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# Rogue diva flows: Aoi Sola's reception in the Chinese media and mobile celebrity

Jamie Coates<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of East Asian Studies, University of Sheffield, UK

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Theorizations of celebrity often contend with questions of the constructed nature of star persona. This is more so the case when discussing divas in Japan, as they are subject to a wide range of gender regimes that mould the ways in which their persona is produced and consumed. Contemporary forms of transnationalism in East Asia, however, have created media flows and fan bases that provide new opportunities for Japanese female celebrities to re-construct their star personas, transcending their celebrity status in Japan. Focusing on the case of Aoi Sola, a Japanese adult video actress turned celebrity, this article demonstrates how transnational East Asian flows problematize our static theorization of celebrity. Sola's interactions with her Chinese social media fan base have afforded her a cosmopolitan persona that has been celebrated as a cultural bridge between China and Japan. At the same time, her star persona leaves her vulnerable to reinscriptions into transnational politics as played out in everyday media flows.

This dynamic is best demonstrated in Sola's attempts to quell anti-Japanese sentiment in China as well as in her efforts to reinscribe her star persona using nostalgic associations of cultural similarity and a shared past. Based on analyses of Sola's celebrity trajectory from adult video to online Chinese mediascape Diva, this article suggests that contemporary star persona status is better understood in terms of gender, movement and 'meshworks'

Keywords: China; Japan; mobility; star persona; pornography; internet

On 23 May 2013 Aoi Sola (pronounced Aoi Sora in Japanese), a former Japanese adult video (AV) actress, sold a piece of calligraphy to a Chinese fan for approximately US\$95,000 (Sohu 2013). The calligraphy featured the eight characters '好玩的凤凰山乐园' (Haowan de fenghuang shan leyuan) which can be roughly translated as the 'Fun Fenghuang Mountain Park', and was written while visiting a park in Ningbo, China. Chinese art purists erupted in consternation, with one commentator calling Sola's work 'clumsy' (zhuolie), while Sola's fans defended her work, stating that her performances and art reflect her 'morally upstanding' (jiecao) and 'young and tender' (zhinen) qualities. However, the vice president of the Shanghai Youth calligraphy club Tang Jihui rejected these commentators' remarks, stating that the obvious factor influencing the appeal of Sola's artwork was her celebrity status. This article reflects on Tang Jihui's comment, exploring how it is that a moderately popular Japanese pornography actress has emerged as a superstar in China. Sola has become a female celebrity revered to the point of quasi-deification; that is, a 'diva'. However, the processes by which she achieved this status are fluid and complex. She is often referred to as a 'goddess' (nūshen) among online fans in

the Chinese mediascape and is generally seen as one of the most significant examples of online female celebrity in China today. Sola's fame in China was not of the explosive type often written of in media and star studies, but emerged out of a complex entanglement of transnational media flows, including social media, journalism and the illegal circulation of her work as a Japanese AV actress. What is more, not only has her celebrity status moved within East Asia, it has transformed with each movement. Sola shifts between embedded forms of celebrity in Japan with their own unique dynamics, such as the 'idol' (aidoru) and 'talent' (tarento) celebrity identities, and her status as a 'teacher' and 'goddess' in China. Aoi Sola's status as a 'diva' is constituted by the way her persona has moved between cultural milieus, genres and media, and so Sola's status as a 'diva' reveals the need to add concepts related to mobility to extant theorizations of celebrity.

Recent scholarship on contemporary female celebrity in Japan has emphasized the multiple and decentred construction of celebrity across a variety of media texts (cf. Galbraith and Karlin 2012). This has mostly been explored in terms of the 'idol' and the 'talent', who are arguably emic Japanese forms of the 'diva'. The term 'idol' is mostly associated with young performers who appear in multiple media forms and 'project themselves as clean, healthy and energetic' (Galbraith and Karlin 2012, 4). Idols predominantly come from performing groups of young men and women, such as Morning Musume, SMAP and AKB48, who embody Japanese ideals of purity, health and earnest forms of fun. The 'talent', in a similar vein, entered the Japanese media at the peak of televisual consumption in the 1990s, and embodied concepts of intimacy and the everyday (Lukács 2010). Talents mostly appear in variety TV, a genre of television that combines talk shows, performances, news and other activities akin to reality TV in a uniquely Japanese form of pastiche. They become famous for being famous, and are rarely known for any particular genre of performance, although they often have unusual catchphrases or behaviour. Most importantly, however, 'talents' act as the sounding board for other media content in television, in many ways standing in for the everyday viewer. Through these two examples of Japanese celebrity we can see how the networked meanings between texts constitute the celebrity of Japanese 'idols' and 'talents', rather than any particular text or performer (Fiske 2011).

