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Wanghong e-commerce in/as China's economic transformation: A case study of beauty *wanghong*

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Abstract

This article examines the crucial encounter between *wanghong* and e-commerce in the specific process of China's platformization. We develop a threefold (macro-meso-micro) approach that combines perspectives from political economy, critical industry studies, and ethnographic research to identify and unpack the heterogeneous actors and actions in the evolution of *wanghong* e-commerce, using beauty *wanghong* as a case study. Drawing upon document studies (146 documents between 2001 and 2022) and 21 semi-structured interviews (supplemented by ethnographic field observations over seven months in 2018), we argue that: first, the contrast between strong consumer demand (activated by beauty *wanghong*) and poorly developed retail and distribution channels in the Chinese beauty industry provides a precondition for the emergence of beauty *wanghong* e-commerce; second, e-commerce platform Alibaba has boosted and institutionalized the convergence of *wanghong* and e-commerce, developing a new "social commerce model" that integrates social networking with entertainment in the context of e-commerce transactions; finally, China's ongoing economic transformation has created possibilities and challenges for *wanghong* e-commerce and energized this new "social commerce" business model. The articulation of the *wanghong* and e-commerce is a result—and also a stage—of the integration of the manufacturing industry and platform economy in China. It is a consequence, yet an embodiment of China's economic transformation.

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Introduction

In 2022, on the first day of the presale of "Double 11" (China's biggest shopping festival, similar to "Black Friday" in the US), *wanghong* Li Jiaqi sold RMB 21.5 billion (around USD 2.9 billion) worth of goods via e-commerce livestreaming (Yu, 2022). This showcased the selling power of *wanghong* in e-commerce and foregrounded the progress and potential of China's *wanghong* economy. The past two decades have witnessed the proliferation of *wanghong*, who have led a cultural and economic trend in China. *Wanghong*, short for "*wangluo hongren*," is the vernacular term for internet celebrities in China, which "translates to 'red on the internet' with the color red signifying popularity, and broadly refers to highly prolific internet users who are effective conduits for channeling online retail businesses or social media advertising" (Abidin, 2018, pp. 2-3). In both academic discussions and the popular press, the term "*wanghong*" overlaps with other terms, such as "influencers," "internet celebrities" and "microcelebrities," in that all of them tend to refer to social media users who accumulate a fan base and whose celebrity status is native to the internet (Abidin, 2016, 2018; Senft, 2008). However, as Abidin (2018, p. 3) critically observes, "unlike the connotations of being a 'content creator' in the Anglocentric parts of the world, a *wanghong* is premised on the acute ability to convert internet viewer traffic to money, relying less on content production than the ability to hold an audience's attention visually."

Indeed, with their own cultural specificities, *wanghong* crystalize an "interplay between local digital media platforms, infrastructural histories, and modes of performativity" (Zhang & de Seta, 2018, p. 60). The connotations of the term "*wanghong*" are evolving in the Chinese context, especially after internet giants such as Alibaba have boosted the "*wanghong* economy" from the mid-2010s onward (Han, 2020). Since 2015, the term "*wanghong*" has been synonymous with a business model based upon monetization of internet fame. Many of them operate their online retailing stores or promote sales of commodities via livestreaming or short video, generating considerable revenues. Because of many cases of successful *wanghong*, Chinese media assert that the *wanghong* economy is the "new powerhouse" of the Chinese internet economy (H. Lv, 2019).

In China, e-commerce is essential to *wanghong* (Han, 2022). Many of them operate their online retailing stores or promote sales of commodities via livestreaming or short video. Considerable income can be generated through these channels. Drawing comparisons with international platforms such as YouTube, where internet celebrities can be very highly paid, the earnings potential for Chinese *wanghong* is even higher still. Chinese *wanghong* usually do not expect large earnings from media platforms, or from the sale of their own branded merchandise, instead relying upon profits generated in *wanghong* e-commerce. These distinctions present not only the diversity of business models, but also imply the heterogeneity of development paths, calling for scholarly investigation of the relationship between Chinese *wanghong* and e-commerce.

To unpack the dynamics between *wanghong* and e-commerce in the Chinese context, this article focuses on a particular genre, namely, beauty *wanghong*. A beauty *wanghong* is a social media personality who creates and shares content about makeup, skincare and other beauty-related topics on a diverse range of Chinese social media platforms, including microblogging sites, short video-based apps and livestreaming platforms. Moreover, beauty *wanghong* are relevant because "beauty product" is a leading category of commodities sold in the *wanghong* e-commerce (Zhang et al., 2020). Keeping this in focus, this study aims to answer the following questions: How has the strong tie between *wanghong* and e-commerce formed in China? What role does e-commerce play in China's *wanghong* culture and economy? What are the characteristics of China's *wanghong* economy given the global rise of internet celebrities?

