


RESEARCH ARTICLE

China's Livestreaming Local Officials: An Experiment in Popular Digital Communications

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Abstract

In 2020, hundreds of sub-national government officials and Chinese Communist Party cadres undertook a months-long experiment in livestreaming and social commerce. These sectors are among the most dynamic in the Chinese internet economy and culture, yet Chinese officials have generally resisted engaging with popular and celebrity cultures, even as institutions have begun to expand and modernize their digital operations. Why, then, did a substantial cohort of local officials undertake this experiment? The proximate reason was that they wanted to help local producers hit by the pandemic and to meet their own pending poverty alleviation targets. However, the significance of the case is broader, reflecting the central state and Party's revised thinking on political communications in an era of internet celebrity and self-media and the propensity for local officials to innovate and experiment in the field of digital and popular communication. Investigating empirically how and how effectively livestreaming was employed at the local level helps us to illuminate these dynamics. To facilitate the study, we investigated how officials understood and performed internet celebrity through in-person semi-structured interviews and a three-month virtual ethnographic study.

摘要

在2020年，中国的县长进行了长达数月的实验性直播带货。随着“直播带货”成为中国互联网经济与文化最活力的发展领域之一，一方面中国大多官员对流行文化与名人效应持抵制态度，另一方面中国政府和机构也在信息数字化方面不断拓展与革新。然而，为什么大批官员进行此项实验？最直接原因在于官员们想帮助那些受新冠疫情影响的本地生产商们提高销售成绩，并达成扶贫要求的指标。可是，更深远的意义在于反映了中国共产党以及中央政府在网红和自媒体发展时代，重塑对政治传播的实践认知，同时也体现了地方官员在数字和流行传播方面的创新和试验。通过面对面半结构化访谈和为期三个月的网络民族志研究，本研究调查了中国领导干部对网红的理解和表现，通过实证研究探讨了他们在地方层面直播带货的开展成效。

Keywords: livestreaming; social commerce; local officials; political communication; internet celebrity; e-commerce; Internet Plus; poverty alleviation

关键词: 直播; 带货; 地方官员; 政治沟通; 网络名人; 电子商务; 互联网+; 扶贫

“I am an internet celebrity cadre!” So proclaimed Chen Canping 陈灿平, deputy mayor of the small town of Anhua 安化 in rural Hunan 湖南, during his frequent livestreaming performances. He was not alone: In 2020, hundreds of sub-national government officials and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres in underdeveloped rural areas began a months-long experiment in livestreaming and livestream shopping. Livestreaming, a form of real-time personal broadcasting, is a major incubator for China's internet celebrity (*wanghong* 网红) culture and economy.¹ Livestream shopping,

¹ Craig, Lin and Cunningham 2021.

also known as social or live-commerce (*daihuo* 带货), is one of the most dynamic sectors in Chinese e-commerce. Yet, the sight of local officials bantering with fans and “hawking merch” while streaming live on the internet was unexpected: despite the scale of China’s entertainment industry and ubiquitous online celebrity scene, officials do not appear on entertainment shows, post selfies on social media or seek cachet by associating with celebrities. For Chinese officials there has traditionally been little incentive and substantial risk to engaging with popular and celebrity cultures. Why, then, did a substantial cohort of local officials undertake this experiment? The proximate reason was that they were trying to increase sales for local producers hit by the pandemic and to meet their own pending poverty alleviation targets. While the incentive structure in this context appears straightforward, the questions of how and how effectively they utilized the affordances of this medium are illuminating in several respects.

This article is concerned with the politics and performativity of local officials’ engagement with popular modes of digital culture and communication, how it connects to broader modes of “experimentation” at the local level and the central government’s emerging thinking about the utility of digital communication tools. To facilitate this study, we investigated how officials understood and performed internet celebrity through in-person semi-structured interviews with 13 officials and a three-month-long virtual ethnographic study of one hundred livestreams by three deputy mayors in Hunan, Anhui 安徽 and Xinjiang 新疆. In the context of the state’s evolving approach to political communications, the significance of this case study is greater than that of a short-lived local initiative. First, it contributes to a growing literature on central and local state actors’ experimentation with digital technologies to improve governance and connect with publics.² Second, it is emblematic of an ongoing “reinvention of official culture online,”³ in which “harnessing” the affordances of new tools and media dovetails with extensive ongoing efforts to “control” them. Third, its success points to further experimentation with officials’ modes of political communication.

Communications for the New Era

The “taming” of the Chinese internet after years of experimentation and capacity building is founded on a dense techno-legal governance architecture that facilitates pervasive surveillance and censorship, combined with the capacities of leading commercial platforms that have been enfolded into a reciprocal relationship with the state.⁴ In the past decade, the diversity of opinion and volume of dissent that were once a sign of vitality in online publics have been neutralised and the Party has actively sought to reproduce the ideological hegemony it wields over other areas of the domestic information environment.⁵ This “control story” is well known, but it doesn’t capture the extent to which Party and state actors have also sought to harness technological affordances for their own ends. Digital communications have been adopted and honed for use in propaganda and persuasion,⁶ online public opinion guidance,⁷ management of nationalist sentiment,⁸ and as a feedback mechanism.⁹ The imperative to seek “discourse power” (*huayuquan* 话语权) externally¹⁰ has led to the emergence from digital spaces, with explicit or tacit state endorsement, of communicators ranging from so-called “wolf warrior” diplomats like Zhao Lijian 赵立坚 to online opinion leaders like

2 Esarey 2015; Chen, Pan and Xu 2016; Hartford 2005; Schläger and Jiang 2014; Wang, Wei 2021; Wang and Han 2022; Wang and Wu 2021.

