

CYBERLEBRITY AND CHINESE POPULAR CULTURE¹

Alexander Lugg

Monash University

Alexander.Lugg@arts.monash.edu.au

In this paper I will explore cyberlebrity in China. I will explore the role of cyberlebrities by examining how they interact with popular culture both in and outside of cyberspace. This will be followed by an evaluation of their impact on Chinese society and culture

A cyberlebrity can be thought of as a curious mixture of traditional celebrity and Web meme. Cyberlebrity is a term used by Theresa M. Senft to describe personae on the Internet who are “better known by their pseudonymic handle than by their given name”.² She explains that this handle is used by the would-be cyberlebrity “to recreate themselves as celebrity spokes-objects” thus creating the cyberlebrity. In this regard, “celebrity” is not only the parent concept from which “cyberlebrity” is derived but also the ultimate goal of individuals who first seek to achieve fame as cyberlebrities. To illustrate, I briefly introduce here two of the case studies that I will present in greater detail later.

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² Theresa M. Senft, "Baud Girls and Cargo Cults," in *The World Wide Web and Contemporary Cultural Theory*, ed. Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss (New York: Routledge, 2000), 191.

Furong Jiejie³, or Hibiscus Sister, is an example of someone who actively sought celebrity status on the Web and elsewhere. Furong Jiejie's primary purpose in engaging with other Web users via online forums was to draw attention to herself. She did this by extolling her uncommon physical beauty and personality as well as the unfair difficulties that had been imposed upon her as she saw them. These posts were accompanied by photographs of her striking poses that were designed to be sexually provocative, although not pornographic. Once she had attracted the attention of netizens, Furong Jiejie began to experiment with other forms of expression that are generally associated with other media. For instance, on her blog she has posted videos on a range of topics that are clearly designed to showcase her talents as a presenter (e.g. on television) and she also released a music single "Furong Says" (*furong shuo*). Furong Jiejie's goal was to become a famous entertainer and the Web offered the easiest way of getting the initial attention of the viewing public. On the other hand, Xiao Pang⁴ initially showed aversion to the attention paid to his online persona. It was not until he was encouraged to out himself by the man who became his manager that Xiao Pang was correctly identified. Since then, he has grabbed the opportunities offered him with both hands and appears to be attempting to carve a career in the entertainment industry himself. In each case, a created online persona has been the primary focus of attention of which the flesh and blood individual at the centre has then exploited to advance their career. Thus a cyberlebrity can be considered to be a subset of traditional celebrity.

Senft's use of the term cyberlebrity is limited to the role of the cyberlebrity as a "celebrity spokes-object."⁵ According to Senft, a celebrity spokes-object is persona with which a consumer can identify that creates branding possibilities analogous with the use of Hollywood stars as faces for particular products. Thus a cyberlebrity is an iconic online identity that can be used for the advertising of commercial products. A cyberlebrity then, is an identity to which netizens can ascribe values and personality traits

³ I prefer to use the romanised Chinese of Furong Jiejie (芙蓉姐姐) because of the multitude translations that have appeared on the Web, e.g. Sister Furong, Sister Lotus, Hibiscus Sister etc.

⁴ I will refer to Xiao Pang (小胖) using romanised Chinese for the same reason as above. It is important to note that the Chinese 'pang' does not carry the same insulting intonations that 'fatty' does in English.

⁵ Senft, "Baud Girls and Cargo Cults," 191.

as they consume it. It should by now be apparent that this is a process occurring in China, but here the concept needs to be expanded. Chinese cyberlebrities are more than discursive objects – things that are talked about – because the speaking subject at the centre of the cyberlebrity seeks to assume, or is assigned, the values and personality ascribed to him or her. This is most noticeable in the case Xiao Pang/Qian Zhijun who has assumed the name given to the discursive object that was his face. One might well argue that a similar process has also occurred in the case of Furong Jiejie/Shi Hengxia, who has assumed the former personality. As such the fictional identity of the cyberlebrity becomes closely intertwined with the ‘real’ identity of the individual of face-to-face relationships, creating an entity equivalent to Donna Haraway’s cyborg. Therefore, rather than considering the cyberlebrity to be the equivalent of a corporate logo, I extend the concept to include both the discursive object of the cyberlebrity itself and speaking subject on whom the cyberlebrity is based.

