Rising from the Margins
Women Superstars in Superpower China

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In This Presentation

- Defining the “cultural entrepreneur” (CE) in the post-socialist era
- Women cultural entrepreneurs: three case studies
- A few concluding observations



Research Area

- Relevant areas:
  - Creative industries & cultural entrepreneurship
  - Women entrepreneurs
  - Celebrity



Wang Chaoge, stage director

Mediasphere & Cultural Transformation

- Aim: To understand cultural transformation in post-socialist China's media and its socio-political implications

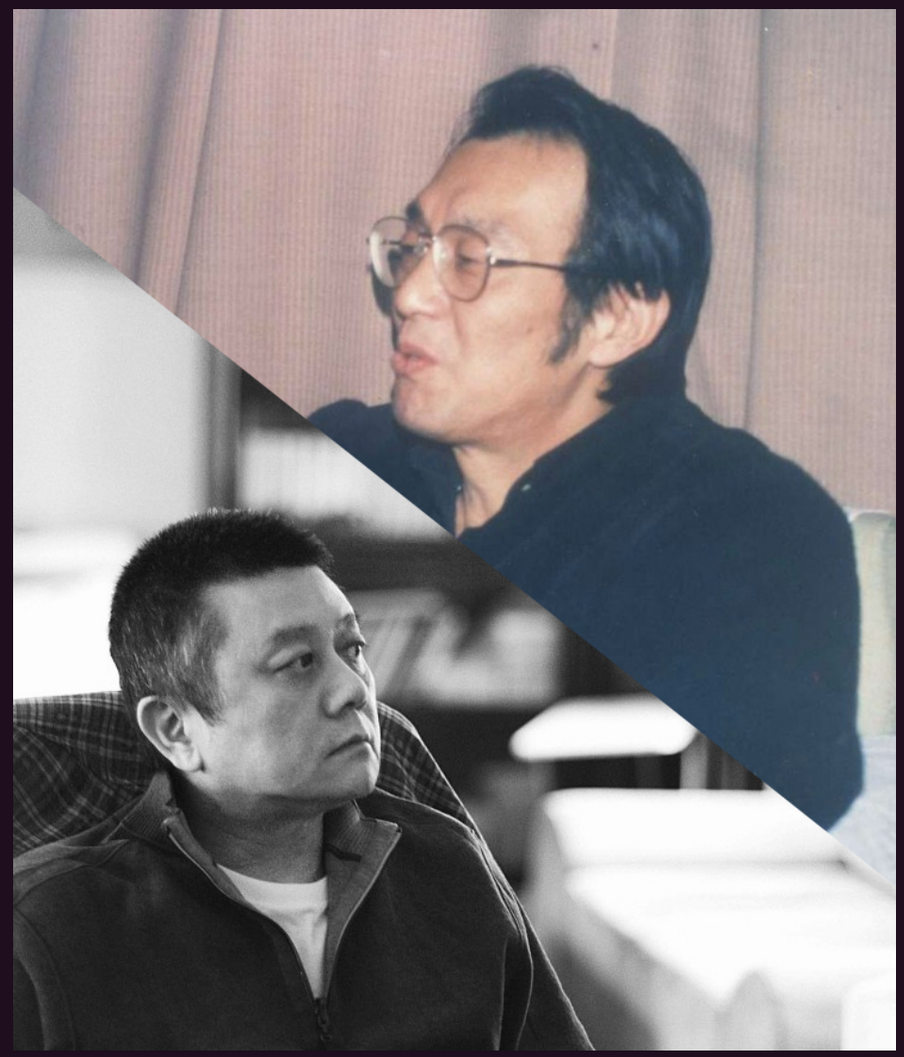
- How do China's CEs use different media (social, traditional etc.) for cultural production, self-fashioning, communication?