This article begins by discussing the concept of "*wanghong*" and the commodification of *wanghong*. It then introduces the research methodology, which employs a threefold (macro-meso-micro) approach that combines perspectives from political economy, critical industry studies, and ethnographic research to examine the heterogeneous actors and actions in the evolution of *wanghong* e-commerce. Our main data generating methods are document studies and qualitative interviews, supplemented by ethnographic field observations. The remainder presents the research findings, focusing on three key themes: first, the contrast between strong consumer demand (activated by beauty *wanghong*) and poorly developed retail and distribution channels provides a precondition for the emergence of beauty *wanghong* e-commerce; second, e-commerce platform Alibaba has boosted and institutionalized the convergence of *wanghong* and e-commerce, developing a new "social commerce model" that integrates social networking with entertainment in the context of e-commerce transactions. This new model is best understood as a high integration of the various processes in the value chain of the *wanghong* economy, which makes e-commerce an integral part of being *wanghong*. Finally, we locate the expansion of *wanghong* e-commerce in China's economic restructuring, arguing that China's ongoing economic transformation has created possibilities and challenges for *wanghong* e-commerce and energized the new "social commerce" business model of Chinese social media platforms and e-commerce platforms.

A brief review of the commodification of *wanghong*

In Chinese media studies, "*wanghong*" is arguably an ambiguous term that is often used interchangeably with "microcelebrities," "internet celebrities," "influencers" and "livestreamers" (e.g., Li, 2019; Wang, 2020; Zhang & Hjorth, 2017; Zhou, 2019). For instance, Li (2019, p. 3016) points out that China's social media environment "provides a plethora of new ways for ordinary people to produce themselves as 'microcelebrities' … the flowering of microcelebrity, or *wanghong* in Chinese, contrasts sharply with the scant scholarly attention paid to it." Similarly, in their critical analysis of Chinese livestreaming sites, Zhang and Hjorth (2017, p. 810) observe that "media professionals and critics began to name the phenomenon '*wanghong* (internet celebrity) ecology'—a media ecology based on an attention economy of 'internet celebrities' and such terms became catchphrases that encapsulate the entire contemporary Chinese mediascape." In contrast to this approach, inspired by scholars such as Abidin (2018), Han (2022), and Zhang and de Seta (2018), we understand *wanghong* as a vernacular term for internet celebrities in China. *Wanghong*, as Zhang and de Seta (2018, p. 60) argue, are best understood as online celebrities with Chinese characteristics, whose "ephemerality, transience, and failure" are context specific.

Existing research recognizes the commodification of both *wanghong* and their global counterparts, who have been striving to reap commercial rewards. In her critical and ethnographic study of camgirls, Senft (2008) points out that, in the beginning of the 2000s, camgirls in the US had already attempted to monetize their online presence by charging their viewers a small amount of fees. In Singapore, as Abidin and Thompson (2012) observe, once blogs became popular, fashion bloggers launched blogshops to monetize their online popularity. Monetizing personal brands has become a common practice on social media platforms, and many influencers earn money through sponsorship. In addition to promoting sponsored content, influencers can also earn money through view-based advertisement revenues. For example, YouTube launched its "Partner Program" in 2007. Since then, the platform has shared its advertisement revenues with content providers based on views, and those accounts with a massive fan base can generate considerable monthly incomes (Burgess, 2012; Lobato, 2016; Postigo, 2014). On international platforms like YouTube and Instagram, sponsorship and view-based advertisement revenues have become the most common way to monetize influencers' fame.

Yet, when it comes to the Chinese context, these profit-earning strategies are unacclimatized. Although sponsorship deals and view-based advertising revenues can also be found on Chinese social media platforms (Guan, 2020; Guo, 2022) (e.g., some platforms copied YouTube's Partner Program and launched similar programs, such as the "WeMedia Program" by Sina Weibo and the "Incentive Program for Content Creators" by Bilibili, a popular Chinese video-sharing website, which promises Chinese creators a share of advertisement revenues and supportive services to stimulate content creation and user activities), they are not sustainable and have generated little benefit to *wanghong*. For instance, many *wanghong* on Sina Weibo and Bilibili complain that they receive very little money from the platforms' incentive programs for content creation (Wang & Picone, 2022). Bilibili even reduced the shared revenues in 2022, which led to a huge reduction in content creation on the platform (Wei, 2022).

