation and education to account for the potential influence of other celebrity characteristics. The results are still consistent with our hypotheses. Additionally, male celebrities tend to repost less from official accounts than female celebrities between June and November 2021. While we hesitate to surmise the reasons behind the gender difference in political signalling, it is plausible to examine the pervasive gender hierarchy in celebrity culture and the broader Chinese society.⁶⁵ The disadvantaged status of female celebrities may propel

65 Evans 2021.

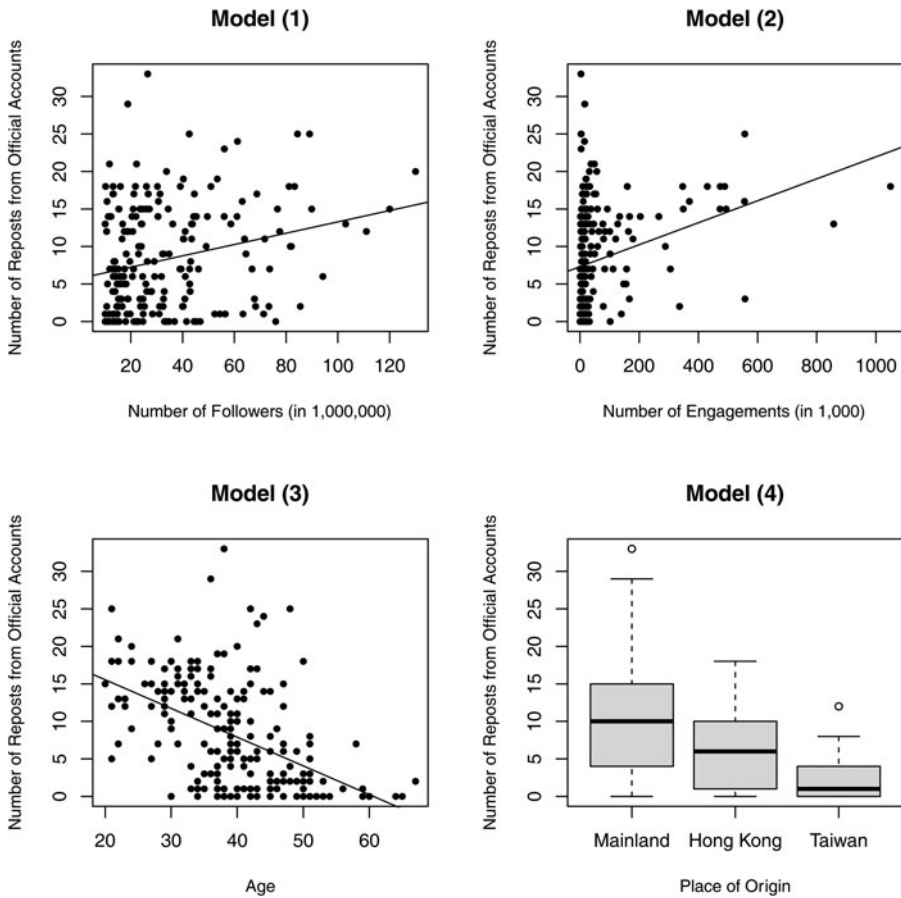


Figure 4. Bivariate Associations
 Source: Authors' dataset.

them to signal more in order to secure a more favourable position in the public sphere, especially in the eyes of the state. Indeed, there have been high-profile cases of the state disciplining celebrities in recent years, including female celebrities such as Fan Bingbing 范冰冰 (2018), Zheng Shuang 郑爽 (2021) and Wei Ya 薇娅 (2021), all of whom were charged with tax fraud and evasion.