3 Guo 2018, 19.

4 Creemers 2015; Weber and Jia 2007.

5 Gallagher and Miller 2021.

6 Creemers 2017.

7 King, Pan and Roberts 2017; Roberts 2018.

8 Fang and Repnikova 2018; Schneider 2018.

9 Chen and Xu 2017; Sullivan 2014.

10 Lee 2016.

former *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin 胡锡进 and influential “patriotic big Vs” (*aiguo da V* 爱国大V).¹¹ Experimentation and adoption of any form of digital communications by Party and state actors – including livestreaming – requires situating and assessing them against the ambitions of emerging official policy and thought. This includes numerous concepts, such as “Internet Thinking” (*hulianwang siwei* 互联网思维), the “online mass line” (*wangluo qunzhong luxian* 网络群众路线), “local media convergence” (*difang rongmeiti* 地方融媒体) and “Internet Plus” (*hulianwang jia* 互联网+).

Internet Thinking entered the lexicon in 2010 (attributed to Baidu CEO Li Yanhong 李彦宏) as an exhortation to business to be “internet ready.” Political iterations soon followed, infusing everything from e-government services to inculcating social responsibility (*shehui zeren* 社会责任) in the cultural and digital industries. Under Xi Jinping, Internet Thinking has been reinterpreted as a logic for cyber governance. In the 2021 “Excerpts from Xi Jinping’s Discussion on Internet Power” (*Xi Jinping guanyu wangluo qiangguo lunshu zhaibian* 习近平关于网络强国论述摘编), Xi invoked Internet Thinking as a rationale for safeguarding cyber security and strengthening the Party’s leadership in digital spaces. These ideas concretized his instruction delivered at a symposium on cybersecurity and IT application in 2016 for all levels of Party and government organizations and their officials to follow an “online mass line.” This approach includes actively ascertaining and responding to online public opinion. The repurposing of the “mass line” for the digital age reflects the seriousness the Party attaches to cyberspaces as discursive fields requiring active and coordinated supervision. Xi’s vision for an online mass line includes “guiding” and “uniting” (with the Party’s position) service providers, opinion leaders and content creators. It goes beyond the earlier, blunter strategy of coercion and co-optation, with a new emphasis on constructing digital communication channels and platforms for the Party and state to leverage. The results are evident in myriad ways, including the partial reconfiguration of venerable institutions like *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报) and the Communist Youth League (*Gongqingtuan zhongyang* 共青团中央) as creators of “edgy” digital content. This is one example of the media convergence that has been a preoccupation during Xi’s tenure. In 2014, the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission (*Zhongyang quanmian shenhua gaige weiyuanhui* 中央全面深化改革委员会) published its “Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Convergence of Traditional Media and New Media” (*Guanyu tuidong chuantong meiti he xinxing meiti ronghe fazhan de zhidao yijian* 关于推动传统媒体和新兴媒体融合发展的指导意见) that thereafter underpinned media convergence at the national, provincial and prefectural levels. The 2018 “Opinions on Strengthening Media Convergence on the County Level” (*Guanyu jiaqiang xianji rongmeiti zhongxin jianshe de yijian* 关于加强县级融媒体中心建设的意见) called for this convergence to drill down further, with county-level media conceived as the “baseline and foundation” for the Party and state’s overall media structure. Its significance lies in its proximity to the grassroots, thus providing an immediate source of public opinion and a “front line” to provide services to the public.

As a result of these programmes, the presence of Party and state actors online has expanded exponentially,¹² and many of them have proven adept at incorporating popular discourse and communication techniques into their digital propaganda operations, as exemplified by the Communist Youth League.¹³ As a result of this experimentation, official organs have commissioned rap music videos;¹⁴ local governments have embraced microblogging;¹⁵ official media organizations use “clickbait” and other tactics common to the commercial digital cultural economy;¹⁶ provincial

11 “Big Vs” are the most influential users on the social network Weibo. The “V” refers to their accounts being verified.

12 Wu and He 2020.

13 Guo 2018.

14 Zou 2019.

15 Esarey 2015.

16 Lu and Pan 2021.

officials and media entrepreneurs have cooperated on digital media projects like *Pengpai* 澎湃;¹⁷ and diplomatic staff like Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying 华春莹 have incorporated popular “cyber-nationalist” modes of communication into their formal diplomatic repertoires.¹⁸ The co- and re-production of grassroots digital cultures by state actors has been described “authoritarian participatory persuasion 2.0,”¹⁹ and it is the recognition that digital communication cultures are inherently interactive, collaborative and participatory that underpins state actors’ adoption of informal communication modes like memes and livestreaming. One of the guiding principles behind official thinking on communications for the new era is that Party and state actors need to actively employ popular contemporary modes of communication and be present in popular contemporary spaces. Consequently, previously disparaged sectors like cybernationalism, rap music and internet celebrity are taken more seriously as sites and tools for political communication.

Internet Plus: Poverty, the Countryside and E-commerce

The idea of Internet Plus stresses the organic combination of internet and business development, as expressed in the 2015 “State Council Guidelines for Actively Promoting Internet Plus” (*Guowuyuan guanyu jiji tuijin hulianwang jia xingdong de zhidao yijian* 国务院关于积极推进“互联网+”行动的指导意见). The Internet Plus rubric has come to play a crucial role in Xi’s keystone development ambitions. At the 18th National Party Congress in 2012, Xi announced the goal of completing the construction of a “moderately prosperous society” by 2020. In 2015, he pledged that China would eradicate extreme poverty within six years. As a complement to substantial state investment, e-commerce was identified as a vehicle for rural development and poverty alleviation. E-commerce is one of the major success stories of Chinese economic development. By 2019 the market was valued at nearly US\$4 trillion,²⁰ with quasi-monopolistic e-commerce giants JD.com 京东 and Alibaba 阿里巴巴 commanding around 80 per cent of trade and Single’s Day (11 November) representing the world’s most valuable e-commerce event.²¹ A succession of government publications established the rationale and framework for e-commerce to contribute to rural development and poverty alleviation. The 2011 “Rural Poverty Alleviation Development Outline” (*Zhongguo nongcun fuping kaifa gangyao* 中国农村扶贫开发纲要) first highlighted the potential of e-commerce. In 2014, the State Council listed e-commerce as one of the “Ten Key Projects of Targeted Poverty Alleviation” (*Jingzhunfuping shixiang zhongdiangongzuo* 精准扶贫十项重点工作). In 2016, the State Council issued its “Plans for Internet Poverty Alleviation” which explicitly connected Internet Plus development and poverty alleviation (*jingzhun fuping* 精准扶贫) through addressing disparities in internet provision and access (*wangluo fuping* 网络扶贫) and harnessing the internet as an engine for poverty alleviation initiatives. As one of five key projects of internet poverty alleviation, rural e-commerce projects (*nongcun dianshang gongcheng* 农村电商工程) were identified as having “obvious and significant” potential for elevating rural areas out of poverty. The “No. 1 Document” issued by the CCP Central Committee in 2020 called e-commerce a “vital measure” in combating poverty.

