

Personal Worship in Contemporary China: A Cultural and Theoretical Review in the Context of the C-Star Paradigm

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Abstract: This paper examines the phenomenon of personal worship in contemporary China through the lens of the C-Star paradigm. It argues that personal worship has shifted from a primarily state-orchestrated and institutionally anchored form of charisma to a platform-mediated and ideologically sensitive field of symbolic power. Drawing on discourse analysis, cultural theory, and Chinese digital culture, the paper traces the historical and political roots of personal worship from the Mao era to the present, showing how charismatic authority has been reconfigured rather than simply weakened. It then introduces the C-Star framework and the core concept of semiotic elasticity, understood as the capacity of a public figure's image to be reinterpreted across multiple ideological and affective contexts without losing basic recognizability. A focused case study of Li Ziqi illustrates how seemingly apolitical personas can become nodal points of national branding, aesthetic desire, and ideological negotiation. The analysis highlights the role of platform governance and algorithmic curation in shaping visibility and worship. A short discussion of counterexamples—C-Stars who sustain long-term legitimacy despite ideological tensions—helps to stress-test the framework. Finally, the paper reflects on the implications of C-Star worship for emotional governance, social

identity, and the stability of China's symbolic order in an age of networked media and surveillance capitalism.

Keywords: C-Star paradigm; personal worship; symbolic power; semiotic elasticity; platform governance; Chinese digital culture

1 Introduction: From Celebrity to Symbolic Power

Personal worship in contemporary China is neither an accidental product of entertainment industries nor a simple survival of traditional hero-worship. It is embedded in a dense historical, ideological, and technological environment. From Mao Zedong's revolutionary charisma to the current configuration of political, cultural, and digital figures, worshipped persons function as symbolic condensations of collective desires, anxieties, and norms.

Classical approaches to authority, such as Weber's typology of traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic domination[1], remain indispensable for understanding how particular individuals come to be treated as extraordinary and worthy of obedience or admiration. Yet these models were developed with pre-digital publics in mind. They do not fully capture the world of platform-based mediation, algorithmic visibility, and real-time affective feedback loops.

Celebrity studies in Euro-American contexts have illuminated the role of stars in consumer capitalism and identity play[2,3]. However, they do not directly address the specific conditions of Chinese modernity: the legacies of socialist propaganda, the continued importance of party-state legitimacy, and the complex interaction between state regulation and marketized platforms.

The C-Star paradigm emerges in this context as a culturally specific yet theoretically generative way of understanding personal worship. Instead of treating "star" as a fixed occupational category, C-Star designates figures situated at the intersection of phenomenal influence (reach, visibility, affective intensity) and semiotic elasticity (the flexible, yet bounded, interpretability of their image). The aim of this paper is to use the C-Star paradigm to reinterpret personal worship in China as a dynamic field of symbolic power shaped by history, platforms, and governance.

2 Research Questions

The paper is guided by four interrelated questions:

1. Symbolic mechanisms

How is “worthiness of worship” produced, circulated, and stabilized in contemporary China? What symbolic operations transform an ordinary person into a figure whose name, image, or style carries collective emotional weight?

2. Historical legacies

How do Maoist and post-Maoist forms of political charisma continue to inform present-day practices of personal worship, even when the figures in question are cultural rather than explicitly political?

3. Platform and governance dynamics

How do digital platforms, algorithms, and governance regimes enable, modulate, or constrain personal worship? In what sense is worshipped visibility both an asset and a risk for authorities and corporations?

4. Social and ideological consequences

What roles do worshipped figures play in shaping social identities, collective aspirations, and ideological boundaries? When does personal worship reinforce existing power structures, and when does it introduce ambiguity or subtle critique?

These questions frame personal worship not as an individual psychological phenomenon, but as a relational and infrastructural process operating within China’s contemporary symbolic economy.

3 Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach that integrates cultural theory, sociology, and media studies. Rather than measuring audience size or counting likes and shares, it prioritizes interpretive analysis of discourses, narratives, and symbolic structures.

First, a discourse-analytic method is applied to official speeches, news reports, policy documents, platform announcements, and popular commentary. These texts reveal not only what is said about worshipped figures, but also the implicit rules governing who can be elevated, in what terms, and with what emotional tone.

