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Blue Sky Thinking: the effects of Aoi Sola in a Sino-Japanese context

Jamie Coates

White Rose East Asia Centre, Universities of Leeds and Sheffield, UK

j.coates@sheffield.ac.uk

In a climate of tense diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan, there are also transnational flows of people, media and commodities that signify increased connection between the two nations. These everyday mobilities form a bedrock of informal politics in Northeast Asia, related to, but also distinct from, government level Sino-Japanese relations. Frictions between China and Japan exist at both levels, however the meanings generated from these governmental and everyday tensions differ. Focusing on the case of the Japanese former adult video (AV) star Aoi Sola, whose name is a homophone of 'Blue Sky' in Japanese, I explore the kinds of political effects a celebrity may have, particularly as a symbol distributed transnationally across a wide array of media.

Aoi Sola's transnational celebrity status is constituted by multiple highly mobile public personas that carefully negotiate different cultural milieus (Coates 2014). Born in 1983 in Tokyo, Sola originally became a minor celebrity in Japan in the early 2000s through her roles in pornographic and pink films, which are

erotically charged and occasionally explicit avant-garde films. She eventually played small roles in television programs and films, and became a regular guest (*tarento*) on late night talk shows. She also featured in a singing group made up of young former adult stars called *muskatto*. The group released a marginally successful single in 2010 but has since disbanded. From 2002 to 2010, Aoi Sola featured in 95 AV productions, four ‘modelling-only’ productions (*gurabure*) and five Japanese TV dramas. She also featured in 10 direct-to-DVD release films and 15 theatrical release films. Despite this prolific output however, her popularity in Japan was starting to wane by 2008, and she made the decision to stop making adult videos.

During her decade of AV celebrity in Japan, other developments within the region ensured that her star persona would develop through informal networks within what Chua Beng huat has called ‘Pop Culture China’ (Chua 2012). Pop Culture China is a network of pop culture distribution based on proximate subtitling scripts, dialects and cultural content within the Chinese-speaking world. It includes, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the PRC, and Chinese speaking communities in Southeast Asia. In the early to mid-2000s Japanese media producers had not secured official distributors within large parts of Pop Culture China. Perhaps ironically, much of Japan’s ‘soft power’ success in East Asia grew out of the efforts of illegal fan subtitling and pirated DVDs (Crisp 2014; Iwabuchi, Muecke, and Thomas 2004; Jacobs 2012). Aoi Sola had developed a fan base in Taiwan who subtitled and redistributed her videos and images in the PRC. Firstly, via DVDs and then through P2P server links, she slowly became an icon of the illegal consumption of pornography within 2000s Mainland China. Her

popularity among young pornography consumers is encapsulated in one of her nicknames in China, ‘Teacher Aoi’ (*Cang Laoshi*). The Chinese pronunciation of Aoi’s surname (苍) is pronounced and written as ‘Cang’ in standardized PRC Chinese. ‘Laoshi’ is a respectful title for teachers. To a generation of young Chinese men who spent a large part of their lives online in the 2000s, Aoi Sola was seen as the first to ‘teach’ them about women’s bodies and sexuality.

Aoi Sola’s fan base in the PRC escalated after she started to engage in transnational promotional activities, largely through social media. In 2010 several events transformed her celebrity status, going from a popular porn star to a major online celebrity. Her rise to fame is now mythologized in the following story. On 11 April 2010, Sola opened a Twitter account where she posted comments on her daily life. Seeing that she had 2000 followers, she jokingly tweeted a question asking when she will have ten thousand. Twitter, alongside platforms such as Facebook and Google, was officially banned in 2009 in the PRC. It could be accessed via virtual private networks (VPN) that create a digital point-to-point connection between a user and a service provider, making the user’s activity more private and allowing them to appear as though they are using the service from outside of China. In late 2016 the domestic provision of VPN services in the PRC was made illegal. In 2010 Sola’s Twitter feed became hugely popular among young tech-savvy men who were able to get around Chinese web restrictions. After posting her question on the 11 April an influx of Chinese fans responded by bypassing Chinese government security, leaping over the ‘Great firewall of China’ (*fanqiang*), to sign up as her followers. It is now

purported that by 12 April 2010, the day after she posted her wistful comment, she had over ten thousand Twitter followers.

