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### Media, Celebrity and Philanthropy in China: Doing Good or Doing Nothing?

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Written by Jonathan Hassid and Elaine Jeffreys.

Academic discussion of celebrity-led philanthropy has blossomed in recent years. Supporters argue that celebrity involvement with charities raises public awareness and support and resources through media publicity (Bishop and Green 2008). Critics argue that it bolsters corporate capitalism and vested elite interests by disguising the exploitative nature of trade and business relationships, distorting policy agendas, directing resources in problematic directions, and 'duping' western consumers into believing that they can 'save the world' by consuming the 'right product' (Kapoor 2013). However, neither supporters nor critics of celebrity philanthropy typically question the underlying assumption that all these effects flow from media publicity.

We tested the assumption that celebrity endorsement drives media coverage and increases a charity's visibility using a statistical analysis of 91 celebrity-endorsed charities in mainland China – home of the world's largest media market and a developing philanthropy sector.

The results suggest that scholarly hand-wringing about celebrities' impact is misplaced. Rather than being a force for good or a force for ill, it appears that in China, at least, celebrities have minimal impact in terms of drumming up press coverage for even the worthiest causes.

To set about addressing these questions, we first compiled a list of 198 major Chinese celebrities by combining five 'Top Chinese Celebrity' lists from 2011-12. We then identified the 254 charities endorsed by these celebrities between 2000 and 2013. After we removed those closely tied to government programs or corporate interests, we were left with 91 relatively 'pure' charities. The sample comprises 63 government-affiliated charities (including 60 public fundraising institutions); 11 international NGOs, mostly affiliated with the United Nations; 9 non-public fundraising foundations founded by prominent individuals or private companies (including A-list celebrities); 4 public fundraising foundations established by celebrities or CEOs; 3 public fundraising foundations established by state-owned enterprises; and 1 micro-fund.

To investigate these charities' media coverage we counted press coverage in the China Core Newspaper Full-text Database. Using the names of each charity as keywords, we counted monthly newspaper stories in a 12-month period before and after the date of first celebrity endorsement. We collected monthly data for the year before the first celebrity endorsement to eliminate prior or seasonal trends unrelated to the impact of the celebrity endorsement itself. We also collected data on: (a) the number of 'hits' for each celebrity endorser on Baidu.com; (b) their total number of *weibo* fans; and (c) whether the charity had multiple simultaneous endorsements.

Using these data, we estimated a pooled panel data model and an alternative time series model, augmenting each with dummy variables to test the time-invariant effect of celebrity endorsement of philanthropies on press coverage.

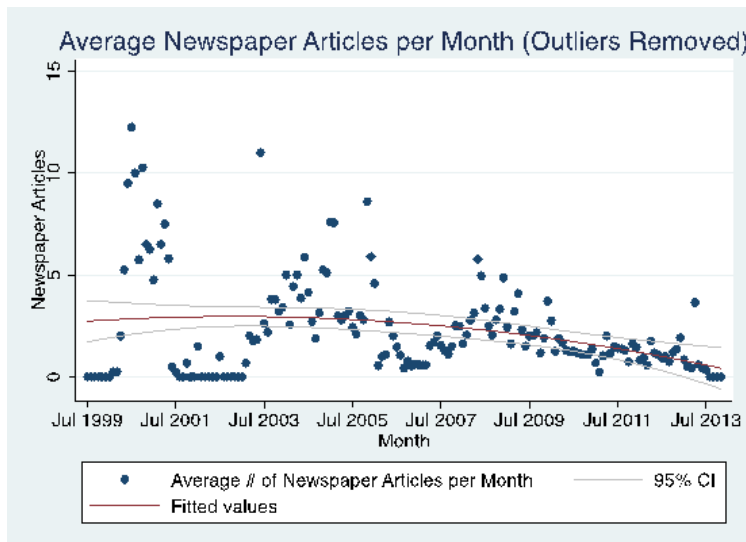
#### Results

We expected that the 91 charities in the sample might attract media coverage because of their links with government, the UN, and famous people, and because censorship authorities put pressure on Chinese media organizations to provide positive coverage of social issues.

However, as Figure 1 shows, the average number of charity-related newspaper articles has, in trend terms, been gradually but noticeably declining. Overall press coverage is quite modest, with the mean number of hits per month only around 4.4, and the median number of articles 0. In other words, the median celebrity-endorsed charity gets no press coverage in an ordinary month.

**Figure 1: Average Newspaper Coverage of Charities Over Time, With Outliers Removed, Plus Trend Line and 95% Confidence Interval Bands<sup>1</sup>**

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To measure the impact of celebrity endorsement of charities in China, we incorporated several independent variables into our statistical models. The first variable, 'Weibo100k', measured how many micro-blog followers a particular celebrity has in units of 100,000, using figures from Sina Weibo as a reasonable proxy of celebrities' overall fame level. A second variable tested was whether charities had single or multiple endorsements from celebrities (most received one, but some had up to 14 endorsements). We also included a dummy variable for the month of first endorsement, reasoning that any press impact was likely to be highest during this month and would then tail off.

Table 1 shows the results of a GLM negative binomial regression, detailing the estimated impact of these independent variables on charity newspaper coverage. It shows that the impact of celebrity endorsement is modest, with each additional endorsement worth an estimated 0.11 newspaper articles/month over time, holding other factors constant. The estimated bump a charity receives in the month following initial endorsement is similarly small at around one additional article; and celebrities' relative fame level is predicted to have no impact at all. In the charitable world, it seems that an endorsement from a stand-up comedian is worth about as much as that from an A-list actor: very little.

**Table 1: GLM Population-averaged Negative Binomial Regression of Celebrity-endorsement Indicators on Newspaper Coverage**

Variable	Coefficient	Estimated Standard Error (cluster adjusted)	p-value
Celebrity <i>weibo</i> followers (in 100k units)	-0.0017	0.0011	0.116
Multiple endorsements	0.1183**	0.0459	0.010
First month	1.028***	0.2373	0.000
Newspaper articles from 1 month before (1 lag)	0.1515**	0.0482	0.002
Newspaper articles from 2 months before (2 lags)	0.1301*	0.0563	0.021
Constant	-0.6149*	0.3137	0.05

Note: Estimated standard errors are corrected for panel clustering,  $n=1720$ \*\*\*, \*\* and \* indicate significance at the 0.1%, 1% and 5% levels

More important over time is the impact of previous press coverage, which strongly predicts subsequent coverage even in the absence of any celebrity endorsements. For example, newspaper reporters wrote an average of 9.75 articles per month on the China Women's Development Foundation the year prior to December 2008, when host Sa Beining, actress Lü Liping and academic Yu Dan gave the organization its first collective endorsement. Despite their star power and combined 6.5 million *weibo* followers, the charity subsequently managed only 7.9 articles per month, a drop of almost two articles per month.

An ARIMA time series model, examining celebrity endorsement on newspaper coverage across a 173 month period (July 1999 to November 2013) had similar results. Celebrity endorsement of a charity had no statistically significant impact on subsequent press coverage, and by far the biggest predictor of future press coverage was coverage in the past.

No matter how the data are sliced, the evidence presented here indicates that future newspaper coverage on charities is predicted best by past coverage, with celebrity endorsement having minimal impact.

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**Notes**

This paper is an abridged version of Jonathan Hassid and Elaine Jeffreys (2015) Doing good or doing nothing? Celebrity, media and philanthropy in China, *Third World Quarterly*, 36:1, 75-93 (DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2015.976019). The research was supported by Australian Research Council Future Fellowship FT100100238.

**References**

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