The intertextual and decentred nature of Japanese celebrity mirrors Richard Dyer's foundational account of the construction of star persona in the celebrity. Dyer suggests that 'what is important about stars, especially in their particularity, is their typicality or representativeness. Stars, in other words, relate to the social types of a society' (Dyer and McDonald 1998, 49). Scholarship on 'idols' and 'talents' reflects this interpretation of celebrity, as 'talents' are generally understood as reflective of wider social ideals of purity and intimacy. However, where Dyer talks of structures, codes and functions, recent scholars have tended to use network metaphors to simultaneously flatten and loosen the ways in which we think about celebrity in terms of power and agency (Galbraith and Karlin 2012). Both metaphors are useful in thinking through a detailed analysis of how celebrity is constructed within a particular cultural milieu, and in many senses are iconic of the way in which meanings become reified in a given society. For example, there is much resonance between Dyer's approach and Emile Durkheim's classic discussion of religion in

society (Durkheim 1965). Durkheim describes how religious symbols reflect particular social types and concerns within a given society, their sacred nature becoming a ploy to immortalize said society's sense of coherence. Durkheim's analysis is particularly pertinent to female celebrities who are referred to in quasireligious terminology, such as 'idols', 'talents' and 'divas'.

The similarities between Durkheim, Dyer and more recent celebrity scholarship also reflect a small limitation within the area of study, namely its reliance on closed or static metaphors for society and culture. The star personae of celebrities such as Aoi Sola raise questions about how we theorize transnationally constructed celebrities, and whether there is a relationship between gender and the process of theorization. I would argue that a final push towards a more mobile, translational and textual metaphor for celebrity helps us to further conceptualize cases such as that of Aoi Sola's. I will use the term 'meshwork' to refer to the interconnected and constructed meanings of celebrity that are at the same time mobile. Tim Ingold (borrowing from Henri Lefevre) has described a 'meshwork' as a kind of text woven out of intersecting and overlapping lines of movement rather than connections between individuated nodes (Ingold 2007). This metaphor contrasts with that of the network or structure, which often implies a situation where one thing remains static – the network or structure – while another thing circulates through it – in most cases information or meaning. In the case of Aoi Sola and the mediascape she is a feature of, very few things stand still. She is a participant in, and product of, the 'rogue flows' evident within East Asia, complicating our ideas of global meaning production and consumption (Iwabuchi, Thomas, and Muecke 2004; Iwabuchi 2002). Sola's 'diva' status is a meshwork emerging from multiple movements created out of the circulation of her Japanese-produced media texts, her own social media interactions, the commentary spawned from this and the production of new media texts in China.

### **The many lives of Sola**

Aoi Sola was already embedded in a meshwork of stardom before she became popular in China. In fact, her career resembled a series of translations and movements between several genres and celebrity types within the Japanese media world. She started her career in the adult entertainment industry at the age of 19 as a swimsuit model, entering the company 'AliceJapan' in 2002. By 2003 she had already been voted the most popular new female artist in the Japanese adult industry in Bejean magazine (Bejean 2004). While continuing her pornographic work in the early 2000s, Aoi Sola slowly moved into several other fields of popular culture. She no longer limited herself to AV films but appeared in several television series, on talk shows as a 'talent', and even began to show an interest in a musical career. Her multi-media presence and prolific output started to catch the attention of fans overseas, as well as new domestic audiences. Through her appearances on variety shows and various media, by 2005 Aoi Sola came to be more commonly known as a 'sexy talent' (sekushī tarento) and 'sexy idol' (sekushii aidoru) rather than an AV actress (AV jōyu). Despite rumours that Sola would retire in 2006, she continued to appear in AV genres in Japan until her recent surge in popularity in China. The company who distributes her AV material has also continued to release compilations

of her previous work.