Moved by the efforts of her Chinese fans, Aoi Sola opened an account on Sina Weibo, a Chinese social media network similar to Twitter. She did it on her birthday, 11 November, which is coincidentally the popular ‘singletons day’ (*guanggunjie*) in China. Singletons day is a festival in China, which was invented in the 1990s and made popular via social media. Literally called the ‘bare sticks festival’ its name is derived from the repetition of 1s in the numeric representation of 11 November, suggesting singular life as well as some phallic connotations. Many ‘pathetic men’ (*diaosimen*) and ‘agoraphobic nerds’ (*zhainan*) claim ownership to this holiday, and it is more than fortuitous that a former porn star born on singletons day might have such a large following among this demographic. Within the first 24 hours of opening her Weibo account Aoi Sola had over 220,000 fans (Coates 2014a). In early 2017 she has over 17 million followers on her Weibo account (Aoi, 2017). Moreover, despite her originally male fan base, from a sample of the first 2000 fans on her Weibo account, which lists gender, it can be estimated that roughly 35-40 per cent of her fans are women.

Aoi Sola’s popularity as an online celebrity in China has moved beyond her star persona as a Japanese porn star. Her earnest attempts to study and communicate in Chinese with her online fans, as well as a range of China-specific cultural productions, shows careful consideration of her fan base. She has also donated large sums to charity causes, such as the Yushu earthquake in 2010 and the Yanan earthquake in 2013. She is now a spokesperson for male health in

China, and often appears at HIV awareness campaigns. She currently spends the majority of her time in Shanghai and Beijing, building a music career and promoting a line of lingerie she is said to have designed herself. Her music productions have been carefully crafted to appeal to Chinese audiences while also emphasizing her unique status as a transnational celebrity from Japan. For example, her first single release song, *Di Er Meng*, is a pop song with aesthetics reminiscent of the former Sino-Japanese star Li Xianglan/Ri Kōran, who appeared in propaganda films during Japan's occupation of China during the second Sino-Japanese war (1931-1945) (for more detailed analysis see Coates 2014 a; (Jennifer Coates b 2014).

While Aoi Sola's cultural productions show a nuanced understanding of the potential markets she must appeal to, the majority of her celebrity activities take the form of appearances and endorsements. She has endorsed condom companies and their promotion campaigns, popular restaurants such as the Beef Noodle chain 'Diaoye niunan', as well as car shows and tourism campaigns in several Chinese cities. In endorsing the underwear manufacturer 'Spakeys' Sola released her own line of lingerie as well. Over the past few years she has taken to using public performances where she writes Chinese calligraphy in endorsement of various events, campaigns and causes. This habit became particularly contentious in May 2013 when she sold a piece of calligraphy to one of her fans for US\$95,000. The calligraphy, originally intended as an endorsement for a theme park in Ningbo China, was the most expensive piece of calligraphy ever sold in modern Chinese records (Sohu News 2013). At the time of its release, Sola's fans came to heads with art critics and calligraphers in China who saw

Sola's work as clumsy (*zhuolie*). In contrast, Sola's fan's argued her amateur works reflected her 'young and tender' (*zhinen*) character.

