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Hood, Johanna

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*Peng Liyuan's humanitarianism: morality, politics, and eyeing  
the present and past*

Johanna Hood

[hood@ruc.dk](mailto:hood@ruc.dk)

**Abstract**

Celebrity in China is booming, yet the patterns, meanings and monitoring of Chinese celebrity and cause adoption both share and differ from Western forms, history and phenomenon. Using a case study on Peng Liyuan, China's most recent first lady, folk singer and military entertainer, this paper addresses some of the key moral and political functions that Peng is helping both reinforce and remake. I show how history and China's current modernization narratives shape understandings of and possibilities for celebrities in public and political life.

Key words: China, regional celebrity, Peng Liyuan, public health celebrity, first lady

# *Peng Liyuan's humanitarianism: morality, politics, and an eye to the present, an eye to the past*

**Johanna Hood**

## **Introduction**

Chinese celebrity involvement in public health advocacy and humanitarian endeavour is a tremendously active and rapidly developing field. In the last several years, Chinese celebrities have taken up the provision of welfare services, for example health advocacy, housing and education support, and frequently help mobilise donations and support for victims of natural disasters.

Most Chinese celebrities are now partnered to a particular cause, and many have their own charities and philanthrocapitalist ventures. For example, the towering NBA (National Basketball Association) superstar Yao Ming is expanding his projects to include disadvantaged children in both American and Chinese societies (see: [www.theyaomingfoundation.org](http://www.theyaomingfoundation.org)). Like Yao, there are many others who are extremely successful commercially and widely known in-and-outside China not just for their entertainment and sporting talents, but for their moral fortitude, and humanitarian (*cishan*) and public-benefit (*gongyi*) engagements.

Celebrity activism in China may also be understood as being shaped by both a local and non-local organizational focus and action. The more popular local engagement tends to focus on China's own disasters and misfortune. Overseas disasters are an area the state is more active in, for example, through the UN security and medical missions. Chinese celebrity engagement in the international sphere usually occurs through their adoption of a politically neutral cause. For example, animal rights campaigns and ambassadorial appointments. The group of sports and entertainment celebrities who are involved in campaigns against the slaughter and poaching of rare species typically for use in Chinese medicine also reflect a growing partnership between international priorities and local actors with international profiles who are willing to adopt such causes (WildAid 2013). However, these causes are far from local priorities and appetites.

At a glance Chinese celebrity involvement in humanitarian causes and philanthrocapitalism appears to resemble EuroAmerican trends. However, in the West, this practise has been established through and remains inextricable from, among many factors, colonial and postcolonialism, labour and resource exploitation and Western international development and good Samaritan practices and ideologies (Boltanski 1999; Edwards 2009; Richey & Ponte 2008). Although the Chinese socialist state has a long relationship with celebrity creation and engagement, China's traditions, celebrity status, and history of celebrity public engagement share very little with those of EuroAmerica. The political, social and historical foundations that separate Chinese and EuroAmerican societies and celebrity differ greatly. Additionally, Chinese celebrity participation in roles characterized as Western, like the United Nations (UN) goodwill ambassadorial programs that began in the mid-1950s and involve A-list celebrities, only recently have included a cohort of international celebrities, including Chinese celebrity members.

Due to these differences, the celebrity humanitarianism in China I explore in this paper shares little in common with Band Aid, Brand Aid or Brangelina-style publicity. It does not rely on images of suffering in the global south, as per Leslie Butt's theorizing of "suffering strangers" (Butt 2002), to mobilise sympathies or define national consciousness, development aid projects, or self-awareness, as it does in the West societies (Chouliaraki 2006; Chouliaraki 2012; Richey 2012). Rather, it is local and can be made sense of best in relation to historical circumstance; social status; gender ideology; national-international dynamics; disaster; local discourses on modernity and the state as a key player in celebrity affairs. It is these factors that help understand the makings, identities and kinds of functions celebrities assume, both present and past. Overlooking these factors leads to missing points of comparison and divergence between Chinese and Western celebrity, and thus important understandings about the particularities of regional celebrity and their function in China are not forged. I explore these in detail and argue that local formulations of fame and notoriety are central to meaningful understandings of celebrities' participation in public and political life.