Overall, Sola's output prior to 2010 was partly defined by the vicissitudes of celebrity and the AV industry in contemporary Japan. Her work was prolific and spanned a multitude of media, but also overshadowed itself in its immensity. In this sense, there were very few films that stood out as her most significant works and her star status was defined by the intertextual meshwork that the corpus of her work created. A brief outline of her appearances prior to her celebrity rise in China in 2010 gives a sense of how prolific this kind of media production in Japan can be (Anon. 2014). 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 other less explicitly pornographic films, including 10 direct-to-DVD release films and 15 theatrical release films. Her prolific output received mixed reviews, although she received a 'best new actress' award for her leading role in *Tsumugi* (Takahara Hidekazu, 2004) (Toda 2005). Sola also played small roles in several productions elsewhere in East Asia, including a Thai teen comedy called *Hormones* (Pit thom yai hua chai wawun, Sugmakanan Songyo, 2008) and Wong Ching-po's Hong Kong production of *Revenge: A Love Story* (Fuk sau che chi sei, 2010). Sola's output during this period was not limited to film and TV dramas, as she featured in a Japanese variety show where AV actresses and various other sekushī tarento performed together (*Onegai?!Masukatto*) (TV Tokyo 2014). An AV 'idol' group called the *Ebisu Masukatto* formed from the basis of this variety show, blurring the lines between the genres of AV and TV variety, as well as putting a hybrid sexualized twist on the genre of 'idol' style groups. Sola issued her first musical release within this group, *Banana Mango High School* (Ebisu Muscats, 2010). However, the group has since disbanded due to the popularity of its individual members and their inability to schedule enough performances where all were present. Sola's new popularity in China contributed to this issue.

Looking at the immensity of Sola's predominantly Japan-based media production it is easy to see how the widespread structuring of Japan's mediascape shaped Aoi Sola's celebrity potential. However, Sola only held moderate celebrity status in Japan, and some critics suggest that her popularity was already waning by 2010. From 2010 onwards, however, Sola's personal online micro-blogging efforts led to a 'diva' status in China that has already outshone her previous work and fed back into her popularity in Japan, East Asia and the world at large. On 11 April 2010, Sola opened a Twitter account where she posted comments on her daily life. Although Twitter is technically unavailable in China, her Twitter feed became hugely popular among young tech-savvy men who were able to find ways to get around Chinese web restrictions. Sola ran the site herself and had attracted a few fans within the Chinesespeaking world, initially in Taiwan where Twitter is available and there are fewer censorship laws. Due to her multi-lingual fan base, Sola committed herself to using services such as Google Translate to respond to fans' comments. This resulted in several endearing mistakes, such as the mistaken translation of 'fan' (fensi) as 'soccer fan' (qiumi) in Chinese, when she posted "Thank you to all my Chinese "soccer fans"". Her mistakes highlighted her clumsy but earnest attempts to attract fans, which have been interpreted as a form of 'cuteness' highly valued among her Chinese followers. Many mainland Chinese net users began to forward her tweets to others,

eventually 'climbing the wall' (fanqiang, a euphemism for breaching China's restrictive internet policies) to register as overseas Twitter users. Sola stated that when she heard of these acts she was greatly moved and decided to open her own account in the Chinese equivalent to Twitter (Xinlang Weibo, hereafter referred to as Weibo), a social media site based on micro-blogging.

On her birthday on 11 November 2010, Aoi Sola opened her Weibo account and received over 220,000 followers within the first 24 hours of registration. Sola's Weibo following overtook her Twitter following in only six hours. She currently has nearly 15 million fans on Weibo alone. China now has the largest national body of internet users; to give a sense of the immensity of China's online mediascape, according to the China Internet Network Information Center, China had 538 million internet users by the end of June 2012 (CNNIC 2013). It was projected that China's internet population would hit 718 million by the end of 2013, accounting for 52.7% of the total population. Around 55% of users are male and under 25, with 80% of users under 40, making them the youngest and largest national group of internet users in the world. In line with this huge user base, Weibo is estimated to be three times the size of Twitter.

In the popular and political sphere, discussions over Sola's star status have served as an alternative site to reflect on relations between China and Japan, as well as cultural differences between Chinese and Japanese women. These discussions have proliferated throughout various media forms showing how the meanings attached to celebrity status are impregnated in the ways they are circulated. Aoi Sola's rise to diva status in the People's Republic of China has puzzled many social commentators in Japan and caught the attention of wider mediascapes. Within Japan, her boom in popularity had one economist dubbing contemporary China's tendency towards 'fevers' (re) as the 'Aoi Sola phenomenon' (Aoi Sora Genshō). Similarly, China commentary sites such as ChinaSMACK.com have speculated on her role in Sino-Japanese relations. Indeed, even *The Economist* aired an article on Sola entitled 'Can't We All Just Get It On?.'