Second, the paper draws selectively on cultural theory to interpret the mythic functions of C-Stars. Barthes’s notion of modern mythologies helps to illuminate how mundane images—such as a rural kitchen, a leader’s everyday gesture, or a minimalist lifestyle—are invested with ideological meaning[2]. Bourdieu’s concept of the field and symbolic capital illuminates how different institutions—state bodies, platforms, brands, fan communities—compete to define legitimate forms of admiration and success[4]. These frameworks are used in a focused way to clarify how C-Stars accumulate and convert symbolic resources, rather than being discussed at length in their own right.

Third, a historical-comparative lens situates contemporary worship against earlier forms of charismatic authority and mass mobilization. Durkheim’s reflections on collective

effervescence are useful for reading both mass rallies and online fan gatherings as structurally related ways of generating a sense of the sacred, even when the sacred object is aesthetic or lifestyle-oriented rather than overtly religious[5].

Finally, the paper undertakes a focused case study of Li Ziqi as a paradigmatic C-Star at the intersection of rural nostalgia, traditional culture, and soft power aspirations. The case is used not as an exhaustive empirical account, but as a strategic site where the abstract features of the C-Star paradigm—especially semiotic elasticity—become concretely visible.

4 Historical and Political Roots of Personal Worship in China

4.1 Maoist legacy and revolutionary charisma

The most paradigmatic instance of personal worship in modern Chinese history is the cult of Mao Zedong. Under Mao, personal charisma, revolutionary myth, and mass organization formed a tightly integrated system. Posters, slogans, model operas, and everyday rituals turned Mao's image into a ubiquitous presence in social life.

From a Weberian perspective, Mao combined revolutionary charisma with organizational rationalization[1]. Yet his charisma was not merely imposed from above; it was co-produced by grassroots participation, local adaptations, and emotionally charged mobilizations. Durkheim's idea of collective effervescence helps to explain how rallies, study sessions, and ritualized chanting generated intense emotional synchronization that anchored Mao's image in the lived experience of millions[5].

This episode left at least three long-term legacies for personal worship in China:

1. A repertoire of visual and ritual techniques for elevating individuals into symbolic figures—ranging from portrait placement to textual praise and repetitive slogans.
2. A deep sensitivity within the party-state to the political risks and benefits of charismatic focus. Excessive personal cult can threaten institutional continuity, while insufficient symbolic centrality can weaken legitimacy.
3. An embedded expectation among citizens that certain moments and crises will be narrated around exemplary figures, whether leaders, model workers, or heroic volunteers.

These legacies continue to shape how contemporary symbolic figures are made and managed, even when explicit personality cults are formally rejected.

4.2 Contemporary political symbolism

In the reform era, formal rhetoric has shifted from revolutionary slogans to developmental narratives and national rejuvenation. Nonetheless, the practice of attaching political projects to personal images has persisted. Leaders' visits to villages, factories, and technological

sites are carefully documented and circulated, creating images of accessibility, competence, and care.

Compared with Mao's era, contemporary political personal worship is softer in affect and more dispersed in media channels. It uses the aesthetics of ordinariness and emotional warmth rather than overt transcendence. At the same time, it remains intertwined with broader ideological frameworks of unity, prosperity, and stability.

Within this environment, explicitly political figures coexist with a growing cast of cultural, entrepreneurial, and digital C-Stars whose symbolic power can complement, echo, or occasionally complicate formal political narratives.

5 Theoretical Synthesis: Semiotic Elasticity in the C-Star Paradigm

5.1 Defining semiotic elasticity

A key contribution of the C-Star paradigm is the concept of semiotic elasticity. For the purposes of this paper, semiotic elasticity is defined operationally as:

> The capacity of a public figure's image and associated narratives to be re-interpreted and re-deployed across different ideological, cultural, and affective contexts, while remaining recognizably "the same figure" to diverse audiences.

Three dimensions of semiotic elasticity are especially relevant for case analysis:

1. Contextual adaptability

The extent to which the same figure can be situated in different storylines (e.g., tradition vs innovation, local vs global, grassroots vs elite) without collapsing into contradiction.

2. Affective range

The range of emotions legitimately attachable to the figure—reverence, nostalgia, pride, aspiration, or even controlled forms of irony—without undermining their basic legitimacy.