Celebrity is a concept that developed in tandem with the advent of dramatic cinema at the beginning of the 20th century. David Gritten believes that the cinematic close-up was the single most important technological development in the creation of modern celebrity because it “immediately gave [the audience] an illusion of intimacy with the stars in a way that they had never been able to achieve with distant actors on a stage.”⁶ This had two related effects. First, the audience was able to construct intertextual identities based on the actors who played the characters in each film. For P. David Marshall it was the creation of these intertextual identities that was the impetus behind the creation of stardom as we know it today.⁷ Marshall’s argument is based on the work of James Monaco. Monaco argues in his work, *Celebrity*, that people did not go to see *Last Tango in Paris* to view a character named Paul, they went to partake of the spectacle of Marlon Brando talking dirty and simulating sex.⁸ Thus, Brando had become an intertextual character that held more interest for film audiences than the individual characters he played or the narratives in which they were portrayed. Equally as important,

⁶ David Gritten, *Fame: Stripping Celebrity Bare* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2002), 21.

⁷ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 79.

⁸ James Monaco, "Celebration," in *Celebrity*, ed. James Monaco (New York: Delta, 1978), 11.

the close-up naturally led to a focus on the actors' physical appearance that was much stronger than that on stage actors. Consequently, casting priorities changed. Rather than concentrating on acting ability, casting directors now focussed on external appearance.⁹ Thus the film star seemed to be picked almost at random from the viewing public. Marshall argues that it was this change that created a myth of democratic access to stardom that has been perpetuated by Hollywood ever since.¹⁰ This myth has been strengthened with developments in technology, particularly television and certain cultural products designed for this medium. Consequently it has played an important role in the significance of celebrity for modern culture. The creation of cyberlebrity is a further development of existing forms of celebrity based in film and television culture.

A recent and important step in the myth-building process that has fostered the development of cyberlebrity was the advent of the *Big Brother* television programme in 1999. The most intriguing aspect of *Big Brother* was that unlike other television programmes that employed professional entertainers, it featured members of the public who seem to have been chosen for no other reason than their large and often conflicting personalities. The premise of the programme was to ensconce roughly a dozen participants in a house over the course of a television season. At the beginning of each week, the participants are required to nominate two of their housemates for eviction and at the end of the week the viewing public votes to evict the housemate of their choice; the final remaining contestant becomes the recipient of a substantial cash prize. The myth of universal democratic access to stardom is thus strengthened because the contestants appear to have been plucked from the public. Indeed, many of the participants of the first British season marked a box labelled 'fame and fortune' indicating that they saw it not only as a chance to win the cash prize but also as an opportunity to promote themselves to the viewing public through a long and intensive process of media exposure- a short-cut to fame.¹¹ In this way, even if they are unaware of it, the contestants are fulfilling Daniel Boorstin's summation of the superficiality of celebrity, "A star is well-known for his/her

⁹ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, 91.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gritten, *Fame: Stripping Celebrity Bare*, 79.

well-knownness.”¹² With programs such as *Big Brother*, the separation of fame from achievement becomes unmistakable. Cyberlebrities can bypass any casting process that exists even for programs such as *Big Brother*; they can be the epitome of Boortsin’s summation. For example, Furong Jiejie and Xiao Pang are famous for being Furong Jiejie and Xiao Pang. Contrarily, cyberlebrities such as sex diarist Muzi Mei¹³ and amateur choreographers the Back Dorm Boys found fame on the basis of their respective creative products which had been shared with the world. To explore this idea further, we need to discuss the idea of the Web meme in relation to the emergence of cyberlebrity.

The Web meme is a notion that is an offshoot of memetics, a term first used by Richard Dawkins to explain the transmission of cultural information. Dawkins coined the term ‘meme’ in his influential book, *The Selfish Gene*, as part of his argument that it is possible to trace the evolution of human and some non-human species through mapping cultural development as a genealogy of ideas.¹⁴ The meme is supposed to be applicable to any aspect of culture, including religious beliefs, political convictions, pop culture fads- virtually anything that can be imitated and passed on.¹⁵ Accordingly, the Internet is the perfect environment for a meme to thrive, allowing as it does for the rapid transfer of information across vast geographic spaces. A demonstration of how this occurs can be found in an experiment undertaken by Mike Godwin, which he documented in an article written for *Wired* magazine (and later republished in his book *Cyber Rights: Defending Free Speech in the Digital Age*). In 1990 Godwin, dismayed by constant Nazi-comparison references that he felt trivialised the Holocaust, seeded Godwin’s Law of Nazi Analogies in any newsgroup or discussion that featured what he felt was a gratuitous Nazi reference.¹⁶ Before long, not only were people citing the Law,

¹² Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, 11.