The active promotion of e-commerce development aims to harness the digital economy as a driver of growth, with rural entrepreneurship facilitated by government investment in public goods, infrastructure and services. Mobilizing various parts of the bureaucracy and leveraging the synergistic relationship between state and private tech firms, e-commerce is envisioned as a growth engine and contributor to Xi’s Rural Revitalization Programme (*Xiangcun zhenxing zhanlue guihua* 乡村

17 Fang and Repnikova 2022.

18 Sullivan and Wang 2022.

19 Repnikova and Fang 2018.

20 Chang et al. 2019, 4053.

21 Song 2020.

振兴战略规划).²² Between 2014 and 2018, the construction of internet infrastructure, roads, warehousing and distribution centres throughout the countryside facilitated 40,000 villages becoming connected to e-commerce, increasing access to products, reducing household costs and providing income for villagers.²³ Thousands of officials were enlisted to provide small-scale physical infrastructure repairs and digital literacy courses. The major tech companies contributed physical and digital infrastructure to facilitate rural e-commerce entrepreneurship,²⁴ for example Rural Taobao Service Centres (*Nongcun Taobao fuwuzhongxin* 农村淘宝服务中心) and “Taobao Villages” (*Taobaocun* 淘宝村).²⁵ Since the first such village was established in 2012, several thousand have emerged across the countryside. Alibaba established its “Thousand Villages and Counties (*Qianxian wancun* 千县万村) Programme” in 2014, investing billions of yuan to facilitate the flow of commodities between rural and urban areas. Tencent put forward its own vision of “internet plus rural revitalization” (*hulianwang + xiangcun zhenxing* 互联网+乡村振兴) and launched platforms such as “Tencent for the countryside” (*Tengxun wei cun* 腾讯为村) and “Penguin e-commerce” (*Qi'e youxuan* 企鹅优选) to provide new channels for selling agricultural products. JD.com 京东 and online electronics retailer Suning 苏宁 have also ambitiously expanded their business scope in the countryside.

Methods and Data

The site for our empirical investigation is the fast and furious world of livestream shopping. This hybrid of livestreaming and integrated e-commerce activity²⁶ has given rise to celebrity streamers like Li Jiaqi 李佳琦, Viya (Huang Wei 黄薇) and Hua Shao 华少, with millions of fans and extraordinary sales volumes and incomes. Known for their fast-talking, charismatic, knowledgeable and entertaining sales pitches, they have become bona fide A-list internet celebrities. The livestream shopping market is concentrated in fast fashion and cosmetics, with a significant side-line in consumables, including speciality and seasonal foods. Live-commerce has been facilitated by a convergence of functionality on sales and video platforms, with traditional e-commerce sites like Taobao adding livestreaming, and video apps like Kuaishou 快手 and Douyin 抖音 incorporating shopping functions. Live-commerce promises a more interactive shopping experience for consumers (e.g. through chat and reaction functions), a revenue source for streamers by converting fans into consumers, and income for host platforms, which take a cut of the profits. The attraction of celebrity hosts, heavily discounted products and instant purchasing has quickly established livestream shopping as a key driver of growth in the broader e-commerce sector.²⁷

Live-commerce has been a widespread phenomenon in Chinese cyberspace for several years. The first reports of local officials engaging in live-commerce date to 2018, and by July 2019 several were already proclaiming its poverty alleviation potential.²⁸ These initial forays into live-commerce speak to the substantial literature on policy experimentation, where local officials adopt innovative methods to facilitate policy implementation and meet institutional targets.²⁹ The “policy innovation

22 Tang and Zhu 2020.

23 Couture et al. 2021, 36.

24 Wang, Shuaishuai 2020, 181.

25 Lin 2019

26 Cunningham, Craig and Lv 2019, 10.

27 Arun Arora, Daniel Glaser, Philip Kluge, Aimee Kim, Sajal Kohil and Natalya Sam, “It’s showtime! How live commerce is transforming the shopping experience,” *McKinsey*, 21 July 2021, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/its-showtime-how-live-commerce-is-transforming-the-shopping-experience>. Accessed 23 June 2022.

28 Haiwaiwang, “Xianzhang dangwanghong, daihuo zhutuopin,” (County mayors become internet celebrities to facilitate poverty alleviation), 3 July 2019, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1637981876030492715&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Accessed 25 October 2022.