In this context, the limited profits generated by content creation force *wanghong* to seek other revenue streams. Virtual tipping or donation (*da shang*), for instance, has become one of the alternative ways to generate revenue on Chinese social media platforms. In its heyday, virtual tipping can bring substantial rewards to *wanghong*, especially those on livestreaming platforms (Craig et al., 2021; Lin & de Kloet, 2019). According to Sina Finance (2021), individual *wanghong* can make more than RMB 30 million (around USD 4.1 million) through livestreaming over "a short period of time." With the popularity of virtual tipping, there has also been growing concerns over legal and ethical issues brought by this new revenue generation method (Bai & Liu, 2021; Bo & Chen, 2020). For instance, virtual tipping has been accused of encouraging *wanghong* to provide sexualized content in livestreaming (Sina Finance, 2021). In response to these concerns and controversies surrounding virtual tipping, the Chinese government developed and implemented intensive regulation, which limits its financial potential.

In contrast to virtual tipping, e-commerce is legally and ethically safe and generates regular cash flows, playing an important role in China's *wanghong* economy (Craig et al., 2021; Han, 2020). Hundreds of thousands of *wanghong* have chosen to monetize their fame and personal brands through e-commerce, such as Viya (China's "queen of livestreaming," who had over 18 million Sina Weibo followers and 80 million Taobao followers before her social media accounts were taken down following accusations of tax evasion by Chinese authorities) and Zhang Mofan MOMO (one of the most commercially successful beauty *wanghong* in China, who established her own beauty brand Mo Amour in 2010, specializing in aromatherapy). This invites consideration about how a strong tie between *wanghong* and e-commerce is formed. To address this, our article focuses on the social and historical formation of beauty *wanghong* e-commerce.

In China, "beauty" is the largest category of commodities in *wanghong* e-commerce, making beauty *wanghong* key actors in the wider *wanghong* economy (Zhang et al., 2020). By focusing on beauty *wanghong*, this study aims to elucidate the internal logic of China's *wanghong* economy, which is rooted in personal consumption. At the macro level, regardless of the different genres they belong to, *wanghong* rely on certain manufacturing industries, many of which share similar development trajectories and experiences with the beauty industry in China: they were all hindered by weak distribution infrastructure and constrained market at the turn of the century and then experienced rapid growth in the following two decades, especially through the channel of e-commerce. Looking into beauty *wanghong* industry can therefore help understand the general *wanghong* economy, which resonates with China's economic restructuring towards the consumption-driven model. At the meso level, beauty *wanghong* are also unique, as the beauty industry in China is a high-profit, fast-expanding industry, which can give these *wanghong* more commercial incentives than other industries. As a result, many *wanghong* who have gained their online fame from other genres (e.g., "comedy," "fashion" and "travel") arguably end up with promoting cosmetics and skincare products on digital platforms. In this vein, as a case study, beauty *wanghong* are both representative and unique in their relationship with manufacturing industry and China's economic transformation.

Research methodology

Adopting a threefold (macro-meso-micro) approach, this study combines perspectives from political economy (Hong, 2017; Mosco, 2009), critical industry studies (Havens et al., 2009) and ethnographic research (Caldwell, 2008). The main data generating methods are document studies and qualitative interviews, which are supplemented by ethnographic field observations over seven months in 2018.

At a macro level, we deploy a political economy approach to understanding the "social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources" (Mosco, 2009, p. 21) in *wanghong* e-commerce. Inspired by Han (2020; 2022), Hong (2017) and Tang (2019) who have investigated the political economy of Chinese internet and *wanghong*, we focus on a particular genre, namely, beauty *wanghong*, to unpack the dynamics between *wanghong* and e-commerce in the Chinese context.

Beauty *wanghong* are relevant, because they leverage social popularity and monetization simultaneously. The global beauty industry is well-known for its big spending on marketing. Taking L'Oréal as an example, Rähse (2020, p. 59) points out that "the very respectable values for marketing and sales are around 45%. This is 1.6 times the cost of manufacturing. No other industry spends so much money on marketing and sales." With the popularity of social media, the potential and power of influencer marketing has been increasingly recognized by the global beauty industry (Driscoll, 2023). Although diverse genres of *wanghong* have gained online fame and fan-bases, not all attain the same commercial success enjoyed by many beauty *wanghong*. For instance, during the presale of the "Double 11" shopping festival in 2021, 70% of the commodities sold by Li Jiaqi were beauty products, which made a RMB 8.2 billion (around USD 1.1 billion) transaction (Meng, 2021). Therefore, focusing on the beauty genre can better illustrate the logic of the *wanghong* economy.