### **The case of Peng Liyuan**

In this paper, I touch on the developments and local meanings influencing contemporary celebrity in China through the lens of the thirty year career of Peng

Liyuan, a successful and extremely well known Chinese celebrity. Using Peng's celebrity trajectory across historical, cultural, military, economic, and, in particular, political and moral fields, I build on the insights of Edwards, Jeffreys and contributors (2010) regarding celebrity in the Asia Pacific region. I further one of their key points—regions and actors do not simply adopt Western values and phenomenon but do so on their own terms and in ways that parallel and diversify practices associated with celebrity philanthrocapitalism and humanitarianism in the West. By exploring Peng's involvement in natural, health and political disaster I show how many of the above key factors have shaped her career and integration within China's political, celebrity and moral mechanisms. I show that any understanding of Peng's actions and trajectory as a public health and political celebrity, must be understood with a view to them. I then broadly reflect on the changes and continuities of celebrity affairs and meanings in China, and suggest ways we can interpret celebrities' actions in light of China's integration into global networks and trends, but with a view to the past that allows for the recognition of key social, moral and political differences that strongly shape contemporary Chinese and celebrity affairs.

I have chosen Peng Liyuan's career and her latest reception by Chinese society at a point of crisis in Chinese state legitimacy for two reasons. First, Peng's case allows us to understand the role of state, society, and also disasters (in this case HIV, earthquakes and a crisis of state legitimacy) in celebrity public engagement and in celebrity trust and soft power in China. Second, Peng also shows how celebrity participation in China has changed over time to track in similar EuroAmerican forms, and how the field of so-called humanitarianism offers new opportunities for those who seem to be 'simple' entertainment figures to accrue political, economic and cultural capital. In China, this means that some celebrities, particularly party member celebrities who are positioned within the state machinery, are able to take on political or politicized, and in the eyes of their fans, advocacy, roles, as Peng has done. The degree to which the state controls public cause adoption however, also forces us to look into China's past, to the socialist use of celebrities as moral actors to better understand the present. Although in the distant past, Chinese celebrities were low-status, they have always been enfolded into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) apparatus. Looking into this relationship and change to celebrity roles over time

brings a better understanding of how celebrities can be both modern and popular figures yet used to promote the state's agenda and interests.

### **Tracking Peng Liyuan's celebrity humanitarianism**

In November 2012, among the many other positions she filled, Peng Liyuan became China's "first lady" (*guomu*, lit. mother of the country). Since then, she has accompanied her husband, Xi Jinping, the latest Chairman of the CCP, on international visits and tours while "Peng Liyuan fever" (*Peng Liyuan re*) raged, and continues to do so, through China (Dan 2013; Pollak 2013).

Domestically, state and social media coverage, commentaries, blog posts and tweets, capitalise on Peng as a capable global citizen, talented singer, nurturing mother, and modern humanitarian-spirited woman. Reports of Peng's activities have mainly focused on international appearances and events. On her first global tour, Peng was shown meeting international dignitaries and at orphanages and schools in Russia and in Tanzania, places of key significance in China's socialist history. As 'mother of the nation,' Peng's visit fits into a setting where China has typically relied on understandings of socialist brotherhood in the "third world" (*disan shijie*) and of its own minority cultures to define national consciousness and build national and global power relations and hierarchies. In this schema, ethnic Han Chinese are positioned, through for example political discourse, cultural and economic exchange and local tourism, as the more advanced brothers and leaders of socialism and socialist unity and prosperity. This is apparent in China's overseas scholarship programs and development aid, and also in what Louisa Schein (2002) describes as internal orientalist Han views of the 'less developed' minority groups.

Peng was widely celebrated in China for her overseas appearances and for her elegance and sense of fashion and support of local designers (Global Times 2013). She also attended the April 2013 Bao'ao forum, where she lunched with Bill Gates, and according to him, they chatted about how to improve world poverty (Gates 2013). Perhaps most the most convincing evidence for her rising popularity and the ways in which she embodies a new China, was the furor among China's netizens caused by Michelle Obama's decision to attend her daughter's birthday party over greeting Peng on her first official visit to the USA (Duowei 2013).