As a robustness check, we use an alternative measure of the dependent variable – the number of reposts from official accounts between January and May 2021 – to run the same regression models. Compared to June to November 2021, the first five months of the year are relatively quiet regarding political events and anniversaries, which allows us to test whether the pattern of celebrities' political signalling behaviour is consistent when political events are less dominating. Because some celebrities used the Weibo setting of “only showing posts from the past six months,” we could not collect these celebrities' posts from January to May 2021. As a result, our sample size dropped to 147, meaning that about 33 per cent of the 218 celebrities chose to limit the visibility of old Weibo posts. This decision could be a deliberate strategy by celebrities to pre-empt potential political or professional backlash from past Weibo posts.⁶⁶ Using this alternative measure, we report regression

66 Liu Sihui, “Weibo shezhi bannian kejian – Zhao Liying deng mingxing daitou ‘xiankan’” (Weibo setting to allow only posts from the past six months, Zhao Liying and other stars begin to limit visibility), *Zhengquan ribao*, 11 April 2019, http://www.ce.cn/cysc/tech/gd2012/201904/11/t20190411_31832275.shtml. Accessed 30 May 2022.

Table 2. Regression Results

	Number of reposts from official accounts (June–November 2021)		Number of reposts from official accounts (January–May 2021)	
	Model (5)	Model (6)	Model (7)	Model (8)
Number of followers (in 1,000,000)	0.05** (0.02)	0.05** (0.02)	0.04** (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)
Number of engagements (in 1,000)	0.002 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)	0.002 (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)
Age	−0.31*** (0.05)	−0.39*** (0.09)	−0.16*** (0.03)	−0.14* (0.06)
Place of origin (=Hong Kong)	−0.85 (1.25)	−1.01 (1.30)	−0.70 (0.72)	−0.76 (0.75)
Place of origin (=Taiwan)	−6.15*** (1.03)	−6.45*** (1.05)	−2.70*** (0.60)	−2.74*** (0.62)
Gender (=male)		−2.00** (0.77)		−0.71 (0.49)
Generation (post-1980)		−1.41 (1.31)		0.17 (0.85)
Generation (post-1990)		−2.14 (2.27)		0.77 (1.47)
College degree (=yes)		0.07 (0.80)		−0.02 (0.50)
Intercept	19.81*** (1.99)	24.97*** (4.64)	8.74*** (1.21)	8.09** (2.81)
Multiple R-squared	0.39	0.41	0.45	0.46
N	218	218	147	147

Source: Authors' dataset.

Notes: Entries are estimated coefficients from ordinary least squares (OLS) models. Standard errors are in parentheses. The reference category for "Generation" is born before 1980. The reference category for "Place of Origin" is mainland China. The reference category for "Gender" is female. The reference category for "Education" is having no college degree. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

results in Table 2, which show a pattern similar to our previous findings. Model (7) shows that having more followers, being of a younger age and originating from the mainland and Hong Kong are correlated with more reposts from official accounts. Adding in the control variables, Model (8) shows similar results, consistent with the models from June to November 2021.

Together, the regression results support our hypotheses that celebrities' influence, age and place of origin correlate with political signalling on Weibo. Specifically, younger celebrities with more followers tend to repost from official accounts more, while celebrities from Taiwan tend to repost from official accounts less than those from the mainland and Hong Kong. The findings suggest that celebrities adapt to state demands differently despite operating in the same political environment. Celebrities who are more influential, younger and from the mainland and Hong Kong tend to toe the Party line more closely. However, the overall effect of reposting from official accounts helps create a favourable discursive and cultural environment to amplify state messages.

Conclusion

As the celebrity industry has rapidly grown in the reform era, the Chinese state's governance of celebrities has become more sophisticated. Adapting to the changing political environment, younger

celebrities who have more followers and come from the mainland or Hong Kong tend to repost more official messages on Weibo as a way to signal their political loyalty to the state and shape online public discourse. The frequent political signalling by the most influential celebrities among younger generations in China suggests that the state has co-opted celebrity influence on social media to broadly promote its political objectives. The convergence of the state's political demand, celebrities' cultural influence and social media's broad reach has allowed the state to dominate online public discourse. Popular culture has become a key instrument of political legitimation in China.

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Dan CHEN is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Richmond. Her research focuses on media politics, public opinion, local governance and cultural politics in China. She is the author of *Convenient Criticism: Local Media and Governance in Urban China* (SUNY Press, 2020).

Gengsong GAO is an associate professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Richmond. His research focuses on contemporary Chinese intellectual discourse, literature and pop culture. He is the author of *A Novel Approach to China: What China Debaters Can Learn from Contemporary Chinese Novelists* (Palgrave, 2022).