29 Heilman 2008; Teets and Hasmath 2020.

imperative” dates to 2004, when the central government identified deficits in local governance as a vulnerability for the regime and pressured and incentivized local policy innovation to improve governance outcomes.³⁰ In addition to specifying numerous variables that encourage experimentation (competition between local administrations, individual and collective incentive structures, career dynamics, institutional constraints, etc.), this literature has identified how “contagion effects” can lead to successful practices spreading among counties.³¹ In the case of livestreaming, there is suggestive evidence of this type of “organic diffusion” as local governments saw others demonstrating the utility of live-commerce and decided to follow. The livestreaming experiment received encouragement in the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak. In February 2020, CCTV-2, a channel that focuses on economic and financial news, reported on a mayor and a deputy Party secretary in Hainan who had quickly sold 30 tonnes of mangoes during a live-commerce event. It was described as a “creative” response to dealing with stockpiles caused by the pandemic. On a visit to rural Zhashui 柞水 county in Shaanxi province in April 2020, Xi Jinping endorsed the merits of e-commerce, saying that it “promotes agricultural and side-line products, helps people escape poverty and attain prosperity, and promotes the revitalization of rural areas.”³² Xi then visited a livestreamer promoting local specialty black fungus, which sold out overnight when the story was reported by Xinhua. On 8 August 2020, the day Wuhan came out of lockdown, Mayor Li Qiang 李强 took to Douyin to promote Wuhan’s local specialty foods. Mayor Li’s action was widely reported as a boost for Wuhan’s post-lockdown morale and economic recovery. By this time major e-commerce firms like Alibaba’s Taobao, JD.com and Douyin had begun convening officials-themed “shopping festivals” and “livestreaming mayor” became a common phrase and marketing tactic.

To gain a sense of the scale of uptake among local officials, and to inform our subsequent selection of a sample of candidates for analysis, we used Baidu to collect demographic information on officials participating in two discrete e-commerce livestreaming events, Taobao’s “Spring Sowing Plan” (*Chunbo jihua* 春播计划) and JD.com’s “618 Shopping Festival” held in late spring 2020. We identified 121 officials, 81 per cent of whom served in local government (at the prefecture, county, town and village levels) or in sub-national bureaus or departments. Party officials were less numerous and lower ranked than government officials. There was substantial geographical diversity, with a concentration in underdeveloped provinces like Gansu, Anhui and Inner Mongolia. The largest cohort were deputy county mayors, accounting for nearly half the share, which we interpret as a function of differentiation between cadre types and roles and the evaluation and promotion processes that govern their career trajectories.³³ There was significant variation in terms of how “professionally” officials approached their livestreaming activities. Some did not have their own accounts and appeared as guests on live-commerce shows. For instance, Li Qiang made his debut on a promotional show for the food brand Liangpin puzi 良品铺子. Others, such as Mayor Chen Canping, ran their own their own accounts, acted as host and employed a team of assistants. However, one point was consistent across all officials: all embraced their identity and role as an official as a significant “selling point.”

Given this distribution, we selected government officials at the rank of deputy mayor based in rural areas for observation. We chose three deputy mayors from underdeveloped provinces who actively livestreamed through the three-month period of our observation in 2020: Chen Canping (Anhua, Hunan province), Tang Xiang 唐翔 (Taihu 太湖, Anhui province) and He Jiaolong

30 Göbel and Heberer 2017.

31 Chen and Göbel 2016.

32 “Zong shuji laidao zhibo jian! Dianshang zhubo Li Xuying jiangshu ‘shishang zuiqiang daihuo’ shimo” (General secretary visits live-streaming show! E-commerce host Li Xuying tells the story of the “strongest e-commerce show in history”), *Xinhua*, 24 April 2020. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-04/24/c_1125902153.htm. Accessed 14 April 2023.

33 Schubert and Ahlers 2011.

Table 1. Breakdown of Participation in Two Livestreaming Events

Government	Mayor	Deputy	Other	Party	Party secretary	Deputy	Other
Prefecture	1	5	-	Prefecture	1	-	1
County	8	48	-	County	1	5	-
Town	1	2	-	Town	-	-	-
Village	2	-	-	Village	4	-	-
District	3	2	-	District	1	-	2
Department	4	-	-	CYLC	1	-	-
Office	4	5	-	Bureau	1	-	-
Bureau	9	4	1	Business	1	-	-

Notes: CYLC = Communist Youth League of China; department = *bu* 部; office = *bangongshi* 办公室; bureau = *ju* 局; town = *zhen* 镇.

贺娇龙 (Zhaosu 昭苏, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) (Chen is male and Tang and He are female). These three officials performed the vast majority of their livestreams on Douyin. Although dedicated e-commerce platforms such as JD.com have hosted a greater number of officials during special sales events, per our observations Douyin was used more routinely. The observation period extended from June to August 2020. In total we observed 100 hours of livestreaming performances by these three officials. Pursuant to an initial pilot observation and guidance from empirical studies of Chinese livestreaming,³⁴ we employed an iterative process of axial coding to produce emergent thematic coding categories. In practice, we recorded stylistic, performance, appearance, interactive and verbal/textual data using a codebook designed to capture the dimensionality of the livestreaming medium.

The observational data also informed our approach to the final stage of the data collection, semi-structured interviews with officials. As noted above, we identified a substantial cohort of 121 livestreaming officials, whom we approached by email and Weixin 微信 (WeChat). After no-responses/refusals, scheduling issues and pandemic protocols, we were able to conduct interviews with 13 officials, nine of which were face-to-face and four virtual. The 13 officials who agreed to be interviewed came from three rural provinces and two autonomous areas. Most held roles at the county level, with the majority in the position of deputy head. They represented different levels of livestreaming experience (from a single livestream to over 100) and success in terms of audience figures (from the low thousands to low millions) and sales on a range of platforms (Douyin, Taobao, JD.com). Among other things, we asked them to explain their motivations and rationales, to describe their experiences and feelings about livestreaming, and to talk about the attitudes of their institutions. In deference to requests for anonymity, all identifying characteristics have been removed from the reporting below. Interviews were conducted by one of the authors in Chinese during the summer of 2020.³⁵

Findings

In this section we present findings combined from the observational and interview data, differentiating between political and performance dynamics. In terms of political dynamics, we seek to understand what motivated these officials, how they explain the political and policy contexts, and the political factors, that shaped their undertaking. In terms of performance dynamics, we

³⁴ Hu and Chaudhry 2020.

