



Dorothy Wai Sim Lau

# Celebrity Activism and Philanthropy in Asia

## Toward a Cosmopolitical Imaginary

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# Celebrity Activism and Philanthropy in Asia

# Asian Visual Cultures

This series focuses on visual cultures that are produced, distributed and consumed in Asia and by Asian communities worldwide. Visual cultures have been implicated in creative policies of the state and in global cultural networks (such as the art world, film festivals and the Internet), particularly since the emergence of digital technologies. Asia is home to some of the major film, television and video industries in the world, while Asian contemporary artists are selling their works for record prices at the international art markets. Visual communication and innovation is also thriving in transnational networks and communities at the grass-roots level. This series seeks to explore how the texts and contexts of Asian visual cultures shape, express and negotiate new forms of creativity, subjectivity and cultural politics. It specifically aims to probe into the political, commercial and digital contexts in which visual cultures emerge and circulate, and to trace the potential of these cultures for political or social critique.

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*Toward a Cosmopolitical Imaginary*

*Dorothy Wai Sim Lau*

Amsterdam University Press



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To my husband, Alfred Yuen  
and my son, Ari Yuen



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# Introduction

## An Uncharted Terrain: Asian Celebrities' Engagement in Activism and Philanthropy

### Abstract

The introductory chapter offers an overview of the volume with the objective, key problematics, and methodology used in this study. It first delineates the picture of a celebritised intervention of goodwill and the cultural politics involved, followed by an exposition of an “Asian turn” of celebrities' engagement in activism and philanthropy. It also provides an analysis of the use of cosmopolitics as the key frame of inquiry. It hypothesises what I call “multiversal consciousness” that reveals the significance of multiple attachments, transient belongings, and displaced subjectivities in the discourse of celebrity-led causes. It contrasts the thesis of cosmopolitanism that dominates the Western-centric discourse of universal humanism. It also suggests such a perspective subverts the North-South divide and the homogeneous or regionally bounded conceptions of Asia. Lastly, it presents the chapter summary of the book and a note of terminology.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitics, “multiversal consciousness,” North-South divides, Asia

The last two decades have witnessed an increasing visibility of celebrities in activism and philanthropy. Hollywood stars, pop music icons, and TV personalities such as Angelina Jolie, Madonna, Bono, George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Oprah Winfrey are well known for their active engagement to alleviate various political, ecological, and human rights issues such as refugees, debt, health, poverty, orphans, human trafficking, weapon reduction, and global warming. More than feeding publicity events to the media, these stars' goodwill helps propel an image of informed and ethical global citizens who understand the asymmetries of economic globalisation

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while being motivated to redress social and political ills (Bryan 2012). For all intents and purposes, they put forward high-profile social actions that legitimise the stories of celebrity philanthropy in “distant” locales and offer solidarity in times of crises. Their self-sacrificing and apolitical appeal accrue social and cultural capitals, projecting a portrayal of a just, humane, and peaceful world. Simultaneously, it evokes ongoing debates about celebrity self-interest and an occupation of spaces of extreme privilege. It helps shape the celebrity branding and the ritualistic performance.

In recent years, Asian celebrities have begun to emerge into the scene, contending for the space to exhibit their sensibility and capacity to respond to human suffering and catastrophe. They have been as active and vocal as their Western counterparts to respond to multiple causes in and beyond Asia (Jeffreys 2011). On Forbes’s (mainland) China Celebrity List in 2009 and 2010 (Key 2010), Shanghai-born retired NBA basketball star Yao Ming has served as the spokesperson of shark protection in mainland China. Malaysian-born Hong Kong-Hollywood actress Michelle Yeoh has promoted sustainable fashion and responsible consumption in the name of protecting the planet and wildlife with her status of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Goodwill Ambassador since 2016. South Korean actor Jung Woo-sung, has called for government support and international attention to the human rights of refugees, after a total of over 500 Yemeni asylum seekers arrived on the southern scenic island of Jeju in 2018 (*The Korea Times* 2019). Cantopop singers Anthony Wong Yiu-ming and Denise Ho have stood at the frontline in Hong Kong’s recent social movements at the expense of China’s lucrative market and in face of the risks of being arrested and charged. The top mainland Chinese live-streamer, Li Jiaqi, used his channel to raise funds for COVID-19 aid and donated over 40,000 masks to Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic. Performing as witnesses, fundraisers, ambassadors, and activists, these Asian stars capitalise on a simultaneous Asian and global identity that is self-consciously narrated and performed through their creative expressions and civic actions to call for benevolent support from local and global publics. Unlike their Western counterparts who advocate remote causes, they unfold affinities and proximities to the suffering populations in their mobilisations. The creative-civic personae, which are compellingly coded in terms of local geopolitics and humanitarian dynamics, vindicate emergent crisscrosses of celebrity and cause in Asia’s pop cultural networks.

Situated in the expanding humanitarian horizon in Asia, this volume provides a critical intervention of star-powered benevolence by exploring the popular imaginaries and civic mobilisations of Asian icons through a



cosmopolitical lens. Drawing on a number of examples of Asian celebrities-turned-activists or philanthropists, I hypothesise that Asian celebrities' civic engagement denotes the universal humanity and solidarity which are spawned by ties to specific locales, cultures, and subjectivities. Simultaneously, it homogenises discourses of celebrity charity and legitimises the spectacularised benevolence to profitable ends. By presenting the perplexed nuances, this book suggests a new form of star imaginary, which I describe as cosmopolitical, emphasising on multiple attachments and mutative consciousness, and contending intensities in the cultural and multimedia networks. It disrupts the discourse of cosmopolitanism, a discourse that has dominated celebrity humanitarianism in the West. In this light, this volume not only charts the discursive production of a distinctive Asian consciousness that blends humanitarianism and fame but also purports possibilities of reimagining global citizens in times of disjuncture, rupture, and contestations.