In addition to our political economic discussion, critical industry studies perspectives are also central to this study, which "locates industry research on particular organizations, agents, and practices" at a meso level (Havens et al., 2009, p. 236). We analyze 146 documents related to *wanghong* e-commerce and the beauty industry in China between 2001 and 2022. This includes 82 news articles in Chinese mainstream media (e.g., a news report entitled "The Healthy Development of *Wanghong* E-Commerce Needs Regulation" by *Economic Daily*, a Chinese state-owned economic newspaper), 22 news articles in Western media and press (e.g., a news report entitled "Alibaba Pushes into Social Networking with Sina Weibo Investment" by Reuters), 24 industrial reports (e.g., A report entitled "From Zhang Dayi to Li Jiaqi: The 'Change' and 'Unchange' of *Wanghong* E-Commerce" by Guosen Securities Ltd., a Chinese company that provides financial brokerage services), 14 government and platform policy documents (e.g., China's State Council's report on work of the government in 2015; A document entitled "The Incentive Program for Content Creators" by Bilibili), and 4 corporate financial reports (e.g., L'Oreal's annual reports). These documents were selected through purposive sampling: we searched with keywords such as "*wanghong* e-commerce" and "*wanghong* economy" on major Chinese news portals, government portals, popular search engines, as well as the official websites of China's leading internet companies (e.g., Alibaba and Sina Weibo). A close reading of these documents helps develop a deeper understanding of the economics, management, and organizational structures of beauty *wanghong* e-commerce.

Inspired by the critical film and television studies scholarship of D'acci (1994), Havens et al. (2009) and Lotz (2007), we also conducted qualitative interviews to examine how different actors are connected and work together to create beauty *wanghong* e-commerce. Each interview lasted an average of 60 minutes. They were conducted between December 2017 and May 2020. We interviewed 21 participants living in mainland China, recruited through both snowball and convenience sampling methods. They engaged in beauty *wanghong* e-commerce in five roles: fans of beauty *wanghong* ($N = 9$), beauty brand marketing professionals ($N = 5$), multi-channel network (MCN) managers ($N = 4$), e-commerce platform managers ($N = 2$), and social media platform manager ($N = 1$). Although only a small number of the people interviewed for this study actually appear in the article, all the conversations we had shaped our interpretation of beauty *wanghong* e-commerce. We use semi-structured interviews to identify the ordinary, the everyday, and the relational in the *wanghong* economy, which are arguably essential for micro-level analysis (Johnson, 2008). Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method, our analysis identifies five initial themes, including "gender," "labour," "beauty industry," "social media and e-commerce" and "China's economic transformation," the latter three of which are discussed in this article. To remove identifying information of interviewees, pseudonyms are used in this article.

Caldwell (2008, pp. 3-4) argues that "media studies must avoid limiting research to a clean menu of disconnected methods," foregrounding an "integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis." To echo this, we also conducted a seven-month fieldwork in China, visiting three beauty expos, namely, the 25th Shanghai International Beauty, Hairdressing, and Cosmetics Expo (Shanghai, March 19-31, 2018), the Yiwu Beauty Fair (Yiwu, April 1-3, 2018), and the China International Beauty Expo (Guangzhou, September 2-4, 2018). During the fieldwork, we met different individuals and organizations who paint a vivid picture of what was happening in the Chinese beauty industry and its relation to the *wanghong* economy. We put these situated field observations in critical dialogue with other discourses and results from our political economic analysis, document analysis, and qualitative interviews.

Re-situating beauty *wanghong* in the Chinese beauty industry

Beauty *wanghong* are influential on Chinese social media platforms (Topkoult, 2022). However, the relationship between the beauty industry and beauty *wanghong* is less visible, though the former has profoundly shaped the latter. Therefore, this section focuses on the connection between the beauty industry and beauty *wanghong*, showcasing their convergence in China's specific and historical context.

To understand the essence of the *wanghong* economy, it is important to consider from where the value originates in this economy. The term "*wanghong* economy" typically refers to online targeted marketing through *wanghong* (Sun & Wang, 2019). As Rigi and Prey (2015, p. 393) argue, social media users' activities and affective relations on the platforms "do not produce new value but instead transfer value from some commodities to others." In this vein, beauty *wanghong* depend on the beauty industry and its products. When beauty *wanghong* transfer more value (i.e., selling more beauty products), they receive an increased share of the revenues from the beauty industry. In contrast, when beauty *wanghong* transfer little value, they can hardly make a profit, especially in the Chinese context due to very limited view-based revenues.