### **Sola as an AV celebrity**

In thinking about Sola's rise to diva status, it is important to reflect not only on the widespread movements of her celebrity image, but also on the ways in which they are enmeshed in the media texts in which she has featured. Sola's image as an earnest and admirable diva is connected to her position as a star originally born out of the pornographic texts in which she began her career. Dyer, Rojek and Marshall all discuss the relationship between film and star persona:

The film may, through its deployment of the other signs of character and the rhetoric of film, bring out certain features of the star's image and ignore others. In other words, from the structured polysemy of the star's image certain meanings are selected in accord with the overriding conception of the character in the film. (Dyer and McDonald 1998, 127)

Pornography is slightly different from narrative film in that, although it has been a narrative genre at times, the ways in which it is viewed and the organization of its content has predominantly been structured as affective and erotic grabs or vignettes, where the viewer is encouraged to focus on very particular aspects of the star's

bodily performance. Peter Lehman (2006) highlights this when he criticizes Linda Williams's work on narrative and identification in pornography. Williams, in her theorization of pornography as a film genre, has emphasized the narrative conventions that make pornography similar to musicals, replacing sex scenes for musical numbers (Williams 1989). Although Lehman admits that many porn films have had narrative elements, he emphasizes a different style of viewing practice and identification. In particular he notes that its fleeting erotic moments and kitsch tell us something about the varying importance of narrative and star identification in pornography: 'Since porn does not invest much in the believability of its fictional world, it acknowledges that spectators are really watching actors perform sexually, not characters' (Lehman 2006, 89). Consequently, 'porn fans' according to Lehman displace 'their star fascination entirely upon the actor and his or her body' (2006, 89).

The majority of Sola's pornographic work adheres in many ways to Lehman's observation. Prior to her popularity, Sola, like many AV actors, featured in single scenes within edited compilation DVDs or as a minor character within larger narrative features. As demonstrated in the image taken from Sola's mid-career AV film under her S1 distributor, the emphasis is on the array of affective moments she participates in. In particular, shots that shift between her genitals and orgasmic expressions or which are positioned in ways that include both are common. These shots are often framed in terms of the spectator and classed as a genre of pornography called a 'point of view' or POV, whereby the viewer is invited to engage with the anatomical details of Sola and affective moments they create. Even as Sola's popularity rose in Japan, and she starred in more narrative-based features, the emphasis on her physical characteristics and performances continued. Sola's role in *Tsumugi* epitomizes the image of the young girl or *shōjo* that has become popular in Japan over the past 30 years. This complex assemblage of innocence and power is an object of fascination within wider media circles; its fans are mostly male, and its polysemous content obsessed with images of female excess (Kinsella 2013; McVeigh 2000). In the pornographic narrative 'pink' film *Tsumugi*, Sola plays the titular schoolgirl infatuated with her teacher. After pursuing him incessantly, she wins his affections. At the same time, however, *Tsumugi* discovers the teacher is having an affair with another teacher while his wife is pregnant. *Tsumugi* also flirts with one of her classmates, eventually falling in love with him.

**Figure 1 (not included). A Life With Aoi Sola is Filled with Sex! (Sora to no kyōdō seikatsu wa 24 jikansekkusu zanmai!) (Aki Hideto, 2006).**

Finally, the teacher *Tsumugi* had been pursuing declares he wants to leave his wife for her, only to have her reject his affections, leaping from a car to her death in what can be interpreted as an act of protest, or as reinscribing the active desiring heroine back into a male-driven narrative (Standish 2005, 257).

As with many pink films, there is a slightly experimental flavour here as Aoi's character *Tsumugi* mischievously laces her coquettish performance with exaggerated facial expressions and theatrical poses, in many ways reminiscent of a clown. She also repeatedly poses riddles about the meaning of love, which emphasize a sense of

innocent playfulness coupled with forcefulness, like many shōjo characters. However, true to theatrical pornography, the plot facilitates a series of sexual encounters that punctuate seemingly unrelated scenes. These narrative features conform to the tension between ‘numbers’ (in the musical sense) and narrative as suggested by Williams, but when weighed up against the body of Sola’s other work it would seem that the narrative conventions bolster the meshwork that forms her star persona, which is still mostly based upon her physical characteristics.