³⁵ In accordance with the procedures set out and approved by the co-authors' institutions, interviewees were informed of the nature and purpose of the interviews and gave their consent to report their answers anonymously.

investigate how officials adopted and then adapted the scripts and routines common to livestreaming and internet celebrity culture, how they understood their performance of the livestreamer role and how it was manifested. The findings section concludes with observations on the outcomes of the livestreaming experience, in terms of political, proximate and personal results.

Political dynamics

Across various policy sectors, the progressive re-centralization of power under Xi Jinping has reduced the leeway and increased the risk for local government experimentation in policy implementation.³⁶ However, experimentation in digital communications has proven possible during Xi's tenure.³⁷ Livestreaming itself was consistent with the central government's thinking on digital communications and poverty alleviation, with numerous early proponents receiving praise for their efforts. Numerous interviewees report their sense that live-commerce was "politically correct," with some explicitly invoking Xi's endorsement:

Since General Secretary Xi gave the green light for livestreaming e-commerce, departments from the centre to the local, from towns to villages, are all following his lead.³⁸

This is not to imply that local governments were directly acting on direction from the top. However, it was clear to our interview subjects that this activity was permissible and viewed favourably. Whether a local government decided to adopt livestreaming was a matter of local agency, with numerous variables involved, including the competition and contagion dynamics noted in the literature.³⁹ At the individual level, a picture emerges of officials initially unfamiliar with and unenthusiastic about livestreaming. Interviewees report initial resistance, claiming a lack of expertise and communication skills,⁴⁰ doubts about the appropriateness of an official entering the *wanghong* world,⁴¹ or concerns about how the public would perceive them.⁴² Sometimes their participation was not entirely voluntary, as in the case of having to substitute for a suddenly absent superior,⁴³ or as in the following case:

[The bureau of trade and economic cooperation] told me to sell tea, so I have to sell tea. If they ask me to sell pork, then I turn to selling the pork.⁴⁴

Another cadre explained that their participation was foisted upon them by a superior who had heard about Taobao's Spring Sowing Plan and County Head Livestreaming Festival (*Xianzhang zhibo jie* 县长直播节).⁴⁵ This dynamic suggests that mayors or Party chiefs, inspired by the fashion for livestreaming, or perhaps other counties' successes, delegate the responsibility to carry it out to their subordinates, who are duty-bound despite lacking enthusiasm or preparedness. It is thus possible to discern an organic dimension to the livestreaming movement, even if the practitioners themselves were not necessarily joining it voluntarily. It also explains the picture we have from our interviews that it was ad hoc, uncoordinated and cadres made up their approach to

36 Teets, Hasmath and Lewis 2017.

37 Repnikova and Fang 2019.

38 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 20 March 2020.

39 For example, Chen and Göbel 2016.

40 Interview with a government official at the town level, 21 March 2020.

41 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 22 March 2020.

42 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 22 March 2020.

43 Interview with a government official at the town level, 26 March 2020.

44 Interview with a government official at the town level, 27 March 2020.

45 Interview with a government official at the town level, January 2020.

livestreaming as they went along. Unsurprisingly, this led to substantial variation in the success and longevity of cadre engagement, with some managing a just a single session.

The synergy between state and private commerce implied by Internet Plus was apparent in the support provided by e-commerce platforms, which convened special sales events for local officials. This support was often reported as crucial, since the platform would provide the tools and market the event and all the officials had to do was appear in person:

So, supported by Taobao and some other influential platforms that promote the cadre live-commerce event, that's where we found the turning point to address the issues [faced by farmers].⁴⁶

The stimulus for all interviewees to start livestreaming was the COVID-19 outbreak, which led to collapsed markets and stockpiles of unsold local agricultural produce. Respondents were unanimous (and sometimes ardent) in framing their motivation as being that of public service to alleviate the predicament of local producers. It was important for them to emphasize this, even in an anonymous academic interview, and we have no cause to doubt their sincerity. However, we can also perceive the convergence of farmers' difficulties and the cadres' own professional and institutional pressures, as the former coincided with the culmination of the highly symbolic national policy goal to "eradicate poverty." Every interviewee referenced their poverty alleviation targets. One respondent said that they were compelled by the situation (*xingshi suopo* 形势所迫) to try livestreaming as a last resort.⁴⁷ Another admitted that the difficulties faced by farmers and the threat to "the government's consolidation of its achievements in poverty alleviation" forced the local government to "do something in a way to circumvent the usual rigid procedures."⁴⁸ This depiction suggests a frantic last-minute attempt to generate income against a target. However, other comments suggested it was less tangible sales that mattered than providing "a demonstration of our government's attitude, an attitude of caring about our people, caring about their income and caring about how to help promote their products."⁴⁹ While many interviewees said that livestreaming activities contributed to poverty alleviation through sales, most also declared it a temporary response to exceptional circumstances. Only one spoke to longer-term ambitions to deploy the transformative potential of livestreaming and rural e-commerce, which they were proud to have opened farmers' eyes to.⁵⁰

Xi's tenure has been marked by an ongoing anti-corruption campaign of unprecedented duration and scale, which has affected hundreds of thousands of Party cadres at all levels.⁵¹ This context explains cadres' sensitivity to transparency and financial propriety. Livestreaming sometimes involves substantial sums of money, both from sales revenue and fans' virtual gifts during the show. In one session, Chen Canping generated sales of more than 2.5 million yuan, and had to repeatedly discourage fans from sending him virtual gifts. This is where the livestreaming cadres diverged most obviously from regular internet celebrities, whose livelihood depends on monetizing fan allegiances. Banning fans from sending e-payment gifts is also a sub-optimal marketing strategy, since the platform mechanism promotes accounts based partly on this metric. The officials we observed repeatedly emphasized that they would not retain any revenue from virtual gifts, pledging to donate it to charity. On learning that one of his specially designed gift products, a brick of tea with his avatar, resold for 15,000 yuan, Chen told the audience:

46 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 20 and 22 March 2020.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 20 March 2020.

