

Zhang Ziyi and China's Celebrity–Philanthropy Scandals

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Zhang Ziyi is arguably China's most famous female celebrity, being ranked after basketball player, Yao Ming, at number two on *Forbes's* (mainland) China Celebrity List in 2009 and 2010 ('2010 Forbes China Celebrity List' 2010).¹ *Forbes* issued its inaugural list of China's top 100 power-ranking celebrities in 2004, demonstrating the growing importance of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in global cultural markets. As with the US list, China's celebrities are ranked by combining income from salaries and endorsements with the number of times they appear in various media formats (Jeffreys & Edwards 2010: 2).

Zhang Ziyi rose to international fame via her starring role in Ang Lee's martial arts movie, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). A global cinematic phenomenon in 2000 and 2001, *Crouching Tiger* earned more than US\$200 million worldwide, becoming the most commercially successful foreign-language film in US history and the first Chinese-language film to find a broad American audience (Klein 2004: 18). Since then, Zhang has gone on to enjoy critical acclaim for her starring roles in Hollywood films, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* (dir. Rob Marshall 2005), and in Chinese-language blockbusters, such as *Hero* (dir. Zhang Yimou 2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (dir. Zhang Yimou 2004). Voted as one of the 'most beautiful people in the world' by many fashion and celebrity magazines, she has appeared as the 'face' of

¹ *Forbes* extended its China list in 2010 to include celebrities from Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as mainland China. Ranked at number five, Zhang Ziyi was the first-ranked female celebrity on the list and the first female celebrity from mainland China. The order of the 2010 list is as follows: 1) Jackie Chan, actor, Hong Kong; 2) Jay Chou, singer, Taiwan; 3) Andy Lau, singer, actor, Hong Kong; 4) Yao Ming, sports, mainland China; and 5) Zhang Ziyi, actor, mainland China (Cheng Long 2010).

international cosmetics giant, Maybelline, and as an ‘ambassador’ for OMEGA Watches (‘Actress Zhang Ziyi’ n.d.; ‘Our Models’ n.d.; ‘Zhang Ziyi’ 2010).



Zhang Ziyi at the 2006 BAFTAs in London. © Caroline Bonarde Ucci. (Creative Commons).

As an A-list celebrity, Zhang Ziyi has been the focus of praise and criticism in China. In 2006, Zhang Yiwu, a literature professor at Peking University famously summed up the political significance of transnational celebrities such as Zhang Ziyi and Yao Ming for promoting a positive image of modern China internationally, by declaring that they were worth more than ‘10,000 of the philosopher-sage Confucius’ (Xiao 2010). Adding to an impressive list of industry awards, Zhang Ziyi was also voted as being among the Top 10 Chinese Celebrities with the Best Public Images at China’s annual Huading Awards in May 2010 (‘Actress Zhang Ziyi Wins Public Image Awards’ 2010; ‘Zhang Ziyi’ 2010). This award recognizes the public images and social influences of Chinese

celebrities from the entertainment field, based on the results of nationwide polls and the decision of a jury panel.



Zhang Ziyi at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival. © Georges Baird (Creative Commons)

However, Zhang Ziyi has also been the focus of negative domestic publicity, chiefly in the context of quasi-sex scandals. She was accused of rising to fame by sleeping with Zhang Yimou, the director of three films in which she played a starring role: *The Road Home* (1999), *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) (Yuan Lei 2007). She was lambasted in China's media for her role in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (dir. Rob Marshall 2005). The original release of this film in China was cancelled because of strong anti-Japan sentiment flowing from the ongoing failure of the Japanese Government to offer a

formal apology for World War II-era military atrocities. These atrocities included the massacre of an estimated 300,000 people in Nanjing between late 1937 and early 1938, and the abuse of thousands of Chinese women as sex slaves. In this context, Zhang's portrayal of a woman selling her virginity to the highest Japanese bidder was viewed as a national insult (Bezlova 2006; 'China Bans Memoirs of a Geisha' 2006; 'China Cancels Release of "Memoirs of a Geisha"' 2006). More recently, Zhang Ziyi has been called 'unpatriotic and shameless' for becoming engaged to an Israeli venture capitalist, Vivi Nevo, and enabling the paparazzi to circulate semi-nude photographs of the couple sunbaking on a beach (Song et al. 2010; Tan 2009).