- Sources:
  - Print media, TV, visual arts etc.
  - Web-based literature
  - Blogs and micro-blogs

- Method: Analysis of print and web-based sources: contents and frames (commercial context)

Market Reforms & Cultural Commodities

- Return? Republican Era - or even early modern China
- Market principles in cultural sphere, late 80s/early 1990s
    - Seeds of a “creative class”? Marginal to the System, stigmatised by Intellectuals
- 11th 5-year plan, 2006: home-grown creativity as economic policty imperative
    - Partial reform
    - “social benefits” demand + “cultural public service work units” cannot be privatised



“Beijing has discovered the value of the individual, creative self-expression and grassroots energy in transforming Chinese economy and society”

Jing Wang, 2016

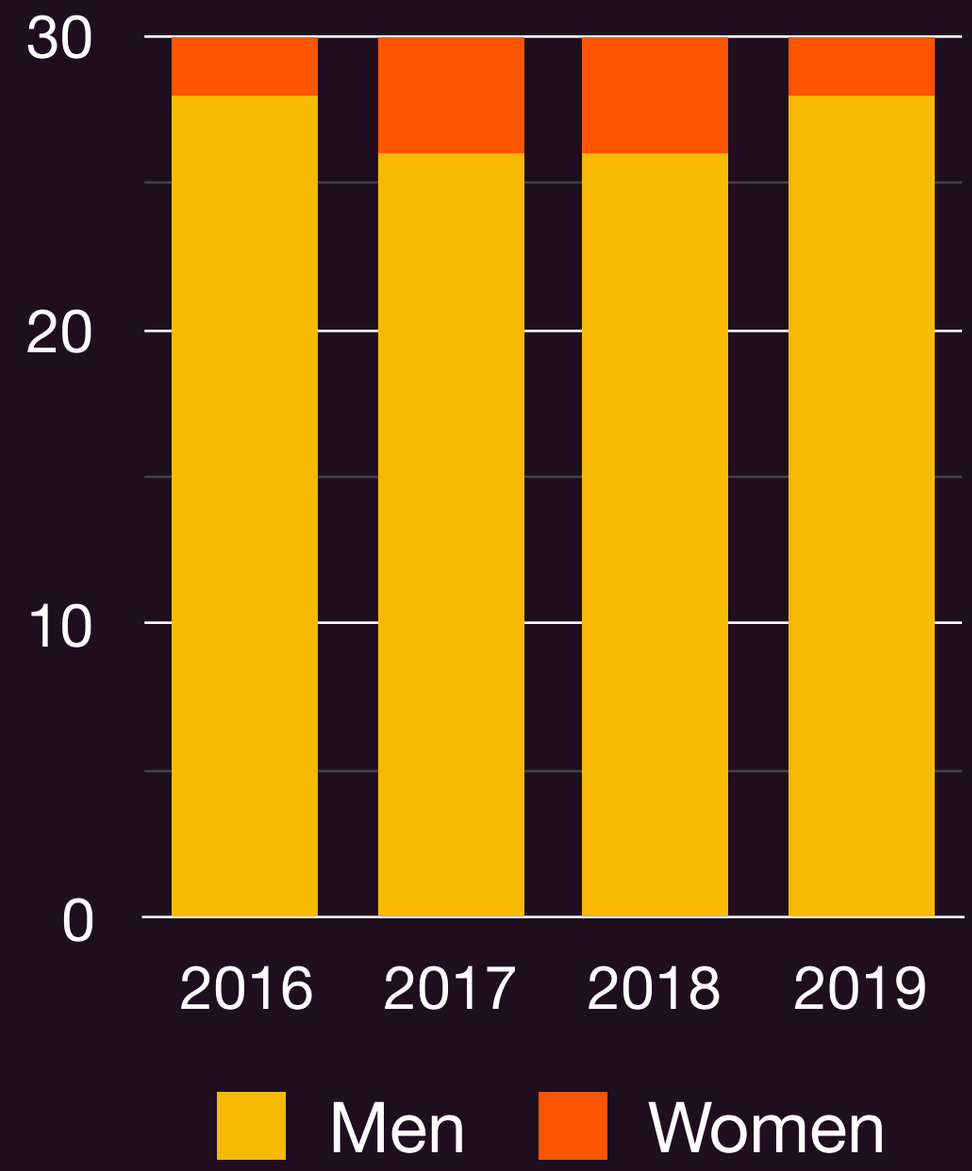
Recognition - Definition - Cooptation?

- Since late 1990s: “cultural entrepreneur” 文化企业家
- Guangming Daily/Propaganda Dept.: celebration of “top personalities in the cultural industries” since 2012
- Mainly CEOs & founders of companies in film production, gaming, online literature, theatre etc.



Propaganda Dept's Honours

- Out of 30 "top personalities" only 2 or 4 women, 2016-2019
  - E.g. stage director Wang Chaoge 王潮歌; TV producer Gao Sumei 高素梅; dance show producers Zhang Xian 张娴 and Kou Yaling 寇雅玲
- Listed personalities praised for contribution to tourism, local economies, official media etc.