¹³ I use Muzi Mei (木子美), rather than Mu Zimei or Muzimei because it is Muzi Mei’s preferred spelling. See: http://www.danwei.org/danwei_tv/danwei_tv_7_mu_zimei_interview.php

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1989).; Dawkins uses the work of P.F. Jenkins with New Zealand birds that shows that the transmission of song style is not a genetic process to demonstrate that memes are not restricted to humans.

¹⁵ Stephen Dougherty, "Culture in the Disk Drive: Computationalism, Memetics, and the Rise of Posthumanism," *Diacritics* 31, no. 4 (2001): 88.

¹⁶ Mike Godwin, *Cyber Rights: Defending Free Speech in the Digital Age* (Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003), 48.; The Law states: “As an online discussion grows longer the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one.”

but the idea had mutated and spawned to corollaries such as Sicar's Corollary and Miller's Paradox.¹⁷ Although Godwin's terminology is borrowed from memetics, it is simplified to "an infectious idea."¹⁸ Whether or not Godwin is fully educated in memetics is irrelevant, as rather than using meme to signify a self-replicating unit of cultural information, he is instead using it in a figurative sense. He is utilising the illustrative power of the term to liken the spread of cultural information to the spread of a disease and to show how a family of ideas can be created from a single point.

I use the term meme in a similar illustrative sense to show how the spontaneous spread of cultural information creates a new fictional identity that is both part of and yet separate from the individual at the centre of a cyberlebrity. At the centre of any cyberlebrity is an individual of social reality, a person of flesh and bone with an identity firmly established in the world of physical activity and face-to-face relationships. Surrounding that person is material produced either by the aspiring or established cyberlebrity him/herself, by netizens who produce unsolicited material, or a mixture of the two. This mixture of fiction and unsubstantiated truths weaves the mythology that creates the cyber-identity that sets the cyberlebrity apart from ordinary netizens. Again we see a manifestation of the cyborg – a combination of social reality and fiction – through which the human person becomes integrated with the machinery of the Web.

Chinese Cyberlebrities

Xiao Pang and Furong Jiejie are the best example of Chinese cyberlebrities because not only are they better known by the pseudonymic Web handles as described by Senft, but unlike other examples that could be used such as Muzi Mei and the Back Dorm Boys, neither have any particular point of appeal beyond their particular Web identities. Contrarily Muzi Mei writes an often thought-provoking blog that continues to attract readers since the scandal that surrounded her original highly sexualised entries has

¹⁷ Ibid.; These state respectively: "If Usenet discussion touches on homosexuality or Heinlein, Nazis or Hitler are mentioned in three days," and "As a network evolves, the number of Nazi comparisons not forestalled by citation to Godwin's Law converges to zero."

¹⁸ Ibid., 48-49.

subsided, and the Back Dorm Boys create entertainment products such as their recently released film.

Qian Zhijun has attempted to capitalise on his identity as Xiao Pang. This identity was created for him by other netizens who built up a collection of satiric images in the tradition of Chinese *e gao* (satire) based on a photograph taken of him at a traffic safety meeting for Shanghainese high school students. Qian's face was affixed to political leaders both Chinese and Western, Shrek, Harry Potter, Gollum, and to digitally altered film posters, becoming rapidly popular over the course of 2003. Because Qian was so mortified at the idea of being mocked as a result of this cyber-publicity, he would refuse to enter Internet cafés and Web users and interested journalists were left struggling to explain who he was.¹⁹ The resulting confusion added to the myth of Xiao Pang in a manner similar to the way that the so-called meme seeded by Godwin began to mutate and take on new meanings. Eventually, a man named Gao Feng discovered the true identity of Xiao Pang and brought him into the public eye. Since then Xiao Pang has taken on a number of minor and temporary roles in the Chinese media. These have included guest spots on CCTV television programmes, living singing contests, conventions and conferences for new media companies like Tianya.com, and the dance programme *Dance Meet (wu lin dahui)*. It has also been rumoured that he will have the opportunity to play a role in the film adaptation of the popular online novel *Candle in the Tomb (gui chui deng)*.²⁰ Aside from more traditional media roles such as the aforementioned, he also appears in a video short called *G: The Clever Embroidered Bag (jin nang miao G)*²¹ that is as much an advertisement for Google as it is a comedic short. However, Xiao Pang's popularity rests on who he is, rather than what he does. His fans love him for his face more than anything else and therefore his future career prospects are limited.