## Global Narratives of Activism and Philanthropy

Activist agendas and do-gooding have become fashionable in the public discourse pertinent to celebrities today. The pairing of entertainment with philanthropy and advocacy gives rise to neologisms such as “philitainment,” “charitainment,” and “politainment.” Causes are realised in diverse modes of personal philanthropy (donations, volunteer work, child adoption), mediatised events (concerts, visit to crisis areas, awareness campaigns), or activist actions (protests, rallies). New breeds such as aid celebrities, celebrity activists, celebrity diplomats and celebrity environmentalists emerge and gain gravity in popular and critical discourses. All these occurrences are evidence of the proliferating phenomenon of celebrities' involvement in activism and philanthropy.

Stars' creative production works in tandem with their goodwill to produce their personae (Marshall 2010). Pop songs, movies, TV shows, stage performance, and artworks are accessible and powerful vehicles to dramatise social problems and garner momentum among the mass. They foster global consciousness, expressing the universal desire for liberal values (Hancox 2012, 280) and realising new possibilities of imagining solidarities in global civic culture (Veg 2016). In a reciprocal light, material benefits of do-gooding are evident. Good causes can often accumulate media visibility and bankability. Highlighting charitable endeavours becomes the mandate of persona construction, self-promotion, and public relations (Kapoor 2013,



3). As Jo Littler (2008) contends, in the process of elevating themselves from the mundane to the sanctified, celebrities benefit the most from their commitment with global causes.

The global image of celebrity advocates and campaigners is complicated by the constructs of border and locale. In the regime of globalisation marked by the mobility of capitals, goods, people, and images (Ong 2006, 123), the star appeal readily transcends narrow strictures of their provincial or national status. Nonetheless, it does not mean the border carries no importance in cultural making. It is exemplified in shared values (Hancox 2012, 280), facilitating the construction of a sense of identity and civic consciousness. Whereas flexibility is both a product and condition of late capitalism (Harvey 1989), cultural globalisation valorises a resurgence of local identities in the name of celebrating hybridity and the production of difference. In this logical vein, stars' philanthropic and activist profiles manifest cultural border-crossing in the globally linked audience whereas it operates in a territory-conscious way, rendering a place-based identity to be a potent tool to categorise and understand the world (Harvey 1989).

In uncovering diffused yet locale-bounded consciousness, celebrity activism and philanthropy, as a catalyst of progressive social change, both reflect and challenge existing sociocultural structures and fame mechanisms (Gotham 2012, 98). On the one hand, celebrities can use their reputation and talents in transnational cultural networks to raise funds and advocate for significant issues regarding democracy, equality, and dignity. Their use of reputation to pursue resources and to garner public awareness to certain causes acknowledges celebrity status as a profession and as a source of influence (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos, and Huliaras 2011, 9). On the other, celebrity-endorsed benevolence functions to promote neoliberal logics of consumption and, thus, a hegemonic culture of goodwill, ultimately disavowing potentially unethical aspects of the attempts (Gotham 2012). Research proves that the logic of philanthropy shifts responsibility for social issues from governments to individuals and corporations through the marketplace which encourages privatisation and liberalisation. Similarly, Ilan Kapoor (2013) avers that celebrity humanitarianism is simply about maintaining hegemony and injustice, cloaked in a veneer of doing good. It results in the politics of exploitative capitalist relations that Kapoor succinctly describes as unjust (Kapoor 2013, 3). As a site of struggle and conflict over status and cultural symbols, celebrity activism and philanthropy represent a mixture of repressive and resistant qualities in a humanitarian order.

The ubiquity of digital media perpetuates the dialectical concern with tensions observed in celebrity activism and philanthropy. With the



popularisation of the World Wide Web, entertainers are enthusiastic of adopting Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to amass public attention to causes, raise funds, and challenge the policy makers (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos, and Huliaras 2011, 9). Novel circuits of mobilisations stress the bottom-up model of expressions and exchanges, endorsing intelligibility of volunteerism and grassroots to solve social problems. Media users actively exploit their agency in networks of cooperation, coordination, and consensus, hence realising virtual participatory communities and non-government-organised volunteering (Duffield 2001, 3–17). Alternative forms of celebrity activism such as connected celebrity activism (Ellcessor 2016) replace traditional sit-ins, direct protests, and community-oriented campaigns. Oftentimes, these new-fangled forms surpass single-issue agendas and integrate fame, corporate firms, and grassroots networks to catalyse social change. The new productive space generated by cyber technology, which is relatively, in Lisa Ann Richey's trope, accessible, transparent, and caring, "leaving isolation, misunderstanding and callousness as part of a 'pre-humanitarian' past" (Richey 2016, 5).

The claim for a technical fix for organised sanctioned injustice and global inequality issues remain dubious (Bulut, Mejia, and McCarthy 2014). Communication technologies shape forms of techno-consumerism that risk reducing concerns of social justice to technocratic issues that are considered to be resolved by managers and experts (Kapoor 2013, 3). The use of apps and live-streaming platforms celebrates the post-democratic liberal politics in which elites such as technocrats, business tycoons, expert scientists or economists, and now celebrities, become the agents of governance. Rather than extending resistant agendas, media technology barely functions to destabilise the system and potentially diverts the public attention away from the long-term and structural problems.