Along with the taint of sexual promiscuity, Zhang Ziyi became the focus of intense public scrutiny in the PRC between January and March 2010 for allegedly defaulting on a pledge to donate one million yuan to the Sichuan earthquake disaster-relief fund. The earthquake of 12 May 2008, which measured 7.8 on the Richter Scale, not only killed an estimated 70,000 people and left five million homeless ('Sichuan Earthquake: Facts and Figures' 2009), but also produced a dramatic rise in individual and corporate philanthropy in China. Philanthropic donations in 2008 amounted to a total figure of 100 billion yuan or 0.4 percent of China's Gross Domestic Product (GDP),² exceeding the documented total for the preceding decade (Wang Zhuoqiong 2008; 'Zhongguo cishan paihangbang fabu "lai juan qiye heimingdan" liuchan' 2009). Zhang's 'failed pledge' led fans and critics to accuse her in bilingual blogs and online videos of charity fraud and bringing shame on philanthropy causes and the Chinese nation (Alexandra099tianya 2010; Dogonfire2005 2010; MyLara 2010; 'Open Letter To Zhang Ziyi About "Fake" Donation' 2010; 'Zhang Ziyi 100 wan Meijin de 5.12 dizhen juankuan ta zai nali?' 2010; Zong He 2010). Dubbed 'donation-gate,' the associated controversy obliged Zhang Ziyi to hire a team of US-based lawyers, to give an exclusive interview to the *China Daily*, and to engage in renewed philanthropic endeavours, in an effort to clear her name (Zhou 2010a, 2010b).

This paper examines the politics of philanthropy in contemporary China with reference to the Zhang Ziyi scandal and its Sichuan earthquake disaster-relief precursors. It first

² By way of comparison, the total number of donations in the USA and the UK in 2006 amounted to 2.2 percent and 0.9 percent of GDP respectively (National Philanthropic Trust 2009; 'UK Charitable Donors' n.d.). The estimated figure of total donations in Australia in 2004 was 0.68 percent of GDP (Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services 2005).

explains how the scandal came to public attention and the nature of its development and resolution. It then locates the origins of that controversy in an escalating series of scandals associated with the disaster-relief efforts, in order to demonstrate how public distrust of the wealthy and famous poses problems for the development of a philanthropic culture in China. Critics of US-based celebrities often claim that celebrity philanthropy is a cynical marketing exercise designed to improve a star's brand power and an apolitical mode of philanthropy that thrives on adoring fans, not on accountability (Wood 2007). In contrast, I show that public individuals who engage in mediatized philanthropic activities in the PRC are subject to intense public scrutiny and demands for accountability. Moreover, rather than exposing the self-centred egoism and fallibility of modern-day celebrities, the nature of those demands highlights the problems surrounding recent calls to cultivate a philanthropic citizenry in present-day China.

Zhang Ziyi's celebrity and philanthropy scandals

On 12 May 2008, when the Sichuan earthquake took place, Zhang Ziyi was at the Cannes International Film Festival. Upon hearing of that disaster, which triggered an outpouring of nationalist sentiment in China (Watts 2008), Zhang initiated three philanthropic activities to assist the relief effort. First, she announced that she would personally donate one million yuan to the disaster-relief fund, citing the traditional Chinese saying: '*guojia you nan, pifuyouze*' (When the country is in trouble, everyone must do their duty) ('Zhang Ziyi xuanbujuan 100 wan' 2008). Second, she established the Ziyi Zhang Foundation, a non-profit charity organization registered under the laws of California, USA, with a bank account for donors to deposit funds for transfer to the Chinese Red Cross Foundation (Care for Children 2010). Finally, Zhang hosted a fundraising event at Cannes, which journalists claimed raised between US\$500,000 and seven million dollars ('2008 Sichuan Earthquake Donations' 2010).

Zhang Ziyi became the focus of intense public scrutiny in January 2010 for allegedly defaulting on her pledge to donate one million yuan to the disaster-relief fund and misrepresenting her other philanthropic activities. The ensuing donation-gate scandal followed speculation about another scandal involving Zhang Ziyi and hints of sexual impropriety—the so-called 'black paint incident,' a series of events that took place on the evening of 23 December 2009. A group of unidentified men entered the lobby of the

Park Hyatt hotel in Beijing, where Zhang reportedly owns an apartment. They demanded that security guards tell them where the actor resided, claiming that she had seduced a married man and cheated other people of their money by accepting gifts worth more than US\$29 million from him ('Who's Behind the Zhang Ziyi "Black Paint Incident"? 2009; Zhou 2010b). Shortly after, another group of unidentified men drove up to the hotel and splashed black paint on a giant OMEGA advertisement board featuring Zhang Ziyi. These events were observed by a waiting crowd of paparazzi who had gathered at the Park Hyatt following a tip-off that Hong Kong actor, Maggie Cheung, and her German boyfriend, Ole Scheeren, were getting engaged at a restaurant in the hotel that evening (Huang 2010). The black paint incident sparked speculation in the press about who had orchestrated the incident and why. It also generated debate on Internet sites, initially on Tianya.cn, which is China's biggest blogging forum, about Zhang Ziyi's moral character. This speculation prompted an unspecified number of netizens to start investigating the actor's life, resulting in the discovery of discrepancies relating to her philanthropic activities (Huang 2010).