Although Peng now is frequently and awkwardly compared in international media to Michelle Obama and Kate Middleton, and features in most major newspapers and magazines, such as Forbes and Time Magazine's lists of the world's most powerful women (Beech 2013; Canada Net 2013; Forbes 2013a; Pollak 2013) this was not always the case. The sudden—albeit belated— increase and recognition of Peng by Western media meant that anyone with any knowledge of Peng—myself included— received requests for media interviews about her past and future prospects (Boc 2013; Gardner 2012; Lim 2012; Makinen 2012; Tobon Tobon 2013). Interestingly, Peng does not feature on Forbes' western-centric list of the world's most powerful celebrities (Forbes 2013b), which is illustrative of different interpretations of her fame. In many pieces, understandings of Peng as a celebrity are often cursory and separated from the very factors that make her celebrity unique and important to understanding contemporary Chinese politics and society.

### **Peng's local track record and rise to fame**

Before this moment and international attention, however, Peng was widely known and celebrated locally for the myriad roles she successfully played in China. She was a military entertainer in the 1980s in the Qianwei Song and Dance Troup of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Jinan Military Area Command and the PLA General Political Department, and was China's first master's degree graduate from the Central Conservatory of Music in ethnomusicology in the late 1980s. She went on to become one of China's most established and celebrated folk singers.

Since the early 2000s, Peng has worked with China's Ministry of Health and in public-private and local-international partnerships in ways that have allowed her to become an authoritative public health celebrity (China Ministry of Health & China Central Television Advertising Department 2005). It was in this context where I first 'met' Peng Liyuan, over a decade ago when I began to investigate celebrity involvement in HIV issues in China. This was at a time when most ordinary Chinese did not know who Peng's husband was, and when Peng's public appearances and any knowledge of her were largely shaped by understandings of her vocal talent and/or connection to the party state and military. This was because since the 1980s she had performed stirring patriotic ditties and folk songs in mass political commemorations, and on the China Central Television station's annual Spring Festival TV program

(known fondly as the *chunwan* 春晚, an viewing event which practically every Chinese citizen watches during the Chinese New Year festival), while her public service was directed at military troop entertainment and morale boosting. She is still known and revered for these roles today, and was promoted to the position of military general (of letters) and is a member of China's People's Consultative Congress. As I show below, it is by considering the state, disaster, gender, and changing roles and hopes for China, that helps make best sense of the many dimensions of her fame.

### **Peng's celebrity: conforming to and challenging history and gender ideology**

Like Western celebrity, where gender often guides female celebrities to champion issues linked to the domestic sphere such as children, literacy and health (Repo & Yrjölä 2011), gender also impacts on Chinese celebrity. In China, gender plays less a role in cause adoption (as the "adoption" process is largely influenced by political considerations) while gendered understandings of power and ideas about actions appropriate for women play a significant role in shaping expectations of behaviour and roles. Female politicians, celebrities or not, are burdened by a history of discrimination, failure and fear, and changes to this understanding must deal with a powerful ideology and understanding of women and power that stretches back centuries.

Within these longstanding views, women are not destined to be leaders, and those who are, are carefully scrutinized, judged harshly and easily scapegoated. In spite of the ideals, over time many exceptional women have risen to leadership positions but often through controlling or disguising themselves as men or relying on male patronage. The failings of Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Zedong<sup>1</sup> and former Shanghai actress, and the last Empress Dowager who ruled until the collapse of China's last Dynasty in 1911, are well cited and illustrate these hurdles. As a member of the notorious gang of four, Jiang Qing encouraged social and political upheaval and havoc during the Cultural Revolution (the late 1960s to mid 1970s). Eventually, the gang, Jiang included, were arrested in 1976 and she was tried for her role. The trial was the first to be televised on national television (Terrill 1992) in a public yet state-scripted drama. Such an event has only been repeated once since, with the 2013 trial

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<sup>1</sup> Mao led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to victory following a bitter civil war and assumed leadership of the CCP in 1949, until Deng Xiaoping took over and began economic reforms in the late 1970s.

of Bo Xilai, fallen politburo member and former ‘red’ mayor of Chongqing. The publicity of Jiang’s ‘crimes’ and her failure to behave in the courtroom reinforced the widespread negative view of celebrity, female leaders, and also foreshadowed the increasing role that technology and politics would play in the formulation of and change to celebrity in China.