The creation of distribution channels is essential for beauty market building (Jones, 2010). These channels determine how beauty products are sold and how their value is realized. The distribution of beauty products in China has followed a path that has diverged from its Western counterparts. In the mid-eighteenth century, beauty companies in the West began building national and international distribution outlets, including beauty and hair salons, specialty stores and shopping malls (Peiss, 2011). These outlets still play an essential role in Western markets today. As Jones (2010, p. 318) observes, unlike in Western countries, "China's consumption of beauty products was close to zero" at the beginning of the 1980s. National distribution networks were few and far between in China at the outset of the Reform and Opening Up period. In the early 1980s, foreign brands arrived in China. On entering the Chinese market, global beauty giants began to build their own distribution networks, starting in large cities on the coasts. By the mid-2000s, five major distribution channels had been constructed: department stores; superstores; specialty outlets; pharmacies and personal care retailers; and direct sales (Wu et al., 2008).

However, the geographic distribution of stores was uneven. Distribution channels built by multinational corporations favored areas with more advanced economies, neglecting rural regions and the majority of the Chinese population who lived in rural and non-coastal areas. For example, in the 1990s, Procter & Gamble focused on major chain superstores and paid little attention to rural markets and smaller distributors in China (Wang, 2005). Xiao Li is a 30-year-old man who has a keen business sense. He worked for L'Oréal China for over five years. Xiao Li emphasized the geographical disparities between distribution channels in China:

> The differences between regional markets are huge. The market in Eastern China is similar to developed countries, that is, very mature. It has all kinds of distribution channels for the retail business. For example, in 2013, Eastern China had well-developed sales outlets, but in Central China, there were few superstores, such as RT-Mart International Ltd. and Walmart at that time, let alone Western China. Even today, Western China may be lacking many kinds of distribution channels.

In contrast to the weak distribution, beauty *wanghong* have cultivated a strong interest by consumers in beauty products. Encouraged by the post-feminist and consumerist ideologies (Guo, 2022; Han, 2022), beauty *wanghong* offer "beauty pedagogy" to their followers, which is exemplified by makeup tutorials teaching women in China how to perform appropriate femininities in daily life. Such beauty pedagogy popularizes the knowledge of beauty skills and products, which was not prevalent in the period after the universally austere lifestyle of the socialist era (i.e., 1949-1977). It also paves the way for an expansion of the existing limited beauty market. The cultural influence of beauty *wanghong* has been further strengthened by Chinese social media platforms' expansion of their user base. For instance, when Sina Weibo, the largest Chinese microblogging platform, faced a decrease in users in 2013, it allocated more traffic to beauty *wanghong* (and other genres of *wanghong*) to attract users, which vastly increased their visibility (Jia & Han, 2020).

When beauty *wanghong* started to lead cultural trends in China, the enhanced consumer demand for beauty products placed increasing strain on the weak distribution infrastructure in certain regions. During this period, China's per capita GDP and the popularity of the internet had been consistently rising. With the growing spending power of Chinese consumers, more and more followers of beauty *wanghong* can afford to purchase beauty commodities. For instance, Huihui, who lives in a small town in Central China, is a huge fan of beauty blogs. She observed that,

> There is no cosmetics specialty store where I am living. I can't even buy everyday cosmetics, such as Maybelline's makeup products. Thanks to the internet, I can purchase the beauty products (recommended by my favorite beauty *wanghong*).

The contrast between strong consumer demand and poorly developed retail and distribution channels provides the precondition for the emergence of beauty *wanghong* e-commerce. In this context, new e-commerce corporations, especially Alibaba, began targeting every region of China, moving much faster than the established beauty giants. In this way, e-commerce has become a driving force behind the expansion of the beauty market.

The convergence of (beauty) *wanghong* and e-commerce

Chinese social media platforms, as scholars (de Kloet et al., 2019; Yu, 2019) observe, are leading in the "social plus" business model, which integrates social networking with entertainment in the context of e-commerce transactions. Their insight points out the essence of China's *wanghong* economy, that is, not only seeking public attention via sociality but also pursuing revenues via e-commerce. "Social" and "e-commerce" are therefore paired in daily praxis, which has been termed "social commerce" (*shejiao dianshang*) (Xu, 2019). It embodies a Chinese approach of "platformization" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), seamlessly driving the growth and profitability of platforms. Among the Chinese digital landscapes, Alibaba has emerged as a pioneer, adeptly acknowledging and harnessing the economic potential of *wanghong* through the social commerce model.