50 Interview with a government official at the town level, 21 March 2020.

51 Chang 2018.

I really appreciate the public's support for me, but I shall reiterate my principles here: These are only gifts and not for sale. I will never seek profit for myself or allow myself to be commercialized because I am a cadre and a Communist Party member.

None of the officials we interviewed appeared averse to the idea of harnessing the affordances of internet celebrity. However, many railed against the dangers of "commercialization" (*shangyehua* 商业化) by which they mean profiting personally from their performances. During one livestream designed to raise money for school children in Zhaosu county, He Jiaolong pleaded with fans not to send virtual gifts to her personal Weixin account:

Please just donate your money through Douyin's virtual gift service (*yinlang* 音浪) because this is traceable...I have to make sure all the money involved can be made public and traceable.

On several occasions during Chen Canping's (increasingly lucrative) livestreams, he was confronted with scepticism about his motives. During one session, "fans" jeered "You are not attending to your proper official duties," "You are a profiteer" or "You are commercializing your official title." Chen's response encapsulated comments that also recurred in our interviews:

My duty as the deputy mayor of Anhua is to support farmers and agriculture through e-commerce. This is just the division of labour between cadres...I don't care what the public thinks about me. I just want to sell as many products to help as many farmers as possible.

Some interviewees were able to provide granular accounts of transactions, market conditions and the social commerce business. We also heard about clashing government/business values, including detailed expositions on price wars and the iniquities of Taobao's marketing (*liuliang* 流量) strategy.⁵² Most interviewees began the livestreaming experiment with low expectations, but at least two were keen to reflect with surprise and delight on the financial impact of their sales.⁵³

Chinese survey data on political trust are unusual in indicating a decline from the national to the local level,⁵⁴ which appears connected to perceptions and experience of corruption, provision of public services and other variables.⁵⁵ However, many of our interviewees mentioned the credibility conferred by their cadre status as a leading factor in their success, as exemplified here: "The natural influence of officials plays a very positive role in online sales. There is a certain cachet in being a cadre, but I didn't expect the impact to be so great."⁵⁶ Another official rationalized as follows:

It is not easy for cadres to endorse products for sale in public, as we have to consider our reputations if the products are not good enough. When officials have endorsed the products, people generally feel that the credibility of this product has been improved.⁵⁷

China has long-standing issues with food safety standards, with numerous scandals affecting public health.⁵⁸ Since at the time of this study public health was highly salient due to COVID-19 and officials were especially sensitive to scandal, it was not unreasonable for cadres to believe their status could lend credibility to products. During their shows they were not coy about their official status.

52 Interview with a government official at the town level, 21 March 2020.

53 Interviews with a Party official in a bureau, 22 March 2020; interview with a government official at the town level, 22 March 2020.

54 Wu and Wilkes 2018.

55 Chen 2017.

56 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 22 March 2020.

57 Interview with a government official at the town level, 27 March 2020.

58 Jen and Chen 2017.

Chen Canping, for instance, revelled in the soi-disant title of “most popular mayor online” and sported a prominent CCP pin-badge during his livestreams. He was also happy to regale his audience with snippets of official life, reflecting on poverty alleviation policy meetings and inviting an Anhui provincial cadre (i.e. a superior in the bureaucratic hierarchy) to join one livestream. In addition to lending credibility to the quality of their products, cadres reflected on the utility (for sales) of their local connections and influence.⁵⁹

Performance dynamics

Social commerce and local government involve vastly different skillsets, but our observations show that local officials were able to learn and enact the logics and routines of livestreaming. These officials describe themselves as “livestreaming mayors” – conforming with the marketing slogan invented by commercial platforms but also capturing the hybrid identity they inhabited during a show. While embracing their official status, the officials we observed were clearly aware of techniques involved in livestreaming. Most officials specialized in a single type of product, a noted strategy for brand-building and audience retention in Chinese social commerce.⁶⁰ Promoting local specialties was typical practice among the officials we observed and interviewed, ranging from peaches and pork products to tea and herbal medicine. Hosting over 120 livestreams during our observation period, often for several hours at a time, Chen Canping’s specialization was Anhua dark tea. On his Douyin account, “Mayor Chen Talking about Anhua,” Chen described himself as “a tea lover” dedicated to “supporting famers through information technology.” His Douyin Cupboard was replete with different varieties of tea from the official website of Anhua dark tea, with two public-private enterprises and one private supplier acting as intermediaries between farmers and customers. As a self-declared tea aficionado, Chen advised audiences on preparing dark tea for consumption, issuing tips on water temperatures, brewing times and appropriate crockery. Other cadres in the study similarly specialized in a range of mainly agricultural products with some connection to or fame in the local area. This was largely out of necessity, but it was also consistent with showing how localized resources and local sources of differentiation and comparative advantage are routinely utilized by local officials to advance higher-level policy agendas.⁶¹

The viability of a Chinese livestreamer is more than just a function of their reach, typically measured by the number of followers or views recorded across various platforms; it is the capacity to command attention in a crowded field *and* to convert that attention into money.⁶² Audiences expect internet celebrities to be “authentic” and accessible and building monetizable connections requires an investment of emotional labour to cultivate para-social or even quasi-familial “para-kin” relationships.⁶³ Due to the centrality of fans’ virtual gifting as a revenue source, carefully nurturing connections with their audience is as important as content creation for many Chinese livestreamers.⁶⁴ The officials in our study adopted, or at least affected, many of the informal subcultural routines of livestreaming, including deliberate efforts to reduce distance and forge connections with audiences. A solicitous demeanour is not often associated with local cadres, but several interviewees acknowledged that they made a deliberate effort to present a caring, attentive and interactive “persona.” We interpret this performativity as being borne of their inhabiting the role of livestreamer rather than duplicity. Adopting the informal routines of livestreaming was evident in linguistic choices, with many officials eschewing regular forms of address like comrades

59 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 22 March 2020; interview with a government official at the town level, 21 March 2020.