An article posted on the Tianya bulletin board system in late January 2010 disputed Zhang Ziyi's claim to have raised over one million dollars towards the earthquake disaster-relief fund, saying that she had only contributed 840,000 yuan of that money ('Zhang Ziyi 100 wan' 2010). This claim prompted other members of the public to contact the PRC's Ministry of Civil Affairs, the Chinese Red Cross Foundation, and other organizations, in diverse efforts to verify (or disprove) Zhang's philanthropic track record ('Donation Details Released' 2010). Apart from confirming that Zhang Ziyi had only donated 840,000 yuan to the disaster-relief fund, in two separate payments of 400,000 and 440,000 yuan, these investigations revealed that money raised by Zhang at the Cannes International Film Festival amounted to the paltry sum of US\$1,300—not the more than US\$500,000 reported in the media. The Ziyi Zhang Foundation was also called into disrepute via suggestions that its lack of transparency implied that it was merely a front for charity fraud and personal profiteering (Zhou 2010b).

Zhang and her agent, Ji Lingling, had already attempted to quash associated criticisms by issuing a public statement denying net-based allegations and promising that accounting records would be made available to the public on 3 February ('Zhang Ziyi jui dizhen' 2010; 'Zhang Ziyi shan kuan zhijin xialuobuming' 2010). However, Zhang's

subsequent silence on the issue, and Ji's failure to provide the relevant records by the specified date, simply added to mounting public criticism of her 'fake philanthropy' (Schwankert 2010). Ji's ultimately bungled attempt to 'clear the record' added more fuel to the controversy. On 5 February, he issued a statement to Sina.com, one of China's most popular web portals, stating that Zhang Ziyi had contributed the promised one million yuan in cash to the disaster-relief fund. On 8 February, Ji retracted this statement by making a public apology to the effect that Zhang had just contributed another 160,000 yuan to the Chinese Red Cross Foundation after discovering that her management team had been careless. As a result, they had failed to pay the third and final sum required to meet the original pledge of one million yuan (Li 2010; 'Q & A: Zhang Ziyi' 2010).

Zhang Ziyi's perceived failure to respond adequately to public criticisms of her philanthropic activities sparked widespread debate on interactive media forums. Apart from posts on the Tianya.cn blog, which had received over half a million hits and 90,000 replies by that time (Zong He 2010), online videos were posted in early February in both English and Chinese on YouTube demanding that Zhang account for her actions (e.g. Alexandra099tianya 2010; Dogonfire2005 2010; MyLara 2010). An open letter was also posted in Chinese on the *People's Daily* website on 1 March 2010, asking Zhang to answer a series of questions about her donations and to make her philanthropic records available to the public. That letter informed the actor that Chinese 'netizens-cum-detectives' would ensure that she could no longer 'hide' behind the laws of other countries and take advantage of the 'tolerance' of the Chinese people (Pan Yuan 2010). Zhang Ziyi's international celebrity is reflected in the bilingual nature of these activities, which, unsurprisingly, attracted further comment in the general media (Pan Yuan 2010; Zong He 2010).

Faced with mounting criticisms of her 'fake philanthropy,' Zhang Ziyi gave an exclusive interview to the *China Daily*, a state-run English-language newspaper, on 12 March 2010. In that interview, the transcript of which was posted on the *China Daily*'s website in both English and Chinese, Zhang affirmed that she had donated one million yuan from her personal finances to the Chinese Red Cross Foundation for the Sichuan earthquake disaster-relief fund (Zhou 2010b). Following two initial payments amounting to 840,000 yuan, she made up the shortfall of 160,000 yuan on 8 February