¹⁹ Yu Juan, "The 100 Transformations of Xiao Pang Reveal His True Appearance ("Bai Bian" Xiaopang Lu "Zhen Rong")," Longhoo.net, <http://www.longhoo.net/gb/longhoo/news2004/njmedia/wenhua/userobject1ai558673.html>.

²⁰ "Little Fatty to Appear in Hollywood Film," ChinaDaily.com, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-07/03/content_908628.htm.

²¹ The title of the short is a pun on the pronunciation of 'G' and refers to the Chinese idiom *jin nang miao ji* (锦囊妙计) which refers to a clever anticipatory solution to a possible problem.

Shi Hengxia settled on the moniker Furong Jiejie having experimented with a number of other names. As Furong Jiejie she then began to post messages detailing her personal qualities and struggles in life alongside provocative photographs on the Qinghua University student forum *Shuimu Qinghua*.²² Building on her readership base, she began to post on public forums under the same name. One report claims that at 5 pm on the 17th of June, 2005 a Google search of Furong Jiejie received 160,000 hits which had grown to 170,000 by 9pm that night and 245,000 seven hours later.²³ One can confirm this rapid increase by using the Google Trends tool. Although this is not a completely accurate measurement, it does confirm that a huge increase in Web searches for Furong Jiejie occurred in June 2005. Interest in Furong Jiejie stems from the discrepancy that arises between netizens' views of her looks and abilities and her own, leading to much debate. Furong Jiejie has an inflated self-opinion and is continually comparing herself to women such as Fan Bingbing, Jolin Tsai, and Zhang Ziyi. Her blog contains numerous comparisons between her and these famous actresses and singers. The entry of 29th of December 2007 cites a love letter that she claims is from French president Nicholas Sarkozy. This enflamed ego has divided the Chinese netizenry between those who see Furong as an admirably confident modern woman and those who see her as a narcissistic hag. Once this interest had died down, she created another scandal by claiming to a foreign journalist that she had been censored. Both the British newspaper *The Independent* and Reuters published stories in which she claimed that Chinese authorities had "cracked down" on her or had requested that Bokee, her blog host at the time, had moved her blog to a less prominent area to comply with a central government order.²⁴ However, journalist Kasier Kuo found no evidence to support this claim. In April 2007, Furong Jiejie became embroiled in a spat with Beijing, Qinghua, and Beijing People's University after they rejected her claim that she had been invited by the universities to

²² "Xianshi Zhong De Furong Jiejie Zai Meiti Kuanghuan Zhong Bei Hulue (the Real Hibiscus Sister Is Lost in the Media Circus)," Sina.com, <http://news.sina.com.cn/s/p/2005-06-24/16087037470.shtml>.

²³ Liu Muyang, "Shi Wen Xinsheng Dai Boke Furong Jiejie: Weishenme Hong? (Asking New Blogger Furong Jiejie: Why Are You So Popular?)," Waitan Pictorial, <http://edu.sina.com.cn/y/i/2005-06-22/150737913.html>.

²⁴ Kaiser Kuo, "Chinese Net Star Cries Censorship," Red Herring, <http://www.redherring.com/Home/13354>.

participate in a lecture tour.²⁵ She has recently announced a retirement from the entertainment business, but whether this is an attempt to rekindle interest in her once more is as yet uncertain. As with Xiao Pang, people seem less interested in what Furong Jiejie produces than who she is.