This volume lends a critical inquiry of activism and philanthropy by engaging in an array of significations and contradictions in the recent landscape of Asia's celebrity altruism culture. It raises several specific questions: What fantasies, narratives, and ideologies are evoked and coded by Asian humanitarian pop icons? How do the stars' goodwill embodiment shape their creative expressions and subjectivities? To what extent do the non-Western media-centric activism and charity retain, negotiate, or subvert the cultural hegemony presumed in politics of celebritised altruism in Anglo-American order? Overall, how do the vicissitudes and ramifications feed into the key problematics of celebritised humanitarian politics today? In order to respond to these questions, this monograph focuses on Asian stars that engineer profiles spanning across geopolitical, cultural, and

industrial coordinates. Also, they have been engaging in charity, advocacy, activism, and ambassadorship on various levels, enthusiastically responding to a mix of issues such as drought, ecological destruction, disadvantaged youth, human rights, poverty, and COVID-19-driven racism. They include Bollywood star Aamir Khan, K-pop idol group BTS, Japanese musician Ryuichi Sakamoto, Cantopop singer Denise Ho, Chinese live-streamer Weiya, and a constellation of ethnically Asian, America-based screen performers. More than a showcase of the campaigns and initiatives driven by these stars, this volume provides a cultural and ideological critique to the prospective contradictions and predicaments of Asian stars' benevolence, disentangling the interplay between causes, politics of fame, and intermedial presence in contemporary Asia. The analysis wrestles with the take-for-granted-ness of geopolitical imagination embedded in Asian celebrity image, attempting to unsettle the binary of Asia and the world in the critical discourse.

Shunning both convenient generalisation and uncritical exuberance, this monograph moves away from an either-or polemics of profit versus politics, nationalism versus globalisation, as well as from solid discriminations between cultural interpretation and critical inquiry that outline the debates in cultural studies and Asian studies. This book positions Asian celebrity activism and philanthropy within its larger cultural and ideological contexts, postulating it as a vexed and complex reality of which individual stars have marshalled civic narratives to question, negotiate, and reimagine the dynamics of power and identity. Employing a cosmopolitical perspective, this volume contends such a star phenomenon in reflection of a new world order that destabilises the vision codified by universal morals and a shared humanity, suggesting plural, volatile, and de-essentialised representations in the global visual logics. Drawing from film, media reportage, press interviews, and social media posts, each of the cases underscores a robust array of theoretical problematics that are pertinent to the phenomenon of celebrity activism and philanthropy in Asia. To these ends, this book is structured as a cross-disciplinary, methodological-driven analysis in the areas of celebrity studies, (inter-)Asian studies, critical humanitarianism, and digital media research, hoping to illuminate ways to understand the up-to-date picture of celebrity activism and philanthropy.

### Discourses of Celebrity-Led Causes: An Asian Turn

One of the key motivations of this monograph is to disrupt the dominance of Western icons, spectacles, and occurrences in the critical discourse of



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celebrity philanthropy and activism. Scholars have shown keen interest in exploring the mobilisation of an array of North American or European-oriented film stars, pop music icons, and celebrity TV hosts such as Angelina Jolie (Chouliaraki 2013; Favara 2015; Rosamond 2016; Hopkins 2018), Madonna (Finlay 2011; Hasian 2016; Rasmussen 2016), Bono (Hasian 2016), George Clooney (Sterritt 2012), Ben Affleck (Budabin 2018; Alexandra 2018), Brad Pitt (Gotham 2012), Salma Hayek (Molina-Guzmán 2012), Oprah Winfrey (Illuz 2003; Cloud 2014), Nicolas Cage (Stohl, Stohl, and Stohl 2011), Sean Penn (Rosamond 2016), Mia Farrow (Huliaras and Tzifakis 2010), Emma Watson (Hopkins 2018; Santos, Barros, and Azevedo 2019), and Nicole Kidman (Hopkins 2018). Many of these works lend a critical perspective to analyse celebrity-led initiatives as a sociocultural, media, or celebrity phenomenon as a cross-disciplinary effort in international development studies, communications and media studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, studies of international relations and global studies.

Asian celebrities have gained an escalating presence and power in the scene of humanitarianism but the circumstance is rarely articulated and probed in any rigorous or sustained fashion. Some of the early attempts of surveying Asian celebrity advocates and philanthropists, nationally or transnationally oriented, focus on China, a country of which philanthropy and the NGO culture have grown rapidly (Jeffreys and Xu 2017). Located in celebrity mechanisms in China's public health realm, Johanna Hood (2010; 2015) has inquired the persona of actor Pu Cunxin and the First Lady Peng Liyun who devote themselves to raise public awareness about AIDS, unravelling the complexities of morality, politics, and philanthropy. Dorothy Lau (2019) examined A-list movie actor Jet Li's One Foundation project and his mobilisation of disaster relief culminated by the 2008 Sichuan earthquake as part of the culture of corporatized or individual giving. Simone Hancox (2012), Chloe Preece (2015), as well as Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg (2015a) draw on the perceptual tie between art and activism, examining dissenting celebrity artist Ai Weiwei and his persona in terms of his Chinese-yet-global identity and brand. Notoriety and its relationship to goodwill are also of scholars' interest. Elaine Jeffreys (2011) investigates Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi and her scandal of defaulting on a pledge to donate one million yuan to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake disaster-relief fund. To further the scrutiny in the context of the evolution of the Chinese internet, Elaine Jeffreys and Jian Xu (2017) inspect philanthropy in celebrity-fan communication networks through the case of popstar Li Yuchun. Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg (2015b) likewise scrutinise the online celebrity-making through the case of celebrated author-blogger Han Han. Remaining rudimentary and scarce,

these efforts are worth expanding in the wider context of Asian celebrity culture and regional politics.