2010. Zhang attributed the delay to her failure to follow-up on instructions that she had given to staff and denied accusations of fraud and embezzlement. Regarding confusion about the amount of money raised in Cannes, Zhang stated that she had only raised US\$1,300 in cash because of the hasty nature of that fundraising event. Although only US\$39,000 of pledges from a total of US\$400,000 had been honoured, she was still negotiating a project with potential donors, whose names she was unable to reveal for privacy reasons (Zhou 2010b). Responding to accusations of embezzlement, and inadvertently offering another example of her ineffective philanthropic efforts, Zhang Ziyi noted that a full-page advertisement paid for by the *Hollywood Reporter*, in which the editor-in-chief and Zhang had appealed for funds for the relief of the Sichuan earthquake, had not induced anyone to contribute to her Foundation ('Q & A: Zhang Ziyi' 2010). Zhang vowed to make up for any shortfall if contributions pledged towards the building of a children's centre in Sichuan Province were unforthcoming. Zhang further insisted that she had never tried to enhance her public image by intimating that she had raised between one and seven million dollars—those figures had been arbitrarily cited by journalists (Li 2010; 'Q & A: Zhang Ziyi' 2010; Zhou 2010b).

Zhang maintained that she had kept silent about the controversy for two months because she had hired a legal team in the USA to investigate the issues raised by China's netizens, which had taken longer than anticipated ('Q & A: Zhang Ziyi' 2010). However, she was now in a position to confirm that there had never been anything untoward about the running of the Ziyi Zhang Foundation—it is a not-for-profit organization, handled by a professional accountant in a transparent and legal manner. Monies pledged to that Foundation through Zhang's fundraising efforts in Cannes and elsewhere were earmarked for the building of a children's centre in Deyang City, Sichuan Province, under the auspices of the UK-based international charity, Care for Children. As relevant government authorities had only approved that project in November 2009, the building of the centre had not started and hence Care for Children had not received any funding from the Ziyi Zhang Foundation. Funds would be transferred once the building work began, which according to subsequent press releases took place on 1 June 2010 ('Zhang Ziyi To Use Funds' 2010).

Zhang Ziyi concluded the interview by saying that the donation-gate scandal had taught her five things about philanthropy and celebrity. First, effective philanthropy requires

more than personal passion: it needs a professional team with the right approach. Second, celebrities have a duty to engage in philanthropic work because they have a public profile, not because they want to boost their image. Third, this necessitates a mediatized approach to generating philanthropy, rather than a low-key or anonymous approach, which she would otherwise prefer. Fourth, the act of giving-back through philanthropy is important to someone whose achievements are the result of time and money invested by the Chinese nation and the Chinese people. Finally, and responding to additional questions about the links between the donation-gate scandal and the black paint incident, Zhang stated that the public has a right to know within ethical limits about the private lives of celebrities. However, members of the public should understand that celebrities are ordinary people and not moral exemplars, even though their domestic and international standing as representatives of China requires them to conduct themselves as perfectly as possible.

In short, Zhang Ziyi affirmed that she had a social obligation, both as a celebrity and as a patriot, to engage in high-profile philanthropic activities, and she vowed to respond to public exposure of her inexperience by righting her errors. In June 2010, Zhang Ziyi made good on that claim by appearing in the earthquake-affected area of Deyang City to announce that work had begun on the construction of a centre for orphans and vagrant children. Zhang further revealed that funding for the centre came from the proceeds of her 2008 fundraising drive in Cannes, indicating that the pledged sum of US\$400,000 to the Ziyi Zhang Foundation had been honoured. Reportedly choking back her tears, the actor expressed relief that after two years of hard work, the project had finally begun ('Zhang Ziyi To Use Funds' 2010).

While some netizens maintained that their actions had obliged the actor to fulfil her promises by exposing her cynical efforts to 'cash in' on the wave on patriotic sentiment that accompanied the Sichuan earthquake ('Open Letter To Zhang Ziyi' 2010), the available evidence suggests a more complicated story. Contrary to the accusations levelled against her, Zhang's involvement in the Deyang project was confirmed in a press release by the Care for the Children organization as early as 8 February 2010 (Care For Children 2010). That involvement contributed to the jury's decision to recognize Zhang's efforts at the Huading Awards in May ('Actress Zhang Ziyi Wins Public Image Awards' 2010). This award arguably demonstrates Zhang's masterful

manipulation of the public from the start to the end of the donation-gate scandal. However, a more plausible explanation for that scandal is the one Zhang provided in interview with the *China Daily* (Zhou 2010b). She had neither the experience nor the professional team required to manage the issues and delays imposed by the lack of a developed institutional framework for philanthropy in China.