Ironically, despite the increasingly harsh tactics Xi’s government is pursuing to maintain political power and social and economic stability, Peng remains widely endeared to the public. In what can be seen as a challenge to the above ideals Peng continues to produce public service announcements, appears in educational posters and billboards and accompanies her husband on state visits overseas. This is a major departure from the public life of the first ladies who preceded her, and also from the traditional status of celebrities which prohibited them from being considered moral actors. Entertainers were long part of a class of people (the *jianmin* and *yuehu*, the mean or hereditary debased status households, constituted by entertainers of all kinds), who were not accorded full citizenship until major legal reforms in the early 1720s (Sommer 2000). However, they remained stigmatized in ways similar to prostitutes and beggars (Schak 1988) until in larger cities numerous courtesans and dans, film actors and actresses began to rise in fame and subsequently status in urban cities like Shanghai, and although they had huge followings they could not be considered to be moral actors like some celebrities in socialist China (Wu 2004).

Although times are changing, and Peng’s popularity remains high, this past undoubtedly matters. Peng’s part in helping find China’s place in the new world order and therefore in achieving the CCP’s “dream” (*meng*) and “revival” (*fluxing*) of the country and its people,<sup>2</sup> allows her to be increasingly involved in the remaking of understandings of women, celebrity and power. All indications to date suggest that she must continue to be an exemplary citizen, and tread carefully across China’s gender ideology and historical record and memory, especially due to her proximity to political power. That Peng is maintaining some of her public persona in spite of her new political status is of significant interest to the study of her celebrity. As I show below, it is by considering the state, disaster, and changing roles and hopes for China, that helps make best sense of Peng’s fame.

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<sup>2</sup> Dream and revival are two of the political terms that Xi Jinping introduced in his address to the nation (Xi 2013).

## **Backing Peng's public persona: considering the state**

Peng Liyuan initially became involved in non-entertainment based causes beyond the military in the early 2000s. From what I understand, her public profile has always been shaped by the state. Her résumé includes extensive work with migrant health and social acceptance in urban areas in a series of campaigns and public meet, greet and perform appearances, including many around the Beijing 2008 Olympics. In these she focused her messages on integration and on tuberculosis (TB) prevention and treatment. She also is more widely known for her participation in HIV anti-stigma public service announcements, posters, and interviews, together with a cohort of television and entertainment celebrities who are also CCP members.

As a public figure who gained notoriety through the CCP military, Peng's history is not unique. The CCP has typically played, and continues to do so, a very strong role in defining celebrity phenomenon and scope, in ways that differ over time. During the 1950s-1980s, most celebrities rose to fame through official channels as revolutionary singers, dancers and entertainers (Edwards & Jeffreys 2010). They would perform in socialist productions with explicit political messages, such as in revolutionary ballets. Then, it was not necessarily celebrity actors, but moral models who became celebrated in ways that elevated their status to celebrity standing. Moral models were a mainstay of the government under Mao, and any literature and media during this period, and thus the celebrities this fostered, had to be politically and morally didactic (King 2013). This practice of recognition for exemplary behaviour continues today. Real and fictional characters and citizens who commit good deeds are popularized (Yan 2008; Wood 2013) and recognized with publically displayed plaques and certificates (Anagnost 1997). Although these moral models seem to have unbelievable levels of virtuousness, like celebrities, they grow out of a tradition of moral exemplars in Chinese fiction and social and political ideology (Chen 1964; Hsia 1968; Sheridan 1968; Sheridan 1976; Stranahan 1983; Wang 2003). These have meaningful histories and should be taken seriously.

Even today the role the state plays in celebrity public affairs should not be underestimated. The Chinese Ministry of Culture is able to decide who can perform and under what kind of circumstances. These decisions allow, for example, George Michael to be one of the first Western celebrities to play for a Chinese audience in 1985 following the commencement of China's open door policies. They forces others

to change their “lewd” and “vulgar” outfits, as happened to Britney Spears. Those who fail to adhere to Ministry guidelines have their tours and causes blocked for undermining sovereign affairs or political misconduct, such as Sting, Rolling Stones, and even iTunes (Fiveash 2008), and Lady Gaga and Katie Perry (Lopez 2011) experienced.