As a critical response, this volume locates Asia as the new locus of celebrity activism and charity, investigating the pertinent imaginary and cultural politics in the backdrop of the prevalent “rise of Asia” narratives. At the turn of the century, commentators and analysts had already purported the “dawn of [the] Asian century” (Wintour 2020) that is characterised by the region’s rapid economic growth, proactive governmental policies, and vibrancy of younger and more technophilic consumers. The recent new emphasis on the study of cultural affinities and interactions within the Asian region has accompanied the shift of the world market toward economies like South Korea and the PRC, and the rise of new trade blocs like ASEAN and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Fads of *hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, and East Asian cinema not only elevate Asia to be the alternative centre for media production but also shape the global visibility of celebrities. K-pop idols, Bollywood stars, and action or kung fu performers attract extensive fan followings, proving themselves as viable players in the global arena. The purportedly less visible “celebrity societies” (van Krieken 2018) such as Bangladesh and the PRC have now become more prominent. All these instances signal the new status of Asian celebrities, vindicating the change of the pivot of cultural politics from the West to Asia.

This book intervenes in the intellectual dialogues at a juncture when global cultural exchanges are expanded yet conceptualisations of Asia are still highly contested. Asia is often considered as a cartographic reality and a constructed category that exemplifies an array of political and cultural attributes in its long historical existence. American-based Japanese scholar Naoki Sakai (2010) succinctly posits that Asia is a derivative of Europe etymologically and genealogically. Chinese scholar Wang Hui also notes that the concept of Asia is “at once colonialist and anticolonialist, conservative and revolutionary, nationalist and internationalist, originating in Europe and, alternatively, shaping Europe’s image of itself” (2010, 987). Intellectuals of the studies of Asia further critically review Eurocentric frameworks. They counterpoise the cultural imaginary formed by colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism while grappling with the interconnectedness of the history, politics, and culture of Asian societies. Takeuchi Yoshimi’s 1960 “Asia as Method” (Chen 2021) followed by Kuan-hsing Chen’s elaboration alongside the “toward-deimperialisation” thesis (2010) is part of the critical investment to challenge the binaries of Asia-versus-West and to interrogate the function of the idea of Asia in a rigorous manner.



The past decade has seen the proclivity that Asian media flows are often put under the rubrics of inter-Asia; Spearheaded by Kuan-hsing Chen's (2010) inter-referencing approach of comparing societies either are geographically close or share akin historical and cultural experiences, inter-Asia studies, unfold the trend of "mov[ing] beyond the nation-state to intersect the regional and the sub-regional," underscoring the "imagination and possibilities of diverse forms of intellectual integration in Asia" (Chen and Chua 2007). Academics are conscious to avoid the trap of East-West bilateralism by instead interrogating processes of regionalisation in Asia in all their asymmetries and variations. They present original and vibrant discussions on an array of topics including geopolitical imaginaries, hybrid performances, deterritorialised bodies, reception communities, and intermedial translations. They wrestle with the inquiries like: How do the processes of mediated persona construction break up the homogeneous or regionally bounded conceptions of Asia? To what extent regionalised inter-Asian productions and circulations of media content challenge homogeneous or disciplinary-bounded understandings of specific media platforms? All these critical efforts set the stage for examining celebrity philanthropy and activism at the crossroads for Inter-Asian cultural transactions.

Intersecting with different subfields of Asian studies, research of Asian celebrities have proliferated in conjunction with disciplines of cultural studies, star studies, and fan studies. Collective energies exemplified by scholarly networks (such as The Asian Media and Cultural Studies Networks and Fan Studies Networks), conferences and symposia (such as the 2019 "Starring Asia" symposium hosted by Australia's Deakin University), edited volumes (such as Lorana Fitzsimmon and John Lent's 2013 *Popular Culture in Asia: Memory, City, Celebrity*, Leung Wing-fai and Andy Willis' 2014 *East Asian Stars*), special issues of academic journals such as the special issue of *Celebrity Studies* on Asian stardom and celebrity (forthcoming 2024) have been consolidated, contributing to the theoretical and empirical paradigms as well as textual and contextual provocations of surveying celebrities and celebrity culture in Asia.

This monograph aims to extend the intellectual attempt by orienting the study in the growing humanitarian culture both in Asia and around the globe. As the first book-length study of the embryonic interest, it grapples with the understanding of Asian personae as more than a function of the geopolitical processes or global market relations, but a result of intermedial dynamics, cultural networks, affective transactions, and flexible citizenship. To move away from the imperialist and culturalist-essentialist approaches, how can one form the link, or a "linking mechanism" (Wang 2007, 18) between

the complex idea of Asia to the world? Furthermore, in what manner do these underrepresented, celebritised causes help define Asia? As part of the trend of the Asian turn in recent scholarship (Dodd and Shubhda 2020, 5), this volume unsettles the hypothetical position of the West as a privileged site of surveying and understanding humanitarian-oriented subjectivity and sensitivity. It proposes a framework that is able to defamiliarise principles of many Asianisms deduced from imperial agendas, national destinies, and emancipatory ideologies. By doing so, it supplements, if not rectifies, the oversight of Asian celebrities in the global humanitarian landscape.