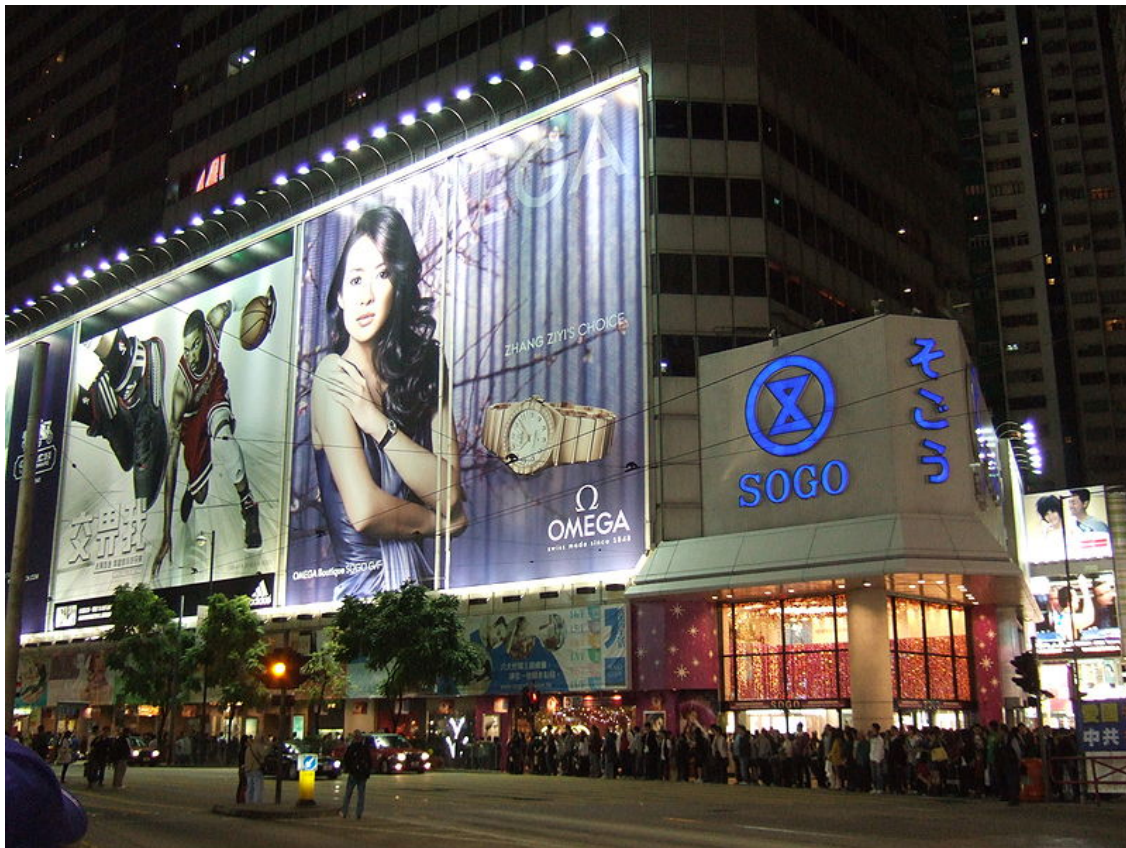
In any case, the ‘fall-out’ from the donation-gate scandal indicates that it offers more than a tale of personal redemption. Concerned netizens promptly proceeded to question the disaster-relief efforts of a wide range of Chinese entertainment stars. Actor Li Bingbing was accused of only donating 500 yuan out of a pledged contribution of 300,000 yuan. Singer Hu Yanbing allegedly donated a mere 50 yuan of a publicized 50,000 yuan. Zhao Wei, a movie star, reportedly only gave 20,000 yuan of a 100,000 yuan pledge and actor Liu Xiaoqing was criticized for donating 4,300 yuan rather than 100,000 yuan as promised (‘2008 Sichuan Earthquake Donations’ 2010). As the escalating nature of such allegations on interactive media forums would suggest, celebrity philanthropy in China is a political affair.

The politics of philanthropy in reform-era China

Although China has a long history of philanthropy (‘About Us’ n.d.; Albertson 2008–09; Tsu 1912), the practice of voluntarily offering time and money to ‘strangers’ is a relatively recent phenomenon, flowing from the nation’s post-1978 shift from a centralized to a market-based economy. After the founding of the PRC in 1949 and throughout the Maoist period (1949–1976), the curtailment of the monetary economy, combined with state ownership and distribution of public resources, prevented the private accumulation of wealth and, to some extent, reduced the need for private philanthropy. Urban residents, in particular, came to rely on the state for the provision of education, housing, employment, health-care and other forms of welfare. At the same time, the Communist Party leadership launched a continuous series of mass-mobilization campaigns to promote its guiding ideology and develop a collective socialist citizenry based on the understanding that state workers were ‘the masters of the state’ and, as such, they collectively owned the nationalized assets of the formerly private industrial and commercial sectors (Zang 2008: 61–62).