In stark contrast to these two stand the Back Dorm Boys. These two former Guangzhou art students shot fame on the back of a series of videos that they had shared with their classmates. The videos feature Huang Yixin and Wei Wei performing exaggerated dance moves and facial expressions as mime Back Street Boys songs. The videos eventually reached a worldwide audience and the Boys' careers have flourished. They began quite simply, by being invited by Motorola to be the face of a Web-orientated advertising campaign.²⁶ They were then signed to the record company Taihe Rye (*taihe maitian*) which provided them with lessons in singing, dancing, and stage arts to develop their skills as entertainers. Since they were signed, they have continued to release material that captures the imagination of their audience and remain relevant to Chinese popular culture. Since then they have released a music single, "O Yi O Yi A," and have produced more video shorts. Two notable productions are 'Seated Farm' (*zuozhuang*) and 'Assembly' (*jijie hao*). 'Seated Farm' can be interpreted either as commentary on the dangers of investing in the stock market, or as commentary on the relationship between management and staff in the workplace. Although I cannot go into detail here, it is enough to note that the Back Dorm Boys' work is relevant to contemporary Chinese society and popular culture. This is also evident in 'Assembly' which lampoons a feature film of the same name. More recently, the Back Dorm Boys released a film, *Ha Ha Ha*, on the 13th of May 2008. It is a farcical comedy that engages the comedic strengths of Huang and Wei.

Clearly the careers of Huang and Wei have far outstripped those of Qian and Shi. Huang and Wei have managed to use their cyberlebrity as a springboard into a more

²⁵ Wang Yang, "Furong Jiejie Jiang Fu 18 Gao Xiao Kai Jiangzuo Beida Qinghua Jun Foure (Furong Jiejie to Start 18 School Speaking Tour, Beida and Qinghua Universities Deny)," NetEase, <http://news.163.com/07/0421/13/3CJTSU9S00011229.html>.

²⁶ Beth Coleman, "Back Dorm Boys Interview," Project Good Luck, <http://www.projectgoodluck.com/blog/2006/08/back-dorm-boys-interview.php>.

traditional celebrity and career in entertainment. It is important to note that at this point they have not yet abandoned their Back Dorm Boys personae. The playbill for their film features their image, above which is written “后舍男生” (*houshe nansheng*, Back Dorm Boys), not their given names. This shows that it is the brand which Huang and Wei have created- the Back Dorm Boys- that is the selling point of the film.

Cyberlebrity and Chinese Society

Why is it that these cyberlebrities have been embraced to such an extent in China? What do these cyberlebrities tell us about contemporary Chinese culture? Furthermore, why have some cyberlebrities such as the Back Dorm Boys been able to convert their cyberlebrity status into commercial success whereas others have failed?

The Web offers people the opportunity to express themselves to whoever may listen as never before. This is because it allows people to publish their opinions, performances, and artwork in what is effectively the public domain at very little cost and with little difficulty. However, the problem is how to attract attention to what one has published online. As we saw, Furong Jiejie demanded attention by creating disbelief and scandal. The Back Dorm Boys created a product in which people are genuinely interested and information about which was spread by word-of-mouth. Initially, a similar process occurred with Xiao Pang as interested individuals outdid one another creating more and more fabulous pictures featuring his face. This interest was compounded by the mystery surrounding his identity. Despite the differences in the way that these cyberlebrities have emerged, they all share a common trait- they are light entertainers of the fluffiest outreaches of popular culture. Perhaps it is this shared characteristic that is central to their popularity.

Leo Lowenthal described during the 1940s that the nature of famous and well-known people was changing. He contrasts the ‘idol of production’ (a heroic figure who hails “from the productive side of life, from industry, business, and natural sciences”) with the ‘idol of consumption’ (“related to the sphere of leisure time... (e.g. sport and

entertainment)”)”²⁷ Lowenthal was describing the tabloidisation of American print culture, even if he did not use that term. This process is also described by Loretta Wing Wah Ho as occurring in the Chinese online environment due to the key characteristics of self-censorship and commercialism.²⁸ She quotes Colin Sparks who interprets tabloidisation as “as a shift from hard news (about politics, economics, and society) to soft news (news about diversions such as sports, scandal, and celebrities) and a shift from concentrating on public life to concentrating on private life.”²⁹ A cyberlebrity can be considered to be an idol of consumption and thus the explosion in these figures can be considered a good indication and result of the tabloidisation of the Chinese Web. The founder of Hoodong Wiki (www.hoodong.com), Pan Haidong, noted at the 2007 Chinese Blogger Conference that Hoodong has a much greater proportion of entertainment content than Wikipedia as a result of the Chinese Web populace growing up with more “entertainment-based” services such as the QQ Instant Messaging (IM) system. He noted that, unlike the English Web, China’s Internet was only now moving toward less entertainment-based services such as Skype and MSN.³⁰ In such an environment, it is not surprising that digital idols of consumption have come to prominence.