### **Cultural Politics of Celebritised Intervention of Humanitarianism: The Self-Other and North-South Divides**

By replotting the trajectory of celebrity-cause interplay found in Asia, this book problematises the rhetoric that dominated the Western discourse of celebrity humanitarianism. Some scholars argue that celebrity engagement intensifies democratic participation (Wheeler 2012) whereas some others discover that celebrities are ineffective in mediating distant suffering to Western audiences (Scott 2014). Audiences have been aware of high-profile North American or European icons who champion the status of “white rescuers,” channelling an array of Third-World causes. Notable examples include Angelina Jolie’s visits to refugees in Tanzania, Kenya, and Syria; Madonna’s adoption of orphans in Malawi; George Clooney’s campaigns to stop the genocide in Sudan; Bob Geldof and Bono’s aid to tackle famine and AIDS in Africa; and Oprah Winfrey’s disaster relief in the 2010 Haiti earthquake. These acts exemplify the ethic of universal humanity, propagandising equality and empathy for those who primarily remain outside the human security of the West (Repo and Yrjölä 2011). The white subject, which is perceived as the universal, ubiquitous subject of humanity, incarnates cosmopolitan ideals and neoliberal impulses that preserve stereotypes of the Western Self and the “Other,” illustrating who is legitimately capable of representing global humanity (Repo and Yrjölä 2011).

The “white saviours” rhetorics are followed by the discursive framing of the suffering and calamity in the Global South. Recent decades have seen a trend of using tropes of engagement and philanthropy to articulate North-South relations in the political and cultural discourses (Richey and Brockington 2020). The white-star-centred spectacles enable inhabitants in the North to easily engage in philanthropy, which at the same time can be ethically beneficial for the citizens in the South.

Whereas Western celebrities' causes stemmed from discourses of colonial legacy and the donor North, Asian representations and experiences makes an intervention by re-evaluating humanitarianism with approaches that move beyond the Self-Other binary and the North-South divide. It is observable that Asian icons mobilise the causes in the countries of origins or the neighbouring regions, relying on their embodied experiences ingrained in specific cultures and locations which are, at times, displaced by their transnational appeal. Their appeal works against the assumption that western values are defined as universally ethical. To elaborate, it counterpoises the imperialist logic of difference and the historical subjectivities underpinned by reproductions of race, class, and gender in colonial terms by rethinking the mythical ontologies of the Western self as defenders and advocates of virtues and justice in the world.

Having argued that Asian personalities reconfigure the ethnic and cultural "Other" does not imply a postulation of an "innocent" resistance to capitalism of an oppressed colonised subject. I am aware of the fact that idol group AKB48's post-disaster visit to the affected areas of Japan's 311 earthquake in 2011 (Katayama 2021, 270) appeared as newsworthy and self-promotional as Brad Pitt's post-Katrina rebuilding in 2005 (Gotham 2012). Discretion, likewise, is given in contemplating BTS' 2020 "Love Myself" campaign which seems as potentially controversial as the charity concerts of Bono and Geldof in terms of their capacities of generating money and spectacle (Boggiano 2020). This volume remains critical to Asian celebrities' penchant to reproduce the principles of neoliberalist consumption in order to cultivate a publicity of which do-gooding is one of the strategies. To take a step further, it pursues a framework that can problematise a presumption of an all-encompassing, normative logic of universal globalism in celebrity activism. Such a framework should be no longer Eurocentric nor binary and is capable of responding to the limits of the oft-adopted First World-Third World and North-South perspectives and their affordances. In light of this, this book identifies and applies the hypotheses of cosmopolitics in an Asian context to encompass and scrutinise the cutting-edge dynamics and debates of star-driven benevolence in a world marked by multiple orientations, subjectivities, and realities.

## Toward a Cosmopolitical Approach

First proposed by Isabelle Stengers (1997), the concept of cosmopolitics is principally set in both connection and contrast to Kantian cosmopolitanism.



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Cosmopolitanism, as a principle and a praxis, has been sustained for a long time and renewed recurrently. It can be drawn from Zeno's conception of cosmopolis, a combination of the Greek words *kosmos* ("world") and *polis* ("city"), and Diogenes' idea of the "citizen of the world" (Cheah 1998, 22). In a classical sense, cosmopolitanism refers to the transcendence of local or nation-state, favouring universal recognition. It reveals a fundamental devotion to the interests of humanity as a whole and often appears to aver universality by virtue of its independence and dissociation from the bonds, affiliations, and commitments that constrain ordinary nation-bound lives (Cheah 1998, 22). Literature on cosmopolitanism consists of two key perspectives. The first perspective illuminates the possibilities of global democracy and world citizenship. The second perspective suggests a new definition of political belonging in a world in which transnational connections result in new strategies of identification beyond the nation state. From *politeia* (proposed by Plato [1990]) to *cosmopoliteia* (elaborated by Kant [2010]), the conception of cosmopolitanism advanced from mere constitutionality to world governance, which was connected to the rise of monopoly capitalist colonialism. Contemporary discourses of cosmopolitanism emphasise the emergence of a new world order formulated by supranational political institutions, new waves of migration, transnational identities, and multiple citizenships. The emergence of global hybrid cultures makes nation states face imminent obsolescence as a viable economic, political, and cultural unit (Cheah 1998, 20). This refashions cosmopolitanism by underlining a kind of mutual translatability that takes place in multiculturalism.