Economic reform since 1979 has produced remarkable improvements in the living standards, education, health and life expectancy of nearly all of China’s citizens, while

also generating a growing divide between the haves and the have-nots (Candelaria et al. 2009: 1). A standard index of inequality is the Gini Coefficient, which ranges from 0 (perfect equality) to 1. In 1978, China had a Gini Coefficient of 0.22, making it one of the most egalitarian nations in the world: everyone was equally poor. By 2007, China had a Gini Coefficient of 0.496, making it one of the most unequal nations (Goodman & Zang 2008: 2). Some sectors of the population have seized the opportunities created by the commercial expansion of the economy to become newly rich, while other sectors of the population face new forms of social exclusion and systemic disadvantage due to the withdrawal of former state provisions. Hence, China at the turn of the new millennium faces social problems that resurrect Andrew Carnegie's (1889: 657) famous contention regarding the philanthropic responsibilities of an emerging stratum of self-made entrepreneurs. 'What is the proper mode of administering wealth after the laws upon which civilization is founded [competition and private property] have thrown it into the hands of the few?'



Advertising billboard in Hong Kong of Zhang Ziyi fronting Omega watches.
No date. (Creative Commons)

Yet the economic and ideological legacies of state socialism continue to influence reform-era China as reflected in public distrust of the rich and famous, and the newness of the PRC's philanthropic culture. 'Wealth hatred' is a documented phenomenon in China today because 'ordinary people' tend to assume that those who have become newly rich along with the partial privatization of the economy are 'immoral,' having obtained their wealth through corruption or the 'theft' of formerly communal assets (Zang 2008: 55–60). Even where personal wealth is arguably the result of talent and good fortune, rich people are still viewed as morally suspect for spending their surplus money in acts of conspicuous consumption, rather than distributing it appropriately to those who are less fortunate. Celebrities such as Zhang Ziyi, for example, are easily opened to criticism as the envied, yet denigrated, idols of hedonistic capitalist consumption when compared with the nostalgically imagined model citizens of an era defined by socialist collectivism and production (Jeffreys & Edwards 2010: 18).

Public distrust of the rich and famous has created problems for the development of a philanthropic culture in reform-era China. The following list of events illustrates the newness of philanthropy in the PRC. In October 2004, the first government-run public-benefit website, China Charity Information Center (Juanchu.gov.cn 2009), was launched by the Ministry of Civil Affairs ('China Launches 1st Official Charity Website' 2004). On 20 November 2005, the first annual China Charity Awards were held at the China Charity Conference in Beijing ('First China Charity Awards' 2005). The first list of China's top 50 philanthropists was compiled in 2004; and the first list of China's top 50 philanthropic companies was produced in 2005 ('China: Philanthropy Overview' 2006). As the recent nature of these activities suggests, thirty years ago there was no private wealth in China, but now private wealth exists and some of the new rich are prepared to give away voluntarily portions of their surplus money (Mackey 2005).

Then, on 5 December 2008, President Hu Jintao made PRC history by making philanthropy an integral part of the nation's public policy agenda during a speech to announce the winners of China's fourth annual Charity Awards (Liu Weitao 2008; 'Zongshuji de jiakuai cishanshiye fazhan dongyuanling' 2009). This speech, which the *People's Daily* described as a mobilization directive, called on Chinese citizens from all walks of life to speed up the development of a philanthropic culture in the PRC, in order to ensure the realization of an all-round well off (*xiaokang*) and harmonious society

(*hexie shehui*) by the year 2020. Deng Xiaoping first used the classical term *xiaokang*, which evokes modest prosperity, to describe China's modernization and the goals of economic reform in 1979. Jiang Zemin subsequently revitalized the term in a report that he delivered to the Sixteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2002, entitled 'Build A Well-off Society In An All-round Way And Create A New Situation In Building Socialism With Chinese Characteristics.' In that report, Jiang stated: 'We need to concentrate on building a *xiaokang* society of a higher standard in an all-round way,' which means an estimated per-capita gross domestic product of more than US\$2,000 by the year 2020 ('All About "Xiaokang"' 2002). The current 'Hu Jintao–Wen Jiabao' leadership's vision of *xiaokang* socialism continues to evoke sustained economic growth as a means to realize prosperity, but it also sees the need for that prosperity to be broadly distributed and for economic growth to be balanced with social equality and environmental protection (Jeffreys & Sigley 2009: 11).