Political Sola

Although the majority of Sola's activities tend to avoid political topics, she has become a political icon at the intersection of Pop Culture China and Sino-Japanese relations. During the same period of her rise to fame, Sino-Japanese relations became increasingly tense. These tensions were re-triggered in 2010 by, but not limited to, stand-offs over a series of islands in the East China sea (Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands). The escalating situation in the East China Sea has resulted in a series of disputes and incited major anti-Japan riots in September 2012. During the riots, large red banners were brandished by protesters, many of them with slogan 'the Diaoyu islands belong to China, and Aoi Sola belongs to the world!' At the same time, Aoi Sola posted a piece of Chinese calligraphy with the phrase 'friendship between the people of China and Japan' (*Zhonggirenminyouhao*) on her Sina Weibo account. She coupled the statement with the comment 'I hope for good relations between us average people...I am a person just like you. Feeling hurt...(shangxin)'. Over 130,000 comments were left in response to Sola's Weibo posting in 2012, ranging from sexually violent threats, to wistful comments about the impossibility of cosmopolitan politics, and even declarations of love (for detailed analysis see Coates 2014). Soon after the anti-Japan riots, Aoi Sola stated in an interview for Asahi Shinbun, a popular daily newspaper in Japan, that she no longer wished to discuss politics, and that her future social media activities will focus on making friends and responding to fans.

Despite her best efforts to avoid political topics Aoi Sola has little control over the political meanings attributed to her star persona. For example, in an interview with Japan's ambassador to China in November 2014, Aoi Sola's name was drawn into politics once again. After the death of Japanese actor Takakura Ken on 10 November, an obituary-style essay that reflected on his influence as a 'masculine god' (*nanshen*) that shaped Chinese ideas of modern masculinity, was published in the *People's Daily*. In many eyes Ken stood as an archetype of Asian masculinity through his macho roles in postwar films watched throughout Northeast Asia (Zhong 2000; Standish 2013). Ken also represented a different form of Sino-Japanese cultural relations, reflected in his collaborations with Zhang Yimou later in his life (see for example *Riding Along for Thousands of Miles* 2005). Takakura ken's death was a catalyst for discussions about China and Japan's cultural relations, and Japan's ambassador Kitera Masato agreed to be interviewed by Chinese journalists the week after Ken's death. During the interview Kitera was asked whether he had considered appointing Aoi Sola as a people's ambassador for Sino-Japanese cultural relations (*Zhongriminjian jiaoliudashi*). However, the ambassador dismissed the question by stating that the popularity of Japanese pornography in China was a disgrace and that Aoi Sola was the shame of Japan's performers (*Riben wenyijiedechiru*) (Sina.com 2014). Aoi Sola, in line with her promises of never engaging in political discussions again, gave no comments on the suggestion of her being a people's ambassador. Nonetheless, the mention of Sola as an ambassador sparked heated debates among online commentators and fans in China.

In contrast to the political interests of her fans and commentators, over 2015 and 2016, Sola focused explicitly on building her career in China while playing several acting roles throughout East Asia. Online, her blog posts largely consisted of everyday posts of her eating, shopping and spending time with friends, making efforts to underplay the political undertones attributed to her star persona as a symbol. In 2016, the closest activity she engaged in that could be read as political was her endorsement of a campaign to prevent desertification through reforestation in Qinghai province, China. The campaign was started by the Chinese goji berry juice company Damohong, goji being one of the major agricultural industries of Qinghai. Sola acted as a spokesperson for the campaign, which planned to prevent the arid saltmarsh basin spanning from Mongolia to Tibet from growing by planting salt resistant shrubs. Sola's role as a spokesperson for Damohong is not coincidental however, as goji are believed to improve one's sexual health in traditional Chinese medicine.

Aoi Sola, politics and theorising celebrity

How does the case of Aoi Sola fit into discussions of celebrities as informal political actors? As Andrew Cooper has shown, celebrities such as U2's Bono, have played diplomatic roles over the past 30 years, particularly in terms of international aid (Cooper and Frechette 2007). Similarly, Kellner has suggested that celebrity status is increasingly playing a role in electoral politics, where the popularity of candidates is dependent on the same technologies, spectacles and media flows as celebrities in general (Kellner 2012). However, these analyses have focused on celebrities and popular politicians as direct agents of their political actions. That is, when Bono attended the Gleneagles G8 summit as an

advocate for growth and responsibility in Africa, he attended with explicit political objectives and acted as an agent for those objectives. Much of the work on celebrities and politics has focused on the potential roles these new political actors might play more than the ways in which their star persona is constructed. However, the case of Aoi Sola suggests the ways in which celebrities produce political effects that extend beyond the actions of stars themselves.