On the contrary, those who adhere to state ideals are rewarded handsomely, such as Jackie Chan and Yao Ming, both of whom were promoted to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference at the recent political meetings in March in Beijing—and have close ties to Chinese business communities. Chan recently was given permission to open a Jacky Chan theme park (J. Zhang 2013) and has made several controversial statements awkwardly interpreted outside China as anti-democratic and pro-CCP (AFP 2013; Foreman 2009; Lee & Cheung 2012; New Tang Dynasty Television 2013).

Peng’s relationship with the state is slightly different in that it only began after the fall of the gang of four in the mid-1970s and with the consolidation of political power by Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping, the latter as chairman of the CCP, a position he held until the mid-1990s. It has been suggested (and published prior to Xi taking on the chairmanship of the CPP) that Peng was unable to enter the military as an entertainer due to her family’s class background, which is reported to have contained Nationalist, the main political rival to the CPP, supporters. She was only able to enlist at the age of 18 (Liu 2011). The most current narratives published about Peng stress less about her class background and more about how her significant training, dedication at a young age to her talent, and family support served as key to enabling her rapid rise despite her rural origins (A. Zhang 2013).

Due to the perceived ability of celebrities to “get twice the result with half the effort” (taxblog 2007), the Chinese state continues to play an enduring role in inviting celebrities to endorse causes of local significance. China has a tax ambassador in both human and cartoon form (taxblog 2007; Huanqiu.com 2011), a green ambassador employed by China’s Environmental Protection Foundation and an ambassador for volunteers (Xinhua News 2010a; Xinhua News 2010b). Celebrities invited by government bureaus and bodies to endorse causes, as HIV shows, typically have an official relationship to the state, usually as party members, and a clean moral slate. They maintain an uncontroversial track record, or they are persuaded to collaborate on

issues of concern to national stability and prosperity, as the effort between a controversial documentarian and the Chinese Ministry of Health over the HIV-based documentary *Together*, and Peng's involvement with HIV, TB and anti-smoking also illustrates.

### **Crises and celebrity: environment, health, CCP credibility and modernity**

There are several key issues that affect Peng's celebrity humanitarianism and the ways in which the state promotes and society understands her celebrity. As mentioned, what Peng adopts as first lady will be monitored by the state, however the state has little real control over how she is received by China's massive netizen community inside and outside China. Although her celebrity humanitarianism is at first glance uncontroversial, it is and always has been most visible at times of crisis, be it environmental, public health or about party state legitimacy. Her presence typically draws attention away from the more structural problems and failings of the state.

Below I will review some of the issues Peng has championed or been involved in, and provide a history of her local and international humanitarianism through these moments of crisis to help make sense of the present. I focus on earthquakes, health disasters, and a Red Cross scandal and petition that was circulated to have her take over the organization. I do so to show both how her celebrity is understood and used in public and state spheres, and that it cannot be understood independently of these factors.

#### **Peng and environmental disaster**

In 2008 a major earthquake struck one of China's interior provinces, Sichuan. According to official estimates, between 70,000 to 97,000 people were killed, millions were displaced, and a million and a half were rescued by emergency crews (Xinhua News Agency 2008). The numbers of deaths were exacerbated by poor weather, mountainous terrain, and the shoddy construction of public facilities such as schools. The lack of quality was likely caused by corruption and a failure of officials to enforce building codes. Inquiries to pursue justice are largely suppressed, and many have been imprisoned as a result of attempts to do so, such as Tan Zuoren, an activist who became widely known following his imprisonment.

Along with Peng's daughter, Xi Mingze, who interrupted her studies at Harvard to fly back and volunteer to help with relief efforts, Peng was shown to be very active in Sichuan's recovery. Reports stressed the long hours and the week they spent in rural areas, and how both Peng and her daughter blended in like regular people. Peng also is quoted to have donated large sums of money, over 200,000 yuan, and was active in morale boosting performances in areas devastated by the quake (CCTV 7 2008; X. Zhang 2013). Peng's and other celebrities' activities received considerable coverage and sometimes scrutiny (Jeffreys 2010).