In his December speech, Hu Jintao praised the enormous contributions of people in providing relief to the millions of victims of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, suggesting that the disaster had heralded the birth of a philanthropic citizenry in China (Bao Wanxian 2009; Wang Zhuoqiong 2008). However, Hu proceeded to qualify his praise for the rapid growth in domestic philanthropy by noting that Chinese philanthropy—in terms of public motivation and the number of philanthropic organizations and donations—lags behind that of developed countries and behind the state of economic development in the PRC. He therefore called on Party members, government departments and business enterprises, as well as '*aixin*' (compassionate) Chinese people, to develop a philanthropic culture in the PRC as quickly as possible, in order to supplement its inadequate social security system (Liu Weitao 2008).

While putting philanthropy 'on the map' in China, the disaster-relief efforts were dogged by scandal from their inception. The Sichuan earthquake of 12 May 2008 immediately generated public condemnations of corporate philanthropy, initially flowing from the circulation of the so-called '*guoji tiegongji*' (international iron rooster list). In colloquial Chinese, an 'iron rooster' refers to a misanthrope, a bird that will not give up a single feather. Between 14 and 19 May 2008, an SMS was circulated in China that called upon concerned and patriotic citizens to boycott multinational companies, such as Coca Cola, KFC, McDonald's, Nokia, and Samsung, because of their allegedly

‘puny’ contributions to the disaster-relief efforts. The SMS called upon concerned citizens to spread the contents of the list and to update it as events unfolded, resulting in widespread debate on interactive media forums such as MSN and QQ (‘5.12 Sichuan Wenchuan’ 2008; Hei Ma 2008). Chain letters posted on the Internet and disseminated via mobile phone networks soon translated into civil protests, with an estimated 100 people gathering outside a McDonald’s enterprise in Nanchong city, Sichuan Province, to protest the company’s lack of genuine philanthropy. Similar protests were waged against KFC in the provinces of Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Shanxi, resulting in the temporary closure of various businesses (‘Companies Rush To Show Generosity’ 2008; ‘The Story of Donations Gate’ 2008).

Public condemnation of multinational companies for their allegedly miserly donations to the disaster-relief efforts quickly translated into praise for local Chinese companies that were seen to have contributed generously. Wanglaoji, an herbal tea soft drink, became famous overnight and reported a significant increase in sales after its parent company, the Jiaduobao Group, donated 100 million yuan at the 18 May China Central Television Station disaster-relief gala (Fong 2008; McGinnis et al. 2009). This contribution was viewed as providing a concrete demonstration of the company’s claim to ‘give back’ some of its profits by ‘zealously’ participating in ‘public welfare activities and philanthropy’ (‘Brief Introduction’ 2005). A post subsequently placed on the Tianya website called on Chinese consumers to reward the company for its demonstration of ‘social responsibility’ by buying Wanglaoji products. Netizens also devised and circulated advertising slogans in praise of the company. One slogan stated that ‘If you want to donate, you donate 100 million [yuan]; if you want to drink, you drink Wanglaoji,’ while other slogans parodied Coca Cola advertisements to indicate that Wanglaoji was the better product (‘The Story of Donations Gate’ 2008).

As it turned out, the perception that multinational companies were busy exploiting business opportunities in China and unwilling to ‘give back’ chiefly flowed from a lack of transparency and clarity in the reporting of donations, and the time-delay required to obtain company board and/or shareholder authorization for donations that exceeded the established corporate social responsibility policies of international companies. Many of the ‘international iron roosters’ had not only made immediate contributions to the disaster-relief efforts, but also sought authorization to increase their original donations.

For example, KFC's parent group, the MDGB group, pledged a donation of 3 million yuan immediately after the earthquake, that pledge increased to 15.8 million yuan on 19 May with an additional contribution of 5.2 million yuan from its employees.

Contributions from other multinationals such as Coca Cola, McDonalds, Nokia, and Samsung, also increased dramatically in the same period ('China: Multinationals Hear It Online' 2008; 'The Story of Donations Gate' 2008). However, public criticisms of the 'international iron roosters' only abated following concerted efforts by the PRC Government and the US-China Business Council. The PRC's Minister of Commerce convened a press conference to confirm their actual donations on 22 May. Given the limited efficacy of that press release, the US-China Business Council began recording the donations of its member companies on its official website and releasing those figures to the PRC's Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Commerce for dissemination in China's media ('US Company Contributions For Earthquake Relief' 2008).