China has been a player in global capitalism since the Reform and Opening Up periods in the 1970s. As a result, China's economy surged in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Despite regional imbalances, China's GDP per capita increased from RMB 7,942 (around USD 1,073) in 2000 to RMB 85,698 (around USD 11,998) in 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2001, 2023). Influenced by beauty *wanghong* and popular culture, Chinese are more inclined to spend money on beauty products. Such changes contribute to a growing beauty market in China. What is at stake then is how consumers can access beauty products given weak distribution infrastructure in non-metropolitan regions. Alibaba seized the opportunity and filled this gap with its e-commerce platform, Taobao.

While multinational cosmetics corporations adopted a conservative attitude toward online sales in the 2000s, beauty retail became popular on Chinese e-commerce sites, especially Taobao. Many sellers, including beauty *wanghong*, have been setting up their e-stores to respond to the expanding demand for beauty products in China. This disparity between supply and demand distinguishes China from other mature markets in regions, such as Western Europe, North America and Japan, where longstanding distribution systems fulfill demand. By 2018, e-commerce had become the largest distribution channel for beauty products in China (Zhu, 2020), bringing cosmetics to those Chinese consumers who could not access them before. Many interviewees outside the major cities highlighted that they can now buy imported cosmetics from Japan and France, and have the products delivered to the door. Increased accessibility to beauty products allows more Chinese consumers to either become beauty *wanghong* themselves or be their audiences. Therefore, the development of beauty e-commerce reinforces the influence of beauty *wanghong*.

Having observed *wanghong*'s enormous potential to increase online sales, e-commerce platforms began partnering with and integrating social media platforms into their operations. At the beginning of the 2010s, Taobao had noticed a significant and constant flow of traffic from Sina Weibo (Han, 2020). *Wanghong*, who were active mainly on Sina Weibo at this time, were producing content to social media and generating online sales to Taobao via both cross-platform promotions and redirecting followers. Connected by these *wanghong*, Alibaba and Sina Weibo began a commercial partnership. In 2013, Alibaba spent USD 569 million acquiring an 18% stake in Sina Weibo, becoming its second-largest stakeholder (Ghosh & Ramakrishnan, 2013). This partnership was further strengthened when Alibaba faced the slow-down of e-commerce growth starting in 2014 (Han, 2020). In 2015, Alibaba held a *wanghong* economy media event and first used the term "*wanghong* economy" (*wanghong jingji*) to promote the economic potential of *wanghong* e-stores. While the 2000s witnessed the initial encounter between *wanghong* and e-commerce, the year 2015 signaled an institutionalized integration between *wanghong* and e-commerce.

The partnership between Alibaba and Sina Weibo has reinvented social media and e-commerce, creating a community of shared interests and a business ecosystem, namely, "social commerce" (Xu, 2019). In comparison with traditional commerce, social commerce can be a more efficient business model, since the social relations between *wanghong* and their followers carry not only public attention, but also a consumer-filtering mechanism. Moreover, at a technological level, Alibaba and Sina Weibo have removed inter-platform barriers and ensured that users can seamlessly shift between Taobao/Tmall and Sina Weibo. It turns out that the social commerce complex, consisting of beauty *wanghong*, social media platforms, and e-commerce platforms, is both effective and efficient: with the technical integration between Taobao and Sina Weibo, the gross sales of one *wanghong*'s beauty store can reach RMB 50 million (around USD 6.76 million) in 1 year(Y. Lv, 2019).

Following the success of the Sina Weibo-Taobao partnership, Alibaba continued to explore the social commerce model. In 2016, Alibaba launched Taobao Livestream, on which the beauty guru Li Jiaqi became famous. This development transforms social commerce from a "trans-platform" model (Sina Weibo-Taobao) to an "all-in-one" model (Taobao Livestream) (Han, 2022). On Taobao Livestream, beauty *wanghong* mix chatting with selling and blend sociality into e-commerce, allowing their fans to purchase mentioned commodities via one digital platform. For instance, during Li Jiaqi's livestreaming, he always shares real-life, everyday problems and how certain beauty products can fix them, tactfully releasing the links of these products. This enables his fans to make real-time comments and order commodities simultaneously during his livestreaming. To avoid the overtly commercialization of his livestreaming, Li Jiaqi tends to strengthen the social tie with his followers by frequently teaching them beauty techniques and interacting with other celebrities, rather than just focusing on selling products. Li Jiaqi's fans enjoy watching his livestreaming, even though they do not really need the products sold by him. This all-in-one model allows Taobao Livestream to accommodate social networking and e-commerce simultaneously, which increases Alibaba's control of the *wanghong* e-commerce.