The relative openness that characterized Wenchuan media coverage should be noted, particularly in comparison to previous disasters such as the Tangshan earthquake that were not widely reported on despite killing almost 300,000 people. However, attention to celebrity presence in Sichuan, like Peng, Jet Li, and Yao Ming, help shade the more problematic issues that characterized the earthquake's death toll, in that it disproportionately affected lower class Chinese and those that suffer most deeply from the effects of corruption (Divjak 2008; Beech 2009; Associated Press 2009).

#### **HIV/AIDS: caring, industry making, and rewriting history**

The causes Chinese celebrities adopt and the stakeholders in their cause adoption show the complexity of local celebrity. Celebrity involvement in HIV is illustrative of this and Peng has been involved in it for over a decade. Peng has advocated for reducing stigma around HIV and TB, has participated in anti-smoking campaigns and worked with a variety of local and international organizations for these causes and public awareness. At a time when Peng's appearances tapered off domestically in the mid-to-late 2000s, her international profile began to increase through her commitment to health advocacy. This coincided with the rise of Xi Jinping to political prominence, with his 2003-2007 chairing of the 25 member politburo (People's Daily Online 2007), and with China's push to establish a presence in International Organizations.

HIV was one of the earliest public health problems or disasters to involve celebrities, and it was the Chinese Ministry of Health that played a critical role in encouraging a group of key celebrities to endorse anti-stigma campaigns and public service announcements. The Ministry of Health was also key to the recognition of celebrity and public intellectual philanthropy, as many were awarded titles such as "AIDS heroes" (*aizi yingxiong*) and "AIDS Ambassadors" (*aizi dashi*) (Chen et al. 2004). What followed this initial involvement has been a more diverse set of causes and

campaigns, but what must be underscored is that without state support and encouragement, celebrity humanitarianism may not have become fashionable. The Ministry, or the Chinese state more broadly, must be recognized for the important role it has played. They have an unacknowledged, liberalizing impact as well as have opened up new possibilities and new uses for celebrities by the CCP.

Within Peng's development of her international profile, she champions issues of concern for global public health bodies and priorities. In her capacity as a global ambassador, Peng appears at key events. She spoke publicly at Toronto's AIDS conference (2006), where she received an award for her commitment to HIV. After lengthy and significant negotiations, she accepted the World Health Organization's invitation to an ambassadorial appointment in 2010, which also involved appearing at the Vienna AIDS conference alongside actor Pu Cunxin in an "Eye on China" session (Whittaker 2010).<sup>3</sup> The interview was broadcast on the CCTV network and online, and brought an empathetic, intelligent and human touch to her work with HIV and China's AIDS orphans, and one that did not involve folk singing or entertainment (Chau 2010). Her involvement in these issues shows both how they became critical to political power, and also the changing nature of celebrity in China. Bolstered by celebrity support, these issues have drawn billions of yuan in development aid and corporate social responsibility funding into the country.

Following Xi's ascension to chair the CCP, a remarkable PSA was released on World AIDS Day which pushed Peng Liyuan back into local media space in very significant ways. Directed by a famed filmmaker and husband of a Chinese UNAIDS ambassador and produced by the Ministry of Health, the 9 minute long PSA showed the transformation of the children affected by HIV and AIDS Peng had been working with in Anhui Province over the past decade, and just like Xi's speech and new political rhetoric, their hopes and dreams for the future. In the PSA's flashbacks to the past, to Peng's first involvement with the children (Yang 2006), they are shown to suffer physical decline and social ostracism without her care. However, in the present they appear to be happy and healthy, and Peng is radiant, caring, and beautifully and appropriately dressed. She touches, plays, and cares for these HIV positive and/or orphaned children. As in the past, Peng is a consistently caring force and moral model

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<sup>3</sup> Thank you to my colleague, Emilio Dirlikov, for providing me with information on the processes behind her ambassadorial appointments.

in their lives, and although the PSA unfolds through a song, *Together Forever*, it is her gentle touch and gentle motherly nature, and a reliance on her reputation, which are critical for its anti-stigma message (Gu 2012).