Nevertheless, accusations of 'donation-stinginess' soon extended to criticisms of two of China's most famous sporting celebrities in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Yao Ming, a professional basketball player with the Houston Rockets in the US National Basketball Association, was criticized for initially pledging 500,000 yuan, which was viewed as insignificant compared to his reported earnings of 56.6 million yuan in 2007 (Yao Bin 2008). Liu Xiang—China's first male Olympic gold medal winner in the track and field—was similarly subjected to public criticism for initially pledging, along with his coach, the perceived paltry sum of 500,000 yuan.

These criticisms, as with those directed at the 'international iron roosters,' proved to be premature or unfounded. The Yao Ming Foundation was established under the auspices of the Giving Back Fund on 10 June 2008 to help raise funds and awareness in both China and the USA of children's wellness and welfare issues in the earthquake-affected areas. Yao Ming personally contributed an initial start-up fund of two million dollars to the Foundation, which went on to raise nearly three million dollars in the USA within a year ('Yao Ming Foundation To Help Rebuild Schools In Sichuan' 2009). Liu Xiang went on to contribute a further 2.5 million yuan and personally visited the earthquake-affected areas ('Liu Xiang Teaches Quake Students To Run Hurdles' 2009).

However, by early 2009, China's netizens were calling on government departments and philanthropic organizations to publish earthquake-related 'donation lists,' in order to

halt the perceived tactic of ‘free and dishonest advertising’ by companies and celebrities (‘Charity’s Best and Worst’ 2009). This debate was exacerbated by claims that the China Association of Social Workers, which was responsible for issuing the 2009 ‘China Philanthropy List,’ intended to publish a ‘name and shame list’ of companies that had failed to honour their pledges, one that did not eventuate in practice (Sun Xunbo 2009). Opponents of the publication of such a list pointed out that it was in effect a ‘blacklist.’ Its publication would not only impugn the brand reputation of certain corporations and celebrities, but also encourage moral blackmail, being based on information that was out-of-date and lacked clarity, and a failure to understand that pledges were often given in stages rather than as a bulk sum (Yao Bin 2008). But, an online survey of netizens’ views on NetEase.com, a Chinese web portal dedicated to delivering “‘Power to the People” by using the latest internet technologies to enhance meaningful information sharing and exchange,’ concluded that nearly 70 percent supported the ‘blacklisting’ of companies and celebrities that had failed to honour their pledges. Only 26 percent of those who responded to the survey opposed the publication of such a list on the basis that it undermined the spirit of philanthropy by turning it into a social obligation (NetEase 1997; Tao Tao 2009).

By 2010, as the Zhang Ziyi scandal attests, the ‘naming and shaming’ of the rich and the famous on interactive media forums for their allegedly ‘fake’ philanthropy had begun to focus on China’s entertainment stars. While pointing to the democratizing influence of the Internet, by giving a voice to those who were previously voiceless and providing citizens with an unprecedented degree of participation in China’s media, the ‘lead-up’ to and the ‘fall-out’ from the Zhang Ziyi scandal highlights a simple fact. The growth of user-generated content, and the rise of the blogger, in particular, does not necessarily contribute to the production of responsible citizens and democratic politics. It also fuels populist denigration of public individuals.

Conclusion

An examination of the Zhang Ziyi scandal and its precursors suggests that the economic and social legacies of the Maoist era have created problems for the development of a philanthropic citizenry in China by encouraging an emphasis on philanthropy understood as a social obligation of the wealthy and famous. Celebrities and major corporations in China are expected to ‘give back *more*’ precisely because they have

surplus money and brand power. At the same time, it is assumed that the philanthropic activities of public individuals should be open to public scrutiny because their money and status requires them to accept responsibility for leading positive social change. This remains the case even though the structural problems associated with the undeveloped nature of China's philanthropic sector prevent them from 'doing philanthropy professionally,' thereby placing them at risk of public censure. The proliferation of celebrity–philanthropy scandals on interactive media formats further indicates that China's netizens view public criticism as a positive incitement for public individuals to do more and better rather than a potential or actual discouragement.

An evident problem here is that the effective transposition of philanthropy from a desire to assist the public good into an obligation to 'give back' undermines both the principle that people are free to determine how much of their resources they wish to use on 'public endeavours' and the underlying voluntarism of philanthropy. If public individuals are obliged to give back more and publicly, rather than doing so voluntarily based on personal sentiment and a sense of reward, then, philanthropy is simply a different and largely unexamined means for ensuring the redistribution of wealth. Alternatively, it places a populist and non-governmental tax on fame and success rather than surplus capital per se.

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