Although cosmopolitanism became a buzzword in the late 1990s and its vibrancy continued in the first decade of the twenty-first century (Mignolo 2010), intellectuals have expressed a sceptical stance towards perceiving cosmopolitanism as the basis to "work out differences among humans" (Blaser 2016). Consider what Rosi Braidotti and his colleagues, in their edited volume entitled *After Cosmopolitanism* (2013), assert when confronting a candid question, "is the idea of cosmopolitanism still useful?" They argue that it is useful, but only insofar when the "universalistic, rationalistic, Neo-Kantian transcendental" model is replaced by "the multi-faceted, affective cosmopolitics of embodied subjectivities grounded in diversity and radical relationality" (Braidotti et al 2013). In a more concrete manner, Isabelle Stengers advances the notion of cosmopolitics in the awareness of the risk of turning a type of practice into a universal neutral key (2005, 995). Stengers, in collaboration with Bruno Latour (2004), locates the problem with cosmopolitanism in its assumption of an already unified cosmos, a single world (the common "thing"), as we actually inhabit a "pluriverse" (2005).



Rather than a particular tradition that one may conceive for a particular world, Stengers uses “cosmos” to refer to “the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds, and to the articulations of which they could eventually be capable” (Stengers 2005, 995). The plausible articulations that divergent worlds may generate associate cosmos to politics in two major ways. First, it counterpoises the transcendental idea of the cosmos, declaring that universality is not something taken for granted. Second, it registers politics to explore the feasibility of those plural worlds and their articulations to become a common world. In other words, the presence of cosmos in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of politics to mean the give-and-take reciprocity or a finite list of entities that must be taken into account. As Latour captures the gist of Stengers’ invention of cosmopolitics, “Cosmos protects against the premature closure of politics, and politics against the premature closure of cosmos” (2004, 454).

While politics often claim cosmopolitanism as its ultimate goal, cosmopolitics eschews from the depoliticised, Western-centric, and pro-capitalist bearings, and engages in the entanglements wrought by cosmopolitisation processes. Contemporary research of humanitarianism informed by mainstream Anglo-American methodologies has postulated humanitarian practices as a self-evidently moral activity, operating under the rubric of universality (Cooper 2008, 111–12). Cosmopolitics provides a trope for reconsidering humanitarianism by diversifying and de-essentialising the vision of the “cosmos.” Bruce Robbins posits that the cosmopolitical denotes ethics, allegiance, and action that allow one to connect to the earth or “all sorts of places” (1998, 3). Borrowing Scott Malcomson’s “actually existing” cosmopolitanism, Robbins observes that cosmopolitics now appears as “plural and particular” (1998, 2), becoming a reality of attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance (Malcomson 1998, 3). Other academics have questioned cosmopolitanism as a Western construct that overshadows a non-Western vision and its tendency of naturalising national interest (Cheah 1998, 23). Indian scholar, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that Kant’s idea of *cosmopoliteia* suggests a “cosmo” vision, but in fact, could not tread beyond the nation-state designating its own colonial states (2012, 107). According to Spivak, cosmopolitanism is often associated with decolonial projects, depending on the colonial/postcolonial, modernity/tradition binaries, which no longer works well, particularly when it comes to a multidisciplinary project of forging identities that are not focused on ethnic identities (2012, 111). It holds true even for the vernacular or sometimes anti-Eurocentric cosmopolitanism that draws the critical vigour of postcolonial relations largely outside Europe

and US academic institutions. Responding to the ostensibly decolonial orientation of cosmopolitanism, Spivak cautions us that what we need is more than a critique of Eurocentric politics of identity. She puts forward a “new epistemological invitation” (Spivak 2012, 111) to see our world and our past:

We must construct cosmopolitanism differently. We must train our imaginations to go into a different epistemological performance when it comes to the idea of cosmopolitanism. It is not syncretism. It is not people living together. Not exchanging different nationalities. Not the shortfall at the crossroads. (Spivak 2012, 112)

In this light, Spivak argues that cosmopolitics serves as the locus of an epistemological challenge towards Eurocentrism’s approach to governmentalising the world. It exemplifies the manners that our contemporary globalised world was not just produced by Europeans or simply through “bilateral connections between imperial nation states and their colonial positions” (Spivak 2012). Rather, it interpolates a broader imaginary that propels one to question what is at stake in declaring cosmopolitanism, an epistemological or discursive category, “occluded... by the custodians of ideology” (Spivak 2012, 108). Technologised intermediality, furthermore, facilitates cultural affinities and dynamics that gives rise to a planetarity of different stakes. Thanks to Spivak’s discursive configuration of the globe as an abstract space, which exists in our computers and allows us to control it, although we retain a mystery of the concept of the planet (Tan 2020). It shapes modes of identity-making as the processes that take place in multiple localities and simultaneously a networked space.

Drawing on the critical energy of Stengers and Spivak, I purport that cosmopolitics is an apt interpretive structure to contemplate the activism and philanthropy led by Asian celebrities. My premise is that Asian celebrity activists and philanthropists, as the agents of the cosmopolitical global abstract, articulate the ethos and ethics that decouple from the universal humanism broadly designated by humanitarian narratives. Instead, they epitomise what I term the “multiversal consciousness,” which operates instrumentally and flexibly in wider cultural and professional networks, revealing the significance of multiple attachments, transient belongings, and displaced subjectivities. Such consciousness vindicates a new global citizenship that treads beyond cosmopolitan claims, uncovering more fissures than sutures, more partiality than neutrality. The novel phenomenon opens up the process of celebritising causes and valorises heterogeneous



and distinctive dialogues, reframing the function of the idea of Asia in a layered and polysemic milieu. By capturing such a process, this book troubles the Eurocentric vision of planetarity, provoking a reconsideration of humanitarian image and agency in Asia for critical ends.