Tabloidisation is not restricted to Chinese cyberspace, but has also occurred with Chinese print culture. Barrett McKormick and Qing Liu illustrate how commercialisation has caused the tabloidisation of the Chinese press. They show that morning papers, or “organ papers” (*jiguan bao*), have faced declining subscriptions, while conversely, evening and weekend papers, being allowed to abridge news of official politics thereby leaving more space for soft news, are flourishing.³¹ This soft news technique is easily transferred to publishing in cyberspace. The premise is that people generally appear to be

²⁷ Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Palo Alto: Prentice Hall, 1961), 112, 15.

²⁸ Loretta Wing Wah Ho, "The Gay Space in Chinese Cyberspace: Self-Censorship, Commercialisation, and Misrepresentation," *China Aktuell* 36, no. 4 (2007): 62.

²⁹ Barrett L.; Qing Liu McCormick, "Globalisation and the Chinese Media: Technologies, Content, Commerce, and the Prospects for Public Space," in *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, ed. C.-C. Lee (London, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), cited in Ho, "The Gay Space in Chinese Cyberspace: Self-Censorship, Commercialisation, and Misrepresentation," 62.

³⁰ David Feng, "Chinese Blogger Conference 2007 Opens, the Crowd's All There," Blognation China, <http://cn.blognation.com/2007/11/03/chinesese-bloggers-conference-2007-opens-the-crowds-all-there/>.

³¹ McCormick, "Globalisation and the Chinese Media: Technologies, Content, Commerce, and the Prospects for Public Space," 147.

more interested in soft news and are thus more likely to visit sites that carry this more easily digestible information. In this regard cyberspace is less controllable, for whereas the central government can enforce every party branch to subscribe to the hard copy of the *People's Daily*, it cannot force netizens to visit the corresponding website. As the principal source of income for many websites is advertising, the number of website visitors is crucial to raising revenue. Therefore, for a website to remain competitive it needs to meet the appetites of its reading public and following on the soft news trend in print media, it follows that websites will also trend towards an emphasis on soft information.

So the combination of tabloidisation and the expressive power of a relatively new technology has led to the creation of a new breed of celebrity in China. But the emergence of cyberlebrity can also be connected to other trends in contemporary Chinese culture and society. 'Grassroots culture' is a phenomenon that has emerged not only as part of Web culture, but as part of Chinese popular culture at large. It is essential to note here the precise Chinese term used to denote "grassroots." Rather than 基层 (*jiceng*) that indicates the basic, primary, or grassroots level of something, instead to 草根 (*caogen*)- the meaning of which is literally "grass roots"- is used. There is an important distinction between the two that is not apparent in English translation. The former term is generally used in reference to official programs of cultural development, such as local theatre projects. The latter term is used more in reference to the form of spontaneous cultural production that is the focus of our present discussion. It is precisely this "Grassroots" culture - of which the Web, its inhabitants, events, and products are a part - that has been alternatively derided as a part of 'nonsense culture' (*wuliao wenhua*) seen by some conservative cultural critics as a blight on Chinese culture, while in other quarters "Grassroots" is lauded as being a culture of the people.

'Nonsense culture' has been used as a derogatory term generally inflected to express the barrenness of meaning and worth of the 'culture' being produced. Typical examples of 'nonsense culture' include Hu Ge's *Murder Caused by a Mantou*, the popular television programme *Super Girl* and even the social activities of students after