The release of the PSA was followed by a meeting between Chinese civil society organizations and the new premier Li Keqiang. Li was the acting and later governor of Henan Province, the epicentre of rural HIV by blood-selling infections (China Internet Information Center 2007). He allegedly suppressed news of the blood-selling epidemic, and caused major delays in responding to the situation and ultimately many avoidable deaths (New Tang Dynasty Television 2011). Although these actions are as close to an apology that HIV victims can expect to receive from the Chinese state, and pay lip service to the Global Fund's demand that China involve civil society in HIV programs or risk a repeat of its funding suspension, it is with Peng's help that the historical narrative of HIV in rural China is masked and transformed. Furthermore, by capitalizing on the gendered motivation of her work with infected children and orphans—it is her maternal instinct and motherly nature that motivate her—she successfully detracts attention from the state and Li's responsibility for the epidemic among the populations she works with, poor farmers and orphaned children, and the state's role in their sick and left-behind status (Chen 2010; Wang 2012). In this, the Chinese state's profit from the blood industry and belated involvement in the control of HIV is made invisible through Peng.

#### **Peng, new forms of trust and the Chinese Red Cross**

In late April 2013, I was in Hong Kong at a conference on humanitarianism when another earthquake struck Sichuan province. After considerable political and social debate about what was actually happening to donations to China (Lau 2013), the Hong Kong legislature belatedly approved a donation of 100 million HKD to official relief efforts. It passed with a 2/3 majority vote but there was considerable popular debate and opposition (Lee & Ng 2013).

Meanwhile across the border in mainland China, the Chinese Red Cross' public and virtual appeals for assistance were also met by large-scale resistance. Within hours of the earthquake, 140,000 netizens took to posting “go away” or “f-off” (滾 *gun*) and an uncountable number of thumbs down symbols on the site until it was blocked for comment (Sohu IT 2013). Due to the lack of trust and transparency in the Red Cross,

many individuals instead choose to donate to the efforts of the non-governmental charities like martial arts movie star Jet Li's One Foundation, which had already moved to separate its efforts from state organizations like the Red Cross in 2011 (Wu & Wu 2011). As a result, the One Foundation received more in donations than did any state organization or Government Organized Non Governmental Organization (backchina 2013).

The reason for the widespread public resentment is that China's Red Cross has been plagued by a series of scandals too lengthy to discuss in this article, known as the 'Guo Meimei scandals'. The scandals showed problems to exist in the Red Cross that mirrored the corrupt and nepotistic behavior of CCP officials, who are widely known and despised for using their political status to curry favors and lucrative contracts for personal and family enrichment. The Chinese Red Cross is not a member of the International Red Cross (ICRC), and is thus largely perceived to be an arm of the state now in desperate need of reform and monitoring (Ma & Kan 2013; Mao 2013).

These scandals were situated in a social context of moral crisis and at a time when ideas about a national Chinese moral character and the need for charitable action and voluntary involvement in Chinese society have encouraged celebrity participation in philanthropic and public benefit efforts. This has developed due to myriad factors, including nation-wide insecurity about China's place in the world order, the desire to modernize, and the memory of Chinese humiliation at the hands of Imperial forces like Japan, Britain and Germany (Jing 2006). Now, the Chinese volunteer association has recorded exponential growth (Hoffman 2012), and laws and social campaigns mentioned above are changing to encourage a spirit of helping those less fortunate, a change much less political in its orientation (Li 2013). In times of record unemployment, students also turn to volunteer activities in record numbers, to both feel good about their contribution to modernizing society and also as a means to boost their resumes. This trend means that for the modern Chinese celebrity, building charities or donating a portion of one's acting and advertising revenues to good causes is hip, and increasingly expected (Huanqiu.com 2011; Ding 201x). As an upstanding celebrity, Peng has become a moral model for modern times.