3. Governance compatibility

The degree to which the figure's circulating meanings can be selectively emphasized or downplayed by platforms and authorities to maintain ideological coherence.

In empirical terms, semiotic elasticity is observed through how the figure is framed in media texts, how different publics "read" and reuse the image, and how easily the figure can be repositioned in response to new events.

5.2 Integrating classical theories

Semiotic elasticity draws on, but also refocuses, insights from several classical theorists in a concise way:

From Weber, it inherits the question of how extraordinary personal qualities are recognized and institutionalized as legitimate authority, but emphasizes the ongoing re-coding of charisma under digital conditions.

From Durkheim, it takes the idea that certain persons become poles of the sacred, yet locates the sacred not in fixed dogma, but in circulating, reconfigurable meanings.

From Barthes, it borrows the notion of modern myth as a second-order signification in which everyday images become carriers of ideology, while stressing that these myths are now designed for flexibility and cross-platform movement.

From Bourdieu, it uses the concept of symbolic capital and the field: C-Stars accumulate capital precisely because their semiotic elasticity allows different actors—state agencies, platforms, brands, fans—to invest and withdraw meanings across struggles in the cultural field [4].

Rather than offering extended exegesis of these theorists, the C-Star framework treats them as tools for specifying how semiotic elasticity is produced, recognized, and contested.

5.3 Analytical implications

Operationalizing semiotic elasticity allows for more precise comparison across cases. Figures with high elasticity can be rapidly repositioned—such as being reframed from “pure entertainer” to “patriotic role model” or from “rural artisan” to “symbol of soft power.” Figures with low elasticity may enjoy intense worship in narrow contexts but are vulnerable when circumstances change, because their meanings cannot be easily re-aligned.

This concept will guide the subsequent analysis of Li Ziqi and of counterexamples where long-term legitimacy persists despite ideological tensions.

6 Case Study: Li Ziqi and the Soft Power of Aestheticized Persona

Li Ziqi emerged in the late 2010s as one of the most globally recognized Chinese content creators. Her videos, which depict rural life, traditional food preparation, and artisanal crafts, attracted massive audiences on domestic platforms as well as on YouTube.

At the level of imagery, Li’s work offers an idealized vision of rural Sichuan: misty hills, seasonal rhythms, meticulous handiwork, and minimal verbal commentary. Geertz’s interpretive anthropology encourages us to treat these scenes as “thick descriptions”—not

merely charming visuals, but textured representations of what a good, beautiful, and meaningful life could look like[6].

From the perspective of semiotic elasticity, Li Ziqi's image is highly adaptive:

Domestically, she can be read as a custodian of tradition, aligning with narratives of “excellent traditional culture.”

In development discourse, she exemplifies rural revitalization and creative entrepreneurship.

For urban viewers, her videos provide an aesthetic refuge, channeling desires for slowness, authenticity, and tactile experience.

Internationally, she becomes an unofficial cultural ambassador, embodying a graceful, craft-centered vision of Chinese everyday life[7].

These readings are not mutually exclusive; they coexist and reinforce one another, illustrating the multi-layered semiotic elasticity of the C-Star.

Li Ziqi's case also reveals the fragility of such arrangements. Disputes over management, platform control, and intellectual property temporarily halted her output and turned her persona into a lens on labor conditions, ownership, and the ethics of commodifying tradition. In this moment, the worshipped figure became a site where tensions between individual creativity, corporate interests, and governance logics were publicly negotiated.

7 Counterexamples and the Limits of Semiotic Elasticity

To test the robustness of the C-Star framework, it is important to consider cases where C-Stars maintain long-term legitimacy despite ideological tensions. These counterexamples show that semiotic elasticity does not always imply instability.

One type of counterexample involves entrepreneurial C-Stars whose wealth and global connections occasionally sit uneasily with egalitarian or statist narratives. Yet some of these figures maintain a stable public presence over time. Their legitimacy can persist because:

1. Their narratives of success are reframed as national achievements (“Made in China,” technological self-reliance), allowing potential tensions to be reabsorbed.
2. Their semiotic elasticity permits a division of labor: critical or ambivalent readings circulate in smaller publics, while more affirmative framings dominate mainstream channels.
3. Platforms and authorities selectively amplify specific facets—innovation, philanthropy, job creation—while backgrounding elements that might foreground ideological conflict.