Aoi Sola's case is perhaps the opposite of Bono's. She is extremely hesitant to engage in political discussions, and when she has in the past, her appeals were simple reminders of China and Japan's shared humanity. Moreover, through her political silence since the 2012 riots, she has quietly rejected calls for her to act as a political agent. Over the past 4 years, her online activities and media involvement have been strictly business-related. She has formed a band, released several singles, appeared on television, and engaged in various endorsement. Her celebrity persona however, still acts as a symbol of Sino-Japanese relations, whether she likes it or not. She is a celebrity with diplomatic effects, rather than a celebrity diplomat.

The growing field of celebrity studies has emphasized the constructed and public nature of fame (Couldry 2015; Dyer 1998; Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001; Turner et al 2004). Celebrity is not 'a property of specific individuals. Rather, it is constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented' (Turner *et al.*, 2000: 11). The case of Aoi Sola is illustrative for the field of celebrity studies for a number of reasons. Her role as a transnational celebrity challenges the methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick

Schiller 2002) and Anglophone bias still common within many theorisations of celebrity (Coates 2014a). Moreover, her movement from porn celebrity to a singing and acting online celebrity with a variety of business interests in the Sinophone world, suggests much food for theorisations of how celebrity and star persona are co-constituted. In particular, the contrasts between the various facets of Sola's star persona: wise yet naïve; apolitical yet highly politicized; earnest yet highly instrumental; and, innocent yet highly sexual, coupled with the mythologization of her rise to fame, through coincidences and lack of intentionality, is suggestive of the complexity of celebrity in a highly gendered transnational polymedia world. It is not within the scope of this commentary to cover all of these topics, although they have been discussed to some extent elsewhere (see Coates 2014a).

The focus of this paper has been on how Sola challenges the way we think about informal political actors such as celebrities. Considering the constructed and circulatory nature of celebrity, discussions of informal political action would benefit from considering not only the informal, non-governmental agents who act as diplomats, such as Bono or Angelina Jolie, but also the symbols that shape the conditions for diplomacy. Symbols, intimacies and the various other phenomena that extend beyond advocacy are the foundations for 'sustainable diplomacies' (Constantinou and Der Derian 2010; Wellman 2004). Celebrities whose star persona stretch over national and linguistic boundaries feed into public imaginaries about other cultures and nations, and allow those seen as culturally different to inhabit the intimate sphere of everyday media

interactions. In order to understand how this intimacy is produced, and what potential political effects it might have, it is important to not only look at celebrities who act as political advocates, but also how celebrity persona contribute to transnational cultural fields more generally.

Despite Sola's explicit commitment to avoid politics, her political message still circulates in Pop Culture China. The separation between her own activities and the meanings attributed to them, tells us something about how celebrities have captured the public imagination in China and the ways these imaginaries circulate in ways distinct from the actions of celebrities themselves. In this sense, they tell us as much about the Chinese public, as they do about Aoi Sola herself. Much like her message of 'friendship between the people of China and Japan' that she posted during the ant-Japanese riots in 2012, Sola's politics are relatively non-committal. They don't favour a side in the debates around Sino-Japanese relations, but rather make an appeal to a shared humanity through the trope of friendship, sexuality and consumption. They are political, in terms of an abstract cosmopolitan politics, but are also anti-political in terms of partisan nation-state based politics. The repeated distribution of these characters by Chinese netizens, as both a phrase and an image, signify a particular kind of political desire, and demonstrates the role that celebrities play in translating, inspiring and circulating imaginaries that may potentially foster 'sustainable diplomacies'.

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