Such a model is therefore best understood as a high integration of the various processes in the value chain of the *wanghong* economy, which makes e-commerce an integral part of being *wanghong*. The convergence of *wanghong* and e-commerce has also integrated the marketing and distribution sectors, finding a new way of realizing value. In this vein, beauty *wanghong* are now fulfilling the roles of marketing and distribution at the same time. The intimate relationship between *wanghong* and their followers enables beauty *wanghong* e-commerce to run smoothly.

Following Alibaba's success, many other Chinese internet companies developed their social-commerce business. For example, in 2018, short video-based social media platforms Douyin and Kuaishou both launched their livestreaming e-commerce services, allowing *wanghong* to monetize their fame through online retail. These two platforms become the major rivals of Taobao Livestream at the beginning of the 2020s. Similarly, another popular Chinese social media platform, Xiaohongshu (also known as Little Red Book), which is well-known for its integration of social networking with e-stores since it was launched in 2014, intensively invests in e-commerce live-streaming with *wanghong* in post-pandemic China (Chen, 2023). According to Melinda, a beauty brand marketing manager who now works for Jingdong (JD.com), the second largest e-commerce platform in China, “the company was very keen to reach Chinese female consumers, and therefore, it launched a new ‘beauty’ section on its app, featuring beauty *wanghong* to transform followers into consumers.” The convergence of *wanghong* and e-commerce greatly boosts user activities, but more importantly, it also “improves the efficiency of marketing, produces new brands, and expands consumption markets” (Xu, 2019).

The story of Eve and Emma

Eve (pseudonym) is a fashion entrepreneur, who is one of the most successful beauty *wanghong* in China, measured by income and popularity. By December 2023, she has more than 11 million followers on Sina Weibo. Eve started her career as a fashion model and blogger, which helped her gain a considerable fan base. In 2014, she established her own online shop on Taobao, selling female clothes and accessories. One of our interviewees Emma is a fashion enthusiast who studied fashion design and styling. She worked for Eve as a supply chain manager of her clothing brand for three years.

In 2015, Eve decided to start a beauty business in addition to her successful clothing brand. She appointed Emma to establish the new business and manage its online marketing. This was a difficult task since producing cosmetics requires intensive capital and specialized knowledge, but the well-established manufacturing base in China offers the possibilities for *wanghong* to explore this new market. As Emma explained:

> Owning a cosmetics brand can bring huge profits. In spite of these difficulties, profits are too substantial to be ignored. The profits are much higher than those for making clothes. For example, if we produce 10,000 tubes of lipstick, selling 40% of them can already cover all of the costs. For cosmetics, you can just post content about them and then “seed” [consumer desire], which are effective techniques in the beauty business.

Emma’s observations highlighted the fact that the maturity of China’s manufacturing sector and its position as the “world factory” facilitated by China’s Reform and Opening Up since 1978 (Coase & Wang, 2012) has provided the recent *wanghong* e-commerce a strong manufacturing foundation and consumer base. It is in this context that, although retailing cosmetics online can yield considerable profits, some ambitious *wanghong* like Eve go further, moving upstream in the beauty industry’s value chain. By establishing their own brands, *wanghong* are taking over each of the various stages of a product’s life, from design to distribution. Their start-up companies rarely set up new factories, for they have no need to do so: China has numerous original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and a wealth of experience providing outsourced production for multinational corporations (Wu et al., 2008). Thus, beauty *wanghong* can hire OEMs directly to produce cosmetics for their own brands.

Moreover, the 2008 global financial crisis pushed China to transform its export-oriented and investment-driven economic growth into a consumption-oriented and innovation-driven economy (Hong, 2017). In this context, China’s central government started to promote the integration of the internet industry and the manufacturing industry, which has given beauty *wanghong* a competitive edge. Facing stiff competition with international beauty giants such as Procter & Gamble and L’Oréal, Emma described her confidence in the *wanghong* economy:

> We respond to the market quicker. For instance, when we launch new collections, we can receive the feedback within two days, three days, or maximum one week from social media and e-commerce stores. This is a great advantage. In a very short time, you know your products' flaws and your customers' preferences, which will benefit new product development. We can make decisions on new products in minutes. In comparison, traditional firms need rounds of discussion, meetings, and debates. The process is cumbersome there.

