

Women Writers as Cultural Entrepreneurs: Anni Baobei

Daria Berg and Giorgio Strafella,
University of St. Gallen

Thought Paper for the Conference on
'Popular Literature in Contemporary China: Production, Diffusion and Genres'
University of Geneva, 16-18 June 2017

Introduction

This study aims to explore the role of women as cultural entrepreneurs (*wenhua qiyejia* 文化企业家) in China's rising cultural industries (*wenhua chanye* 文化产业) and new media. As a case study we analyse the rise of Anni Baobei 安妮宝贝 (Annie Baby, alias Li Jie 励婕, b. 1974), one of China's first new Internet writers who became a literary sensation at the turn of the twenty-first century. She is worth a closer look as she started a new trend in cultural production and also epitomizes China's new women cultural entrepreneurs. Although she counts among China's most successful writers in reform-era China, there is a dearth of analytical studies of her works and career that this study aims to redress.

China boasts the world's largest Internet population with 618 million netizens and a 46% penetration rate, rapidly increasing the number of Chinese citizens able to communicate through non-official channels. Focusing on Anni Baobei, this paper aims to analyse first, how China's cybersphere creates a new type of celebrity; and second, how her online writings constitute a new kind of web-based media spectacle, negotiating government censorship by shunning political topics while catering to popular taste and consumer demands.

Analysis will focus on the main characteristics of Anni Baobei's writings, investigating how they debate Chinese women's new dreams and nightmares in the twenty-first century. The media spectacle exists on three levels: first, as the public spectacle of female self-fashioning, casting the new woman writer as a media celebrity; second, as a literary reflection on economic reforms and globalisation; and third, as the epitome of the social rise of China's new women cultural entrepreneurs.

This research is important because it sheds new light on China's changing ideals of womanhood in the age of consumerism, digital media and globalisation. This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the cultural and social negotiations surrounding female self-fashioning and the changing notions of womanhood in China's new mediasphere.

The Writer

Anni Baobei counts among the pioneering writers who started as an Internet author and became a 'consumption celebrity'—in Guy Debord's (1992) sense of the word—whose personae epitomise the many facets of consumer culture. She began publishing her works on the literary website *Rongshu xia* 榕树下 (*Under the Banyan Tree*) in 1998 and became one of China's most famous and highest-paid writers. She later joined the staff of the website and from 2000 the website Under the Banyan Tree hosted a regular column in which her writings appeared 'for kindred spirits to read'.

In 2000 she also published her first volume in print, *Gaobie Wei'an* 告别薇安 (Goodbye, Vivian), a collection of short stories that included some of the works she had previously published online. The book went on to sell an estimated half a million copies and turned her into a household name among young Chinese readers. After publishing several successful novels under the name of Anni Baobei, among them *Lianhua* 莲花 (Lotus, 2006), the author announced via *Weibo* in 2014 that she would adopt the Buddhist-inspired pen name "Qingshan 庆山". With her new Buddhist-inspired take on travel writings, Anni Baobei alias Qingshan has reinvented herself

for a new audience while catching on a yet another new cultural trend in post-socialist China.

Cultural Entrepreneur

The term ‘cultural entrepreneur’ (*wenhua qiyejia*) has caught on in recent years to describe individuals involved in the commercialisation as well as production of culture and entertainment. This identity at ‘the intersection of culture and cash’, to use Elisabeth Currid’s words,¹ emerged in China around the late 1990s as part of a wider phenomenon known as ‘*xia hai* tide’. At the time, numerous state-employed knowledge workers abandoned or neglected their safe but unremunerative jobs ‘within the system’ to become entrepreneurs, many — but not all — moving towards China’s budding ‘cultural industries’. China’s literati looked askance as the public figure of Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮 — an admired author of ‘introspective literature’ (*fansi wenxue*) whom they considered a ‘lofty-minded intellectual’ — became the CEO of a commercial film studio around the mid-1990s. In their eyes he became the symbol of *zhishi fenzi* surrendering to money-worship.

Today, even though Xi Jinping seems to echo those voices from twenty years ago when he chastises authors and filmmakers who put money before socialist values, attitudes has changed remarkably. The political and cultural establishment nowadays celebrates ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ with galas and awards, such as those organised since 2012 by *Guangming Daily* for the ‘Top Personalities of China’s Cultural Industries’. The list of *wenhua qiyejia* selected for such prestigious events, however, includes few creators and authors of culture, very few emerging figures, and mostly top executives and founders of large companies in the cultural industries. Only two out of thirty of them were women in the list published by *Guangming Daily* in 2016; they are Mao Jianqing 毛剑青, CEO of a media and entertainment group and Guizhou-based politician, and stage director Wang Chaoge 王潮歌. The compilation and publication of lists like this reflects not only the profound transformation in how

¹ Elisabeth Currid (2007) *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art and Music Drive New York City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 37.

the politico-cultural establishment views individuals who aim at extracting maximum market value from cultural production and consumption, but also the stated CCP policy of control-cum-cooptation vis-à-vis cultural industry entrepreneurs.

Our working definition of ‘cultural entrepreneur’ differs from the current mainstream definition of *wenhua qiyejia* in China. Cultural entrepreneur *avant la lettre* Wang Shuo 王朔 (b. 1958) is closer to the type of figure our project intends to focus on, i.e. individuals who are both creators of ‘cultural products’ as well as businessmen and businesswomen, and whose work in both realms bears relevance to our understanding of the present and future of Chinese society, politics and culture. In a 2013 paper on the Industrial Revolution in Europe, economist Joel Mokyr defines ‘cultural entrepreneur’ as ‘individuals that add to the menus [of beliefs and cultural preferences] from which others choose’.² Having defined ‘culture’ as ‘a system of beliefs, values and preferences’ that shape systems of ‘formal and informal rules and incentives’ (Mokyr 2013: 1), Mokyr redefines figures such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Isaac Newton (1642-1727) as ‘entrepreneurs’: ‘What matters for my purposes is that for a small number of individuals, the beliefs of others are not given but can be changed. [...] Their function is much like entrepreneurs in the realm of production: individuals who refuse to take the existing technology or market structure as given and try to change it and [...] benefit personally in the process’ (Mokyr 2013: 2).

Anni Baobei is one such figures, as she pioneered and achieved commercial success in a sector — Internet literature — that has ‘added to the menu’ of the Sinophone cultural marketplace. Similar to bestselling popular novelists Wang Shuo, Wei Hui 卫慧 (b. 1973) and the Japanese bestselling author Yoshimoto Banana 吉本ばなな (b. 1964), Anni Baobei turns the slogan ‘to serve the people’ into the concept of the author as a waiter/waitress in consumer society, serving her customers what they want to consume.

² Joel Mokyr (2013) Cultural Entrepreneurs and the Origins of Modern Economic Growth, *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 61.1, 2.

In sum, this study will use the example of Anni Baobei to show that the issue of cultural entrepreneurship is not purely an economic one. Cultural entrepreneurs can influence beliefs and values both in a transformative — by changing our ‘cultural menu’ — and in a conservative fashion. This project aims to provide insights into the cultural and political implications of their rise.