This volume illuminates some of the central paradoxes that are made conspicuous through the cosmopolitical agenda of understanding Asian celebrity activism and philanthropy. Nevertheless, my goal is neither simply to celebrate cosmopolitical persona as an ideal image of celebrity campaigners nor to reveal Asian icons' mobilisations as a hoax intended to bring in greater vibrancy in the global humanitarian order. Even it is not to illustrate how "Asian values" differ from other Western ones. Rather, it is my intention to show that the discussion can open up new possibilities to understand and evaluate celebrity activism by avoiding the pitfalls of a simplified polarisation of Asia-vs.-West and of the taken-for-granted separation of altruistic incentive from commercial incentive. Activist and philanthropic ethics and ethos generate novel currency in the highly multimediated and volatile setting but the meaning lying within keeps evolving and, hence, needs reinterpretations. Through the analysis, I hope to offer a range of points of entry into broader intellectual and cultural conversations about the shifting notion of global citizenship and Asian celebrity power, and about the critical ends that star-powered humanitarianism can be poised for contemplation. From star-led NGOs to multimedia performances, from campaigns to ambassadorship, this book engages to the possible means in which the shifting imaginaries in question can be mediated and negotiated not only as an outcome of the moral virtues and the politics of fame but also as a manifestation of new forms of subjectivities and creativities in the digitally mediated activist and philanthropic cultures.

## Organisation of the Book

This book aims to propose a cosmopolitical intervention to conceptualise Asian celebrities' benevolent imaginaries and narratives, outlining the changing star-powered activism and philanthropic culture at present. It establishes a schematic framework of six cases, presented in six chapters, featuring celebrities from India, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and Asian American diasporic networks. Each chapter can be viewed as both an individual instance and part of a matrix of humanitarian engagement of Asian personalities. It denotes certain types of engagement to causes



and cultural affinities and attachments, enlivening the ongoing debate in the recent landscape of Asia's celebrity altruism.

Chapter 1 focuses on the celebrated Bollywood star Aamir Khan, investigating his mobilisations and the persona in the transnational, multimediated context. Khan has shaped his advocate image through his socially revealing movies like *3 Idiots* (2009) and *Dangal* (2016) and the TV show *Satyamev Jayate* (2012–2014), in which narratives of compassion and social transformation are framed through the affiliations to both universal morals and to local cultures and lives. In the offscreen realm, he founded in 2016 Panni Foundation, an NGO aiming to alleviate drought in India, which relies on the newly acquired neoliberal management approach and technocratic logic. While his venture solidifies his image of the saviour patriarch, the image is perplexed by the simultaneous rise of popularity and bankability in China. This chapter contends that Khan's civic persona does not lie outside the parameters of neoliberal logics and the state ideology, illustrating how it valorises the imagination of contemporary Sino-Indian relations. It sheds new light on the transnational Bollywood stardom in the nexus of crossover fandom, politics of fame, and techno-capitalism.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the advocacy and public diplomacy of K-pop sensation BTS, inquiring how they function as an instrument of consolidating and displaying the soft power of South Korea and how they inspire a constellation of distinctive fan-driven campaigns. BTS has captured growing popular and intellectual attention in recent years and their status as celebrity advocates provides a rich and contested context for the contemplation of the potential interplay of altruism and K-pop idol culture. In 2017, BTS has launched the global movement named "Love Myself" and has been invited to form a partnership with UNICEF's "Generation Unlimited" agenda, promoting the well-being and self-esteem of youth and children in Asia and worldwide. In 2021, moreover, President Moon Jae-in of South Korea has assigned BTS as the special envoy for public diplomacy, elevating as a key epitome of Korean soft power (*Korea Times* 2021). BTS' goodwill commitment, furthermore, motivates members of ARMY, the codename of the group's fan community, to collaborate and mobilise an even broader range of causes, shaping a potent and grassroots-based visibility in the terrain of benevolence. Treading beyond the convenient narratives of how their public diplomacy and ambassadorial assignments expand their global reign, this chapter interrogates BTS' advocacy by revealing how their mobilisations is problematic and culturally unproductive as they augment and legitimise the neoliberal K-pop idol economy and the propagandist proclivity in the cultural diplomacy in South Korea.

Chapter 3 concentrates on Ryuichi Sakamoto, Japan's world-acclaimed and pioneering music composer-pianist, exploring his border-crossing persona as a vehicle of reimagining environmentalism. In the wake of the national (the 2011 tsunami and nuclear radiation in Fukushima) and personal catastrophes (the diagnosis with throat and rectal cancers in 2014 and 2021), Sakamoto called public awareness to the ecological threats of global warming, nuclear power plants, and forestation in recent times. His creative works, notably the multimedia project LIFE and album *Out of Noise* (2009), are exemplary to his concerns. Employing the thesis of eco-environmentalism as a point of departure, this chapter challenges the emphasis on a sense of place as an indispensable condition for environmental ethics. It argues that both the local and the global are co-constitutive in the cultural unfolding of environmental concerns, as indicated in Sakamoto's evolving persona. By so doing, this analysis shows the ways Sakamoto philosophises and practices his professional presence as he proliferates narratives of eco-crises in Japanese-yet-cosmopolitical terms.