Another type of counterexample concerns entertainment figures who have weathered scandals or shifting moral expectations. In some cases, their images are rehabilitated by

emphasizing growth, repentance, or charitable work, again demonstrating how semiotic elasticity can accommodate controlled forms of tension and repair.

These cases suggest that semiotic elasticity is not simply a measure of vulnerability. Under certain conditions, a high degree of elasticity can underpin durable legitimacy, provided that interpretive flexibility is continuously managed by powerful actors.

8 Platform Governance, Emotional Economies, and Identity

C-Stars in contemporary China emerge within highly structured platform environments. Algorithms decide what appears in feeds; moderation policies filter content; recommendation systems test which figures generate engagement. Jenkins's notion of convergence culture and Jenkins, Ford, and Green's concept of "spreadable media" underscore how content circulates across multiple channels and is actively propagated by users[3,9]. In China, this spreadability is nested within a governed infrastructure that closely monitors what kinds of affect and identification are acceptable.

Platforms and regulators share an interest in maintaining emotional order. Excessive polarization, moral panic, or uncontrolled idol worship can be framed as threats to social stability. At the same time, mobilizing admiration and aspirational identification is valuable for consumer markets and ideological consolidation.

Social identity theory suggests that people define themselves through group memberships and comparisons[10]. C-Stars offer ready-made figures around which groups can cohere: fans, consumers, patriots, urban professionals, rural nostalgics, or "ordinary people who work hard." Semiotic elasticity is central here because it allows the same figure to function as a point of identification for different groups without necessarily forcing a direct confrontation between their diverse expectations.

At the infrastructural level, worship itself becomes data—traces of liking, commenting, purchasing, and sharing that feed back into recommendation systems. These systems, in turn, decide which figures deserve continued visibility or must be quietly de-emphasized. In Zuboff's terms, this is a form of surveillance capitalism in which behavioral surplus is extracted and commodified[11].

Thus, personal worship is increasingly shaped by invisible infrastructural decisions rather than by deliberate collective rituals. Yet the underlying logics of symbolic power remain recognizable: certain persons are separated from the ordinary and invested with prestige, authority, or moral weight, in ways that still resonate with Weberian charisma, Durkheimian sacredness, and Bourdieusian symbolic capital.

9 Conclusion

This paper has argued that personal worship in contemporary China is best understood as a dynamic, platform-mediated field of symbolic power rather than as either a residual cult of personality or a simple importation of Western celebrity culture. The C-Star paradigm, centered on the concept of semiotic elasticity, captures how worshipped figures emerge at the intersection of phenomenal influence and flexible interpretability, and how they are shaped by historical legacies, governance regimes, and digital infrastructures.

Historically, Maoist forms of revolutionary charisma provided a dense repertoire of visual and ritual techniques for elevating individuals, as well as a lingering sensitivity to the political risks of highly concentrated symbolic power. In the reform era, personal worship has diversified, with cultural, entrepreneurial, and digital figures joining leaders and model workers as focal points of admiration.

The case of Li Ziqi illustrates how seemingly apolitical C-Stars can become nodal points of aesthetic, economic, and ideological investment, while also exposing tensions between individual creativity, corporate structures, and state regulation. Counterexamples of C-Stars who maintain long-term legitimacy despite ideological tensions show that semiotic elasticity can also underpin durable authority, provided that interpretive flexibility is continuously managed.

Theoretically, the C-Star framework extends Weber's concept of charisma, Durkheim's reflections on the sacred, and Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic capital into a context characterized by convergence culture, networked media, and platform governance[1,3,4,5,8]. It invites further comparative work on how different political systems manage the volatility of symbolic elevation—how they allow, encourage, or restrict the emergence of figures who can concentrate public affect.

Future research could deepen the empirical basis of this argument by analyzing specific platform policies, tracing the life cycle of particular C-Stars, or examining cross-border circulation of Chinese symbolic figures. It could also explore the emotional afterlives of fallen C-Stars: how publics process disillusionment, betrayal, or saturation once worship collapses. For now, the key claim is that personal worship in China today is a central mechanism through which society negotiates modernity, identity, and legitimacy in a media environment where visibility is both an opportunity and a site of constant negotiation.

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