Although the Red Cross scandal created an immediate celebrity of Guo Meimei, what is of interest here is the afterlife of this event and Peng's place in the proposed solution. After the scandal was brought to light and inconclusively investigated, and

following debate about the credibility of the Red Cross after the April 2013 earthquake, a petition to have Peng Liyuan head and reform the Chinese Red Cross was circulated and supported in China's blogging community and news media (China Times 2013; Luo 2013). Posts and commentaries about the petition typically expressed strong support for Peng's previous humanitarian work, the positive impression she'd made as China's first lady in Africa and Russia, her classy style and success as an engaging public figure, her virtue and her maternal nature (backchina 2013; GuHantai net 2013; Mao 2013). Such support, which disengages her political reality, recognizes her success in the tradition of time-honored moral models mentioned earlier, and suggests how due to this and her experience within humanitarian events that she should help reform the very system she is part of vis-a-vis what is thought to be a crumbling and corrupt state institution. "I sincerely hope that Peng Liyuan will change the Chinese Red Cross to be more transparent, and will rebuild the [now tainted] image of Chinese philanthropy" (Hubei university student in backchina 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Celebrity humanitarianism and philanthrocapitalism can appear in the public imagination, to be a free and open field with little other than the individual celebrity's good will to shape it. This is clearly not the case, and certainly not in China. But it is structured by different forces than those elsewhere. An examination of China's history and the role of history, gender, morality and the state in celebrity cause activism have brought these differences to the fore. In China today, among the CCP's more stern measures to maintain control, celebrity activism can be considered a new form of soft power and state engagement with non-traditional, i.e. cultural stakeholders (Peng 2009).

Until very recently celebrities may have been party members but had little real political power, which suggests that changes signal the beginning of a new technique to maintain power and international and local credibility amidst a crisis of legitimacy at home. Peng Liyuan's case illustrates the very clear role that the state plays in celebrity affairs, without which she would not have had the opportunity for such a diverse humanitarian profile. Peng connects with all walks of life in China through her wardrobe, her graciousness, her talents, and her record of dedication to the alleviation of suffering (*weiwen*) of Chinese, from earthquake affected areas to

children orphaned by HIV. Her philanthropic image is maintained through her engagement with these issues at home and overseas. Yet, we can also see how through her public profile and activities, that she has developed a strong relationship to the Chinese public increasingly defined on trust and hope, in an apolitical and highly gendered consciousness. Thus the soft power flows both ways, as increasing trust in celebrities remakes their social role.

Yet how Peng is favored and interpreted are out of the state's control. The widespread social commentary on and value of Peng's celebrity, and the support for her to assume a greater political role, for example the petition circulated online suggesting she take over the scandal-ridden Chinese Red Cross, are increasingly tied to the Chinese people's sense of modernity and a crisis of public trust in the state, of which Peng is somehow, ironically, seen to be largely independent of. Now Peng is not simply a celebrity, but a player in redefining China's modernity and moral character, and is thus a player in helping address a crisis of CCP credibility. It is here where Peng is potentially of the most use to the state, as many netizen comments about Peng's moral fortitude and untainted background reflect.

Peng's public profile and engagements also signify a major reversal of China's *guomu* role, which point again to the changes in Chinese society and celebrity roles that are afoot. As the previous three wives of the CCP chairmen have stayed almost completely out of public view, Peng is thus seen to be creating a modern role for herself, and in doing so is challenging gendered understandings of power as well as those of celebrity. As Peng takes on a more prominent role in helping shape what Xi coined as the "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people, the China dream" (Xi 2013), the public perception of Peng Liyuan in her new role signifies a remaking of gendered roles in the context of political power in China yet a continued reliance on gendered understandings of motherhood and morality to do so.

Despite the capricious nature of trust in Peng, this sense of trust is and will prove useful as the party endeavours to refashion itself as a more transparent and trustworthy body and address the growing crisis of its legitimacy. Typical of Western celebrity advocacy, Peng serves to draw superficial attention to particular issues (Littler 2008; Richey 2012; Kapoor 2013), but her fame does not allow greater structural problems of inequality that are so fundamental to the causes she champions to be raised. Thus, Peng shows us that to understand and interpret celebrity actions

and meanings in contemporary China, it is important to stay apace of China's changing moral and political worlds, with a view to remembering political celebrity and moral models of the past and allowing them space to imprint the present.

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