60 Zhan and Xu 2019.

61 Tsai and Liao 2020.

62 Guan 2021, 328.

63 Yan and Yang, 2021.

64 Abidin 2018, 3; Zou 2018, 808.

(*tongzhimen* 同志们) or everybody (*dajia* 大家) in favour of referring to fans as family (*jiaren* 家人), babe (*baobao* 宝宝) or bro (*laotie* 老铁).

Many interviewees said they lacked confidence in their capacity to perform the role of livestreaming host and voiced concerns about cadres “showing their faces” in an informal public space. Some recoiled at the less deferential communication norms of the internet and disliked being commented on directly by audiences. However, interviewees were clear about what they had learned: sincerity, informality and a down-to-earth demeanour are the key to connecting with fans and leveraging that connection to increase sales. Reflecting on their experiences, several officials reported being disarmed by easygoing interactions with the audience and enjoyed the opportunity to engage in informal banter with regular people.⁶⁵ Few, however, performed the role as wholeheartedly as Chen Canping, who was happy to indulge audiences by singing and dancing during his livestreams, a common “service” among internet celebrity hosts.

Livestreamers rely on platform algorithms, which recommend live-streaming rooms and elevate their prominence on the app interface according to popularity (*renqi* 人气) metrics of audience size and the value of virtual gifts. Officials were clear about this and made efforts to accommodate it. One key tactic for maximizing audience size is being active during heavy traffic (*daliuliang* 大流量) time slots. Over the duration of our observation period Chen Canping expressed his pride at never missing a Friday afternoon heavy-traffic slot. A common tactic among Chinese livestream hosts to increase the popularity of their show is to connect (*lianmai* 连麦) with other streamers and internet celebrities, hosting them physically on set or getting them to call in. The Chinese consumer culture preference for *renao* 热闹 (excitement, noise and bustle) is well established⁶⁶ and has translated into the livestreaming context.⁶⁷ *Lianmai* helps livestream hosts create an appearance of popularity, connectedness and liveliness that builds excitement for their performance and sales. During our observation period, our three officials often connected with other livestreamers and invited internet celebrities to participate in their shows. During one observation, Chen Canping interacted with six separate internet celebrities in a single hour. In others he was joined by “Da Bing” 大兵, a well-known comedian. These guest appearances created an ambience of *renao* and demonstrated the impressive reach of Chen’s *guanxi* 关系 (personal network), a cultural signifier of importance and trust. Other tactics associated with livestreaming and live-commerce were the regular discounts, two-for-one promotions and exciting time-limited discounts (*miaosha* 秒杀). Chen Canping even used his personal image to sell a range of merchandise and produced special gifts to reward bulk buyers. Novelty gift products with his avatar proved extremely popular.

Prior studies on livestreaming, video-sharing and e-commerce in China have shown them to be highly gendered in practice and accompanying discourses.⁶⁸ Women livestream hosts (*nüzhubo* 女主播) have been singled out for particular scrutiny, with media coverage highlighting their physical characteristics and demeanour, and sometimes criticizing the purported commodification of femininity and sexuality.⁶⁹ The pressure on women livestreamers to conform to popular expectations about their appearance and behaviour is widespread, and He Jiaolong and Tang Xiang both utilized presentation strategies commonly associated with female *wanghong*. Both initially promoted themselves as “beautiful female mayors” (*meinü xianzhang* 美女县长) and assumed roles associated with femininity and gender performativity like publicizing local beauty spots.⁷⁰ During some livestreaming events they would act as a tourist guide introducing local attractions while

65 Interview with a Party official in a bureau, 22 March 2020; interviews with a Party official in a bureau, 20 and 22 March 2020.

66 DeGlopper 1995.

67 Lu et al. 2018.

68 Meng and Huang 2017; Tan et al. 2020.

69 Zhang and Hjorth 2019.

70 Wang, Hui 2020.

wearing traditional (and stereotypically feminine) dress. He rose to prominence via a livestreaming event to promote the tourism industry in Zhaosu county, during which she posted images of herself horseback riding in ethnic-minority dress. This is a common presentation strategy for women across the Chinese internet, cultural industries and celebrity spheres, tapping into literary and folk traditions of female heroic imagery.⁷¹ The pictures went viral as Chinese internet users celebrated the elegant and heroic image of the “horse-riding mayor.” Her following on Douyin increased exponentially, attracting the attention of state broadcaster CCTV. In one television interview, He compared her rapid rise to that of Ding Zhen 丁真, a handsome young Khampa Tibetan pastoralist who achieved overnight fame after featuring in a photoshoot, which he converted into a career as *wanghong* and reality TV celebrity.

Outcomes

The outcomes of the livestreaming experiment for the officials we observed and interviewed were mixed, in terms of sales and professional and personal development. Some officials, like Chen Canping and He Jiaolong, generated exceptional sales and made substantial contributions to the coffers of their localities. Other officials’ financial results were more modest, and a systematic assessment of the economic contribution of livestreaming is beyond the scope (and is not the focus) of this paper. Still, many of our interviewees were proud to have made a tangible and symbolic contribution to struggling local producers. Shortly after the conclusion of our observation period, the three officials whose livestreaming practices we followed for several months lost their mayoral titles when their temporary postings (*guazhi* 挂职) expired. However, they received consequential professional rewards for their efforts. He Jiaolong was promoted to deputy director of the bureau of culture and tourism in Yili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture. Tang Xiang took the position of deputy section chief of the Anqing Beijing liaison office, having turned down a lucrative private-sector job offer. Chen Canping was awarded the revered title of “Exemplary Individual in the Uphill Battle against Poverty Alleviation” (*Quanguo tuopin gongxian xianjin geren* 全国脱贫攻坚先进个人) in person by Xi Jinping.