Marginal?





Above, video-blogger Papi Jiang; on the left, Jin Xing, dancer and choreographer, in Davos

“At the Intersection of Culture and Cash” (Elizabeth Currid)

- Creation and commercialisation of cultural products - marketing, business ventures, (self-)promotion
- Ideological *and* economic role:
    - Exchanging cultural goods while adding to the “menus” of beliefs, mindsets and cultural preferences from which others choose (Joel Mokyr)



Cao Fei, *Cosplayers*, 2004

Anni Baobei / Qingshan

- Pen names of Li Jie 励婕 (b. 1974)
- On *Rongshuxia* 榕树下 (Under the Banyan Tree), a pioneer of online literature:
  - 1997: *Gaobie Wei'an* 告别薇安 (Farewell to Vivian) as Anni Baobei
- No publishing connections: "Playing around" (玩), writing out of boredom, just for fun



Anni Baobei / Qingshan

- Around 2000: from web “writer” (写手) to print “author” (作家): 15 books, member of Chinese Writers Assoc.
- Editor, translator, columnist, etc.
- Social Media: book promotion and self-fashioning as Buddhism-inspired traveller
    - Parallel themes of her writing, social media presence, and pen name



Anni Baobei / Qingshan

- “So once I was able to get [my writings] published as books, I just stopped my online writing” (Li Jie to Daria Berg, 2014)

- Not only successful move from online to (then more prestigious) print and re-branding:

  - dense and complex connections between multiple traditional and digital media — online writing, micro-blogging, wechat blogging — in today’s mature mediasphere.



Xu Jinglei

- Actress, film director and producer, writer, editor, blogger etc.
- From *My Father and I* to *Go Lala Go!* — Range of diverse characters that hint at the real-life Xu Jinglei
- Transmediality (Jenkins) as all-round creative-promotional strategy: not just products, but transmedia celebrity persona



Xu Jinglei

- Shenshen Cai (2017): Xu Jinglei's "individuality and personal life intermingles with her film roles [and] together create **the Xu Jinglei phenomenon**"

- ***Mirror images***

    - L. Vandervaay (2019): XJL's **life** and **characters** "subvert traditional gender tropes while staying within their societal framework"



Xu Jinglei & Transmedia Celebrity

- U. Eco’s distinction between Empirical Author || Model Author || Character and/as Narrator

- With transmedia strategies + social media (i.e. illusion of contact with the Author) — flattening of multi-layered characters onto Author’s identity

- Transmediality in both sides of CE’s identity: promotion of product + mindset/lifestyle

  - e.g. “strong woman character”, “modern and urban lifestyle”, “exotic* romance” etc. — Characters *and* celebrity personas as aspirational

Cao Fei

- Multi-media artist and international art celebrity

- Chinese Contemporary Art Award: Best Young Artist 2006, Best Artist Award 2016



Cao Fei

- Her art reflects on China’s socio-cultural transformation from a detatched, sometimes satirical standpoint — “comment, not criticism” (NYT 2015)
- Themes point at globalisation in Internet age and alienation
- Social Media (Instagram): shapes artistic storytelling while projecting image of successful global artist



Cao Fei, *Asia One*, 2018






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MULTIMEDIA ARTIST CAO FEI
What does it mean to be a female artist today?





- “Rumba I” & “Rumba II: Nomad” (2015): commissioned and exhibited by Gucci



Cao Fei

- “BMW Art Car #18” & “Unmanned” (2017): commissioned by BMW; “augmented reality” art and short film on a car

- “The BMW Art Car #18, which is based on the BMW M6 GT3, is inspired by the speed of racing cars and the tremendous changes of Chinese society over the past decades” (from Cao Fei’s website)



Cao Fei



Cao Fei, *La Town*, 2014

- Most “experimental” side of creative industies has broken separation between “elite”, “serious” culture and intense commercialisation and social media promotion — *avant-garde ~ pop*

- Most avant-garde cultural languages and darkest commentary on modern society fully integrated in the market logics of the creative industries

Concluding Observations

- Relative marginalisation: commercial limelight vs lack of political cooptation
- Complex relation between traditional and new media with regard to symbolic capital and creative activities
- Transmediality in cultural creation — communication — shaping of CE's public persona
- Marketing “alternative” lifestyles, mindset and values — within the boundaries of the economic and political system
- Even the most avant-garde artistic experimentation becomes a function of market-oriented creative industries