The beauty brand that Eve and Emma operated has no offline counters and takes e-commerce as the only distribution channel. The brand's sales surpassed RMB 1 million (around USD 136,100) in just the first 40 seconds after its Taobao store was officially launched online. The orders were already packed and sent out early in the morning that day. Such scenes embody the coordination that combines the internet industry and the beauty manufacturing industry, as a result of China's ongoing economic transformation since the 1970s. In return, the *wanghong* economy also fuels China's economic transformation. In 2020, China's government announced the "dual circulation" development strategy—a concept introduced by President Xi Jinping—that prioritized domestic consumption instead of the export-oriented development pattern of the past (Xi, 2021). In this vein, the *wanghong* economy (re)activates the Chinese manufacturing industries that are losing opportunities in the international market and (re)stimulates domestic consumption.

Although China's economic transformation provides a positive environment for *wanghong* e-commerce, it does not guarantee that *wanghong* will remain at the center of the game. For example, the threshold for activating OEM production is high, which means not all beauty *wanghong* like Eve can pay for the service. Unlike ordering from consumer stores, factories demand a minimum quantity for orders, which far exceeds what an individual can consume. Hiring OEMs requires intensive start-up capital, storage space and sophisticated supply chain management. Many of our interviewees who worked as beauty *wanghong* or in their teams pointed out that some *wanghong* retired their e-commerce brands, because of stiff competition.

The general *wanghong* economy shares a future similar to that of China's economy as a whole. Given today's global economic decline and intensifying geopolitical tension, China's economic transformation faces immense challenges. Moreover, *wanghong* may not remain at the center, since stakeholders in capitalism, such as platforms and large manufacturing corporations seek control of the game. As such, the future of the *wanghong* economy deserves further investigation.

China's ongoing economic transformation has created possibilities and challenges for *wanghong* e-commerce and energized the new "social commerce" business model of Chinese social media platforms and e-commerce platforms. Reading the story of Eve and Emma against the backdrop of China's economic restructuring can help contextualize the emergence and development of the *wanghong* e-commerce.

Conclusion

Focusing on beauty *wanghong*, this article has examined the crucial encounter of *wanghong* and e-commerce in China's platformization process. We argue that, first, such convergence is based on the historical contrast between the strong consumption demand, activated by beauty *wanghong*, and the poorly developed retailing distribution channels of Chinese beauty industry; second, e-commerce platform Alibaba has boosted and institutionalized the integration of *wanghong* and e-commerce since the mid-2010s, creating the "social commerce model" that integrates social networking with entertainment in the context of e-commerce transactions; finally, China's ongoing economic transformation has created possibilities and challenges for *wanghong* e-commerce and energized this new "social commerce" business model. The articulation of the *wanghong* and e-commerce is a result—and also a stage—of the integration of the manufacturing industry and platform economy in China. It is a consequence, yet an embodiment of China's economic transformation.

As a case study, beauty *wanghong* are both representative and unique in their relationship with manufacturing industry and China's economic transformation. Looking into beauty *wanghong* can help elucidate the general nature and essence of *wanghong* economy in China: the distribution channel in the beauty industry tells a universal story about China's consumption market before and after the *wanghong* economy. By focusing on beauty *wanghong* and their relationship with the beauty industry, this article has foregrounded a representative development path through which many manufacturing industries actively engaged in China's *wanghong* e-commerce. The role of Taobao in the beauty sector resembles the role of e-commerce in many other sectors, necessitating *wanghong* for market expansion. Meanwhile, by concentrating on beauty *wanghong*, we have also highlighted the dependence of *wanghong* upon their relevant manufacturing industries.

This article, however, does not aim to cover exhaustively every aspect of China's *wanghong* economy. For instance, we have investigated the integration of *wanghong* and e-commerce through the example of Alibaba, looking at the dynamic process of making *wanghong* e-commerce in a specific historical context of China's economic restructuring. In doing so, we have set a socio-historical foundation to support future investigation and analysis of the ever-changing landscape of China's *wanghong* economy, within which newcomers (e.g., Douyin, Kuaishou and Xiaohongshu) have joined the game. By historicizing and contextualizing the case of China, this article has revealed how internet celebrity-abled economic activities unfold differently across societies. The *wanghong* economy is the outgrowth of China's economic transformation at particular historical conjuncture. However, it should not be understood as a fixed, essentialized phenomenon, as *wanghong* economy is continually driven and shaped by different forces, including social media platforms, popular influencers, consumer markets and manufacturing industries, which invites ongoing empirical research and reflections.

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