Chapter 4 shifts to Hong Kong, providing a critical account of Cantopop diva Denise Ho's activism in Hong Kong's present-day political landscape. Identified as an emergent icon of Hong Kong's democracy fight, Ho is one of the few entertainers who works on the frontline in the recent social movement. Her activist image gained international media limelight especially at the moments of her arrest during the clearance of the Occupy site in the 2014 Occupy Central campaign and her UN speech regarding Hong Kong's controversial extradition bill in 2019. By positioning Ho's case in the political and entertainment scene in recent Hong Kong, this chapter probes Denise Ho's activist-singer persona as it straddles in the interstitial space of politics and performance, of creativity and censorship, of the statuses as a Hongkonger and a global citizen. In this light, this chapter shows that Ho exemplifies the evolving pop stardom in the ever-changing civic spheres and the entertainment economy of the territory.

Situated in the milieu of e-commerce live-streaming, Chapter 5 discusses the charitable cause led by Weiya, one of the most successful live-streamers in mainland China, and her contested persona on the platform. Dubbed as "sales queen," whose presence is anchored on the China-based sales platform, Taobao, Weiya exemplifies a blend of performance and sales, attracting copious followers. While she is well-known for her top sales progress, she endeavours in donation and welfare advocacy for the poor in and outside China. She includes the agricultural products from some villages of China in her web store, a response to the "poverty



alleviation” policy of China in the period. She works with the United Nations, too, to promote the coffee and other farm products produced in Africa. However, Weiya, alongside other Taobao KOLs, has become a target of public censure due to her wealth and the resulting predilection of neutralising the hegemony of neoliberalism, as much as her purported intention to serve the interest of the state foreign policy. Riding on the rising *wanghong* phenomenon in China’s cultural scene, this chapter analyses the novel commerce-charity spectacle and the microcelebrity vigour in the matrix of benevolence, online economies, and political intervention in contemporary China.

Positioned in the ongoing COVID-19 threat, Chapter 6 explores the philanthropic narratives and an emergent form of solidarity embodied by Asian or Asian American stars in the time of the global health attack. In 2019, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus alarmed the world, swiftly garnering attention and assistance across the globe including Asia. The arrival of the pandemic coincides with an alarming rise of anti-Asian hate crime and xenophobia, prompting an array of celebrity-led, social media-oriented initiatives like the live-streamed concert called “Identity: Project Blue Marble” and the awareness campaigns of #WashTheHate and #TakeOutHate. Oriented in an inter-Asian setting, this chapter posits a cluster of celebrity philanthropists as an imagined alliance, rather than famed individuals, that evokes a sense of ethnic communal identity within and across distinctive geopolitical spaces. It hypothesises that such an alliance gives rise to a new type of pandemic-driven solidarity which relies on the assumption of a universal right of claiming a global citizenship but simultaneously is placed in an ethno-racial category. Such an ambivalent kind of solidarity problematises the idea of a homogenous Asia, unveiling intricacies of global infection and regional identification as substantiated in the COVID-ravaged world.

The concluding chapter offers an analysis that links these Asian celebrities together to underscore the ethics and ethos of activism and philanthropy in transnational cultural networks. It reiterates how cosmopolitics viably functions as the key frame to provide new insight on the image of celebrity activists and philanthropists by advancing a vision of a pluriverse rather than an already unified cosmos or a single world. It also reasserts the importance of reimagining Asian icons from the cosmopolitical perspective, which can open up further explorations and dialogues in the global landscape of activism and philanthropy.

A brief note of terminology is needed here. Whereas the meaning of activism is quite clearly delineated in both critical and popular discourses,



the conception of philanthropy may warrant some exposition. In common parlance, the terms philanthropy, charity, and humanitarianism are often used interchangeably (Kapoor 2013, 4; Richey 2016, 11). All three terms suggest a heightened sense of moral actions, which are well oriented towards a public good. While all these three terms signify helping one's fellow human beings (Kapoor 2013, 4), they contain differences in genealogy and meaning. "Philanthropy" connotes "love for mankind," which is manifested through generous donations to "good causes" (OED 2011). It is often used for secular, and typically corporate settings (Kapoor 2013, 4). In today's discourse, it is associated with business tycoons or humanitarian NGOs and their practices of universalising civic responsibility. "Charity" indicates an overtly Christian root that is connected to a sort of Christ-like love for others (OED 2011). Distinctively, "humanitarianism" is a term rendered widely by international relations scholars with a specific historical reference to the 1864 Geneva Convention's recognition of humanitarian principles in international law. It is rendered as the governance of the moral practice of war. The expansion of humanitarian space from the governance of war to relatively vague interventions in light of a presumed shared humanity can also be found as dated back to the crisis in Biafra in the 1970s. In this book, this term is occasionally used in a rather general sense in the analysis of Asian icons' embodiment of universal humanity and ethics.

"Do-gooding" is another term that is frequently adopted in recent literature. Jo Littler used the term to describe a specific sort of reaction to suffering at a distance which is capable of "generat[ing] a lot of hype and PR" (2008, 240). This is an umbrella notion that works across the religious spectrum and the public-private binary. Some suggest bifurcated positions are not of importance in the area of international and governmental policy (Littler 2008, 240), but others prove that celebrity "do-gooding" interacts in intriguing ways with international policy.

As part of the pragmatic discursive framework, this book retains to use the terms philanthropy and charity to signify celebrity-driven causes that are indicative of a sense of compassion and the moral basis of a shared humanity without forgoing with the use of the other two terms to refer to the specific nature of the humanitarian agendas and good deeds. It adopts philanthropy and charity as the vantage points of ruminating and elucidating Asian celebrities' intentions and actions that are responsive to human suffering and calamity, both general and specific. Yet in individual chapters, other tropes that denote the relatively specific nature of philanthropic culture such as spectacle of charity, politics of compassion, and celebrity citizenship are employed.



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