hours. In some conservative circles it has even been referred to as a ‘social illness.’³² In this respect, the perceived rise of ‘nonsense culture’ is read by some as a symptom of the increasing decadence of contemporary Chinese life. It is considered not so much to be coarse as it is meaningless, born out of people’s desire to occupy their time with things of no significance, such as the sharing of online ‘nonsense pictures’ (*wuliao tuwen*).³³ Some of the criticism levelled at ‘nonsense culture’ has been specifically directed at *Super Girl*. For instance Shanghai Songwriters Association (*Shanghai Quyijia Xiehui*) president, Wang Rugang, has criticised the fact that the participants are not specialised performers or songwriters.³⁴ Rather, he claims, they are only interested in selling themselves.³⁵ Wang’s commentary is offered from a culturally elitist point of view. His criticism is based on his belief that the contestants are not real musicians whose appeal is based on their skill or creativity but performers whose appeal is based on the image created for them in the popular media. In other words, their identity has been commodified and sold for the consumption of the masses. These criticisms should come as no surprise in light of what we have already examined of this behaviour in our contextualisation of cyberlebrity in our discussion of reality television. This is in keeping with the prevailing elitist view of Chinese ‘grassroots culture’, that holds that not only is it artistically barren, but that it is also aesthetically vulgar, pandering to the lowest common denominator and holding only the most base appeal.³⁶ However it is precisely this discrepancy between ‘grassroots culture’ and so-called ‘elite culture’ appeals to those who consume it and, on the Web, produce it.

³² "Out of the Dorm: How to Make Confucian Communists Squirm," *The Economist*, http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6776404.

³³ Luo Tianzhu, "Qiang Zhu Song Dandan "Tai You Cai Le" Zheshe Wuliao Wenhua (Scramble over Song Dandan "Too Talented" Refracts Nonsense Culture)," *Wingoon.com*, http://www.wingoon.com/content/2007-02/26/content_889773.htm.; These nonsense pictures can take the form of *e gao* (satire). If we investigate the English translation of the Chinese term, a layering of meaning is discovered. *Wuliao* can be translated not only nonsense or silly, but bored. Netizens create silly and meaningless pictures because they are bored. Other netizens view them because they are also bored.

³⁴ Wen Songhui, "(Wenhua Yan) Caogen Wenhua Zheng Jueqi, Heshe Deng Ru Daya Tang? ((Eye on Culture) Grassroots Culture Has Risen, When Will It Enter the Elite Pantheon?)," *People.com*, <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22226/34912/34914/4253291.html>.; Zhu Meihong, "Guo Degang Cai Galiang Yu "Caogen Wenhua" De Bingzhen (Guo Degang, Cai Galiang and the Illness Of "Grassroots Culture")," *People.com*, <http://culture.people.com.cn/GB/22219/4239006.html>.

³⁵ Wen Songhui, "(Wenhua Yan) Caogen Wenhua Zheng Jueqi, Heshe Deng Ru Daya Tang? ((Eye on Culture) Grassroots Culture Has Risen, When Will It Enter the Elite Pantheon?)."

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Grassroots culture is being widely lauded as a new, raw, but authentic form of popular culture, “from the masses for the masses”, a phenomena capable of breathing a potent new life into Chinese culture.³⁷ The work of Back Dorm Boys and Hu Ge’s *Murder Caused by a Mantou* are spontaneous cultural creations that speak for and to the Chinese populace in ways that the artificial grassroots culture of Mao’s Yan’an Talks never could. Additionally the very architecture of the Web is ideally suited to the spread and growth of grassroots culture because it is, by nature, a medium that encourages creation as well as consumption as it can only continue to grow if those who consume the available material also contribute something of their own. This is the essence of the Web2.0 rationale, which refers less to a particular technological development than a philosophy of Web use. Specifically, it refers to the move away from individual projects, such as home pages, on which visitors can comment, to group projects such as Wikipedia and Hoodong Wiki. Collaborative projects such as these help non-specialist people write, film, record and share their creations with other non-specialists. In doing so they create a popular culture based in cyberspace and includes the online mythology of cyberlebrities. Thus, in cyberlebrities, Chinese cyberspace has drawn its folk heroes from within its own consumer population – self styled champions of their own ‘rubbish culture’ in a manner similar to the way that mainstream China has created new ‘heroes’ out of *Super Girl* winners.

Cyberlebrities’ identities are forged in the mythology created by both themselves and their fellow netizens. This gives them status as individuals of note within their community and among their peers. In China, the tabloidisation of the media, including the online media has caused interest in soft news and entertainment to increase. The increasing interest in soft news and light entertainment has caused the profiles of Chinese cyberlebrities to be raised. They are unique in that they command a place in popular culture that is not replicated anywhere else in the world. They are the folk heroes and champions of the digital generation.

³⁷ Ibid.

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