



Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:  
The 24th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-21 Oct 2023

## LIFESTYLE GOVERNMENTALITY IN CHINA: GOVERNING THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CITIZEN SUBJECTS THROUGH LIFESTYLE PRACTICES ON XIAOHONGSHU (RED)

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### Background and Context

China uses its sovereign power to govern Internet technology in a way that stabilizes party rule by imposing content censorship on digital media and platforms and establishing institutional control over the data infrastructure. The Cyberspace Administration of China highlighted that platform governance is tightly related to “national security, the lifeline of the national economy, major aspects of the people’s livelihood, and major public interests” (Xinhuanet, 2021). The oversight of lifestyle platforms and *wanghong* (the Chinese name for influencers) economy is playing a vital role in this endeavor. Xiaohongshu (Red), the Chinese biggest lifestyle sharing platform, as a collaborator and partner with China’s national cultural and political project (Wang & Lobato, 2019), aligns with multiple strategies of governing, shaping and guiding citizens through lifestyle practices. More than 200 million users share photos with accompanying texts, and videos about their shopping, fashion, travel, education and other lifestyle experiences and reviews on Red. In this article, I propose the term “lifestyle governmentality” to capture Red as a cultural technology of citizenship that directs self-managing subjects toward the desired outcomes sought by various governmental institutions. I suggest that the inducement offered by Red to facilitate and improve users’ personal life, fulfillment and success through lifestyle sharing is distinctly tied to a hybrid model of governmentality that combines neoliberal and socialist political reasoning about governance, enterprise, and social welfare.

### Main research questions

In this article, I apply a Foucauldian perspective of governmentality (Foucault, 1991; Gordon, 1991; Rose, 1998) and sociological lifestyle studies (Abercrombie et al., 2006; Binkley, 2007) to analyze how Red disseminates information, guidance and templates for self-shaping and improved living to shape and regulate the conduct of

Ju, R. (2023, October). *Lifestyle Governmentality in China: Governing the entrepreneurial subjects through lifestyle practices on Xiaohongshu (Red)*. Paper: presented at AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

citizen subjects. Here I locate the citizenship patterns Red enacts within a framework of governmentality that combines neoliberal and socialist programs, reforms, and discourses. The central questions guiding this research project are: 1) How do the historical, cultural, and social specificities of China's governmentality that frames "lifestyle" as a governmental mechanism influence the dispersed process of "self-making" on Red? 2) How does Red implement cultural training that indirectly governs the subjects under the name of lifestyle maximization, individual choice, and personal responsibility? 3) How do everyday users respond to, act through, rely on and negotiate with the governmental practices and authoritative discourses that position them as ideal entrepreneurial subjects?

## **Methodological frameworks**

Foucault's theory of governmentality considers the conduct of self as an ongoing life-project in which individuals are given agency, self-responsibility and self-empowerment (Foucault, 1982; Rose, 1998; Ouellette & Hay, 2007). This perspective has informed many studies citing lifestyle media as a cultural technology that translates authoritative discourses as chances for citizen subjects to exercise agency and enhance personal well-being within a neoliberal context (Lewis, 2011; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Woronov, 2016). The current literature focusing on the Chinese lifestyle platforms' relationships to theories of governmentality explores how these platforms facilitate the construction and spreading of authoritative knowledge in disciplining the female body (Liu & Wang, 2022; Liao, 2021) as well as the commercialization of the entrepreneurial labor of content creators (Guo, 2022). But this body of literature tends to overlook the interplay between the top-down and the bottom-up networks in which management and guidance over individuals and populations could occur with the active engagement of political authorities, lifestyle platforms, professional associations, and citizen subjects themselves. By formulating the concept "lifestyle governmentality," this article aims to bridge the gap between the Chinese framework of governmentality theories (Palmer & Winiger, 2019; Sigley, 2016; Jiang, 2020), which emphasize continuities with the Mao-era approach to total social mobilization and the reinvention of neoliberal techniques in shaping people's subjectivities, and lifestyle studies, which see lifestyle choices as a sense of identity formation and social group stratification (Bauman, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984; Weber, 1946).

## **Methods and preliminary findings**

This research projects combines a systematic document analysis of regulations, notices, and guidelines related to platform governance, with walk-through method (Light et al., 2018), and in-depth interviews with Red influencers (n=12) and users (n=35). An analysis on the documents released from 2018 to 2022 from the central and local government agencies and private enterprises allows me to develop empirical knowledge of how the notion of 'entrepreneurial citizenship' was framed in the governing focus of lifestyle platforms. Moreover, I attempt to grasp how these governmental techniques apprehend the everyday practices of users through an interview-centric ethnographic study. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. The open-ended nature of the questions was intended to elicit a narrative describing how users make meaning of their creativity, interaction and negotiation with Red's government processes and official

regulatory organizations. These data were generated and coded using thematic analysis (Gangneux, 2019).

The first section traces Chinese historical continuities and ruptures in the politicization of lifestyle practices that frame the current legal and regulatory framework of governing lifestyle platform. In the Revolutionary Era, the Chinese Communist Party's strategy of politicizing individual lifestyle choices was aimed at realizing its utopian vision of a classless society. Following the Open and Reform Policy in 1978, there was a significant shift in the governance of leisure and lifestyle, with the primary objective being to employ citizens' lifestyles as a means to display China's modernization. Today one of the major political and economic goals is to boost household spending in all realms of lifestyle and lift most of the population into the middle class, while keeping social mobility at a reasonable level. The Chinese governmental technologies for performing "the care of an entrepreneurial self" as an obligation to society are incorporated into the policy framework of platform governance.

The second section illustrates how the multiple strategies of governmentality that occur over and through the activities of lifestyle sharing reconcile two dimensions of placing users as subject of governance. First, Red partners with many governmental bodies that shape a kind of entrepreneurial self to facilitate "healthy" lifestyles for citizen subjects who could master themselves, care for themselves and govern themselves on behalf of the government's goals. These strategies include algorithmically constructing a regime of visibility by incentivizing influencers and their followers to produce knowledge in accordance with the entrepreneurial norm. Second, users are encouraged to organized into a "sisterhood community" that involves expertise networks to expand the values of marketplace into domains that were not previously considered economic, such as emotional life, romance relationships and selfhood. For example, an influencer mentioned that marriage and romance relationships should consider social class matching as it is even more important especially in light of the deceleration of China's booming economy.

The third section highlights when lifestyle governmentality works through the formation of users as entrepreneurial subjects, this form of governmentality also bears the enduring possibility of resistance (Ettlinger, 2018). The contemporary Chinese governmental discourses encourage a kind of self-improvement and empowerment through the acquisition of technological and civilizing skills to produce high-quality subjects under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party (Wallis, 2013). While Red is subjected to official regulatory actors including state laws and local administrative rules, it has also emerged as regulatory entities and powerful gatekeepers of lifestyle related content for its own commercial and social benefits. However, in this process, influencers and users were aware of the governing techniques and discussed about their negotiations, challenges, and resistances in our interview.

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