In the period since our observation concluded, coinciding with a new phase in the COVID-19 pandemic and official declaration of success in “eradicating poverty,” the “livestream craze” has slowed down. The “campaign-like” phase of the livestreaming experiment appears to have been bounded by specific contextual factors. However, local officials *are* still livestreaming, albeit more sporadically. In September 2022, Chen Shaowang 陈绍旺, mayor of Dalian 大连, joined Xin Ba 辛巴, one of the most popular social commerce livestreamers, to promote Dalian seafood.⁷² The same month, the deputy mayor of Shanghai, Wu Qing 吴清, was involved in social-commerce in the automobile sector.⁷³ Tang Xiang and He Jiaolong retain their Douyin accounts, on which they reference their current official titles, but have moved on from live-commerce. Chen Canping maintains an active digital and social shopping presence, still with a concentration on tea, under the new handle of “Wanghong Mayor Chen Canping, PhD” (*Wanghong xianzhang Chen Canping boshi* 网红县长陈灿平博士). Chen’s continued use of his former mayoral title and explicit fusing of officialdom and internet celebrity is symptomatic of his media entrepreneurialism. It is

71 Sullivan and Zhao 2021.

72 “Xin Ba: lianshou Dalian shizhang zuo zhibodaihuo, zhenshi youpaimian, guang touzi xuexiao jiu shigeyi” (Xin Ba: co-hosting livestreaming show with Dalian mayor, 1 billion yuan invested in school building), *163 News*, 14 October 2022, <https://3g.163.com/dy/article/HJKMHV7O0553R1WO.html>. Accessed 25 October 2022.

73 “Wu Qing chuang guanyuan daihuo qiche jilu: Shanghai fushizhang daihuo rongwei RX5 PLUS zhihu maita” (Wu Qing breaks record for car-selling among E-commerce cadres: deputy mayor of Shanghai encourages the public to buy RX5 PLUS), *Sina News*, 18 May 2022, https://k.sina.cn/article_6491095056_182e6401000100oxw1.html?from=auto&ab=qj-c&http=fromhttp. Accessed 25 October 2022.

also easier given that he is no longer employed as an official and his previous efforts received direct approval from the central government.

Aside from livestreaming officials, there are numerous indications that Party and state actors are keen to continue experimenting with popular and informal methods to reduce distance to regular people and communicate their messaging. For instance, in June 2022, amid economic turbulence and uncertainty about ongoing pandemic restrictions, prefectural Party secretaries in Anhui, Henan and Guangxi were presented as casually hanging out at night markets, chatting with customers and treating themselves to common night market delicacies. Highly choreographed symbolic performances by Xi Jinping aside, including “folksy conversations with farmers and meals in ‘ordinary’ Beijing restaurants,”⁷⁴ Chinese officials do not usually indulge in the grassroots meet-and-greets common to democratic election candidates. In another novel experiment, Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee 李家超 opened a personal Weibo account and soon accrued more than a million followers. Like the experiment with livestreaming and social commerce, we suggest such episodes reflect an increasing willingness to engage informal modes of political communication where they are deemed useful.

Conclusion

As control of the Chinese internet has progressively tightened over the course of Xi’s tenure, so too have Party and state actors demonstrated an equal interest in exploring ways to harness the affordances of popular and digital communication spaces and tools. Media consumption habits and communication preferences have changed, necessitating political communications strategies that can reach people in the spaces they inhabit and speak to them in a way that resonates and is effective.⁷⁵ Acknowledgement of this reality has resulted in numerous experiments with digital communication tools, including the livestreaming local officials that are the subject of this article. In practical terms, the substantial cohort of cadres who adopted live-commerce in 2020 were simply trying to sell agricultural produce to help local farmers, and to meet their own poverty alleviation targets. Yet in doing so they demonstrated the utility of harnessing the tools and leveraging the attention and affective bonds common to internet celebrities. In microcosm, they embodied the expansion of Party and state actors into informal digital spaces and experimentation with new communication methods. The novel experiment involving officials and livestreaming required the alignment of economic headwinds caused by COVID-19 and pending poverty alleviation targets. But, given official thinking on the significance of digital communications as a tool and site for governance, policy, propaganda and persuasion activity, their demonstration of the utility of the tools and routines of internet celebrity for reaching ordinary people is likely to prompt further experimentation. As the internet celebrity sphere becomes an entrenched part of Chinese society, it is reasonable to speculate that official actors might seek to be more present and more actively engaging with publics in those spaces. An earlier corollary to this kind of innovation and “media entrepreneurialism” was local leaders’ experiments with television in the early 2000s, where, for example, critical reporting was discretely encouraged in order to discipline subordinates and push forward governance goals.⁷⁶

The informal origins of the “livestreaming craze,” consistent with observations in the literature on policy experimentation, show how entrepreneurial local officials can observe, adapt and adopt popular grassroots trends to their own needs. The central government’s orientation towards digital technologies and the incentive structure for local officials creates opportunities for entrepreneurial cadres like Chen Canping to engage in ad hoc experimentation with popular modes of

74 Esarey 2021, 900.

75 Repnikova and Fang 2019, 679.

76 Chen 2020.

communication. The livestreaming case, from its tentative grassroots beginnings to its “campaign phase” and eventual endorsement by the central government, suggest that experimental methods consonant with national-level policies, institutional objectives and “political correctness” have the potential to gain traction and spread in popularity. Xi Jinping’s endorsement of livestreaming and the award for Chen Canping were a clear sign that the central government leadership could accept leveraging the “celebrification” of low-level cadres acting in line with policy objectives like poverty alleviation and political imperatives like anti-corruption and “positive energy” (*zheng neng-liang* 正能量). This doesn’t prefigure local officials becoming *wanghong*, nor engagement with broader celebrity processes at the national political level, but it does point to the further modernization, diversification and experimentation with official political communications.

Competing interests. None

Acknowledgements. The authors are indebted to three anonymous referees for their feedback and suggestions

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