The emphasis on physical characteristics as part of star persona is central to the way magazines that promote and review pornography in Japan describe AV stars. Aoi Sola’s review profile in VideoBoy magazine shows her height, bust size, weight and ethnicity as her most defining features (VideoBoy 2014). This perhaps explains why the majority of AV actresses rarely attain the level of celebrity of other entertainers, or at least why when they do, the lifespan of their star persona is markedly short. Aoi Sola’s celebrity status thus relied more on her movements from AV genres to other genres such as erotic pink narrative films and variety shows, which allowed her to develop a persona that exceeded pornographic stardom. At the same time, however, Sola’s celebrity as an AV star allowed her to move, chameleonlike, between genres and media, partly due to the lack of a narrative convention surrounding her star persona.

In her regular appearance as a ‘sexy talent’ in the variety show Onegai?! Masukatto Sola became a hybrid celebrity whose fans, familiar with the intimate details of her body, were able to welcome her into the televisual intimacies of the ‘talent’ system (Galbraith and Karlin 2012). Her appearances in feature films and television shows also promoted her image as iconic of the intersections between the AV industry and young girls as envisioned in media debates surrounding shōjo.

**Figure 2 (not included). In Tsumugi (2004) Aoi Sola’s character mischievously laces her coquettish performance with exaggerated facial expressions and theatrical poses.**

At the beginning of Kiraware Matsuko no isshō/Memories of Matsuko (Nakashima Tetsuya, 2006) Sola makes a short appearance playing herself but with very little explanation. In the first two minutes of the film a narrator talks over a montage of Shibuya youth culture, identified as the year 2001 in subtitles. As the narrator states that ‘everybody dreams’, the camera cuts back and forth between a group of dancers and a young Aoi Sola dressed as a schoolgirl sitting on some steps nearby. A garishly dressed man approaches her and asks if she would like to become an AV star; she responds with a smile, the camera closing in on her expression as she is led away by the man.

### **Transnational Sola**

Aoi Sola’s early popularity in Japan has been largely attributed to her ability to seem infant-like and sexual at the same time. This image has carried her to guest star in overseas productions too, such as the aforementioned Thai film Hormones where she plays a Japanese tourist who tempts a young teenage boy away from his devoted girlfriend. Sola’s more serious overseas appearances, such as the Hong Kong

production *Revenge: A Love Story* (Ching-Po Wong 2010), also rely on her gendered physicality. In Wong's film, Sola plays a victim of a horrific murder, suggesting that Sola's star persona travels easiest in genres of excess, whether sexual or violent. Sola's sexualized physicality was a large part of her initial popularity in China; her round face and large bust have become iconic, and her appearance is often denoted by a four-character phrase, *tongmian juru*, which translates to 'a child-faced beauty with a giant bust'. While the popularity of her sexualized image in China is irrefutable, the way in which it has intersected with the circulations of web-based media is the factor that has ensured her rise to 'goddess' status. Aoi Sola's image and pornographic work first entered China through informal networks of pirated DVDs as well as closed file-sharing mechanisms. China, despite only granting private access to the internet in 1997, has had a longer history of content regulation than most other countries (Chen and Ang 2011). Since 2000, '[c]ontent that disseminates obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, homicide and terror, or incites crime' has been forbidden within Chinese web spaces (Chen and Ang 2011, 45).

**Figure 3 (not included). Aoi Sola's review profile in *VideoBoy* (2014) indicates her height, bust size, weight and ethnicity as her most defining features.**

This content regulation is more achievable in China than many other sections of the web due to the Chinese government's ownership of its infrastructure, which it rents to private companies. What is more, the Chinese internet infrastructure is largely facilitated via a few transpacific cables with limited bandwidth, making the internet in China more an intranet that has been retrofitted to global service providers (Fong 2009). Despite these regulations, however, the digitalization of Sola's content and the provision of closed addresses that internet users can use to access collectors' personal archives means that Sola is largely associated with internet content, including pornography, social media and journalism. Indeed, a widely circulated joke about the differences between levels of mobile internet access, which now constitutes the most popular mode of access, suggests that Sola has in many ways become a signifier for the internet in itself:

2G is a text file of Aoi Sola, 3G is a jpeg image of Aoi Sola and 4G is an Avi video of Aoi Sola. ('Enter' 2011)

In moving into the Chinese mediascape, Aoi Sola's sexualized image transformed. In particular, her image as a 'young girl' became reinscribed as a 'teacher' due to the role her sexualized material played in many young internet users' lives. A common way for people to refer to Aoi Sola is using variants of 'teacher' and the Chinese pronunciation of her name (Cang Laoshi, Cangshi, etc.). Having talked to fans on Weibo and followed a few threads on the reasons for this, it appears that her image as a teacher is a reference to her being the first pornographic star many online fans ever saw. As one of my friends explained to me, she 'taught them the intimacies of sex and desire'. Although 'teacher' originally refers to her porn star status, nowadays it appears to be simply a phrase associated with her particular star persona, and is used by Aoi's fans who have little interest in her pornographic work. As noted earlier, Aoi Sola didn't realize her popularity in mainland China until she started using social media in 2010. User-generated social media such as Twitter,

Youtube and Weibo complicate our understandings of agency in relation to media texts, as often the relationship between producer and consumer is collapsed (Dijk 2009). The investigation of celebrities who use these media also further complicates our understanding of the media themselves, particularly those historically separated by discipline, because they show the ways in which celebrity is constructed intertextually across a meshwork of narratives and diverse media forms. In fact, these new technologies have created what Senft calls 'micro-celebrities', a phenomenon where user-generated self-representations gain temporary star status (Senft 2008). Celebrities often co-opt new media such as user-generated content to reinscribe the trajectories of their star persona; in the case of Aoi Sola, user generated media transformed her star persona from that of young girl to teacher and diva.

Aoi Sola's Weibo account affects an air of playful diligence (Aoi 2013). At the top of her Weibo account's main page she writes in Chinese:

Hello everyone, I'm Aoi Sola, sometimes I appear on films, or sing songs. Sometimes I make appearances on television shows. For better communication with you all, I'm diligently studying...

Sola's Weibo page is purportedly managed by herself and mainly involves self-portraits and anecdotal comments about her everyday life. She juxtaposes images of herself as a girl next door, earnestly learning Chinese and calligraphy, with that of a glamorous performer, both singer and actress. Since opening her Weibo account, Sola has been invited to appear on a wide range of talk shows and roundtables, and has taken it upon herself to promote several charities, such as a campaign for HIV prevention (Wang 2013). She has also released several singles in the Chinese language, which perhaps best represent the ways in which she plays with a more glamorous star persona.

In the music video for her song titled 'Di Er Meng'/'Second Dream' (Li Ying, 2012), the camera cuts between scenes of Sola exploring the streets of Shanghai, particularly those from the former colonial sectors, and shots of her dressed as a stylish 1930s bar singer holding a feathered fan. The music video was designed to accompany a short film featuring Sola which tells the story of a young cosplay performer who goes to Shanghai after her partner leaves her. As she explores the city she listens to the 1930s recordings of Manchurian-born Japanese performer Li Xianglan (Ri Ko-ran), and eventually comes to a bar where, after drinking heavily, she dreams of the singer. The scenes of Sola in present-day China are filmed in a grainy black and white, while the bar scenes are painted in rich hues and costumes. Sola's lyrics echo the sense of nostalgia affected in the music video. She sings:

You told me to forget you, to forget you;  
But how is it that you return to me in dreams;  
My hatred is only that dreams are baseless;  
And I awake to a cheek only covered in tears.

'Second Dream' is itself a meshwork of multiple media texts: a short film, a music video and several Weibo postings, which intersect with various lines of memory and meaning. It demonstrates that Sola, and those who help to produce her media texts in China, are highly conscious of her position as a Japanese woman singing in a Chinese music video produced for a Chinese audience.

**Figure 4 (not included). The music video for Aoi Sola's 'Second Dream' ('Di Er Meng'), shot in Shanghai.**

Citing historic 'divas' such as Li Xianglan (see Jennifer Coates, this issue), and nostalgic aesthetics of Shanghai's former days of high fashion, this media text signifies the complex semiotics of transnational media flows between China and Japan. Sola's star persona and engagement with online fans seems to negotiate the dynamics of this field very carefully, attempting to demonstrate a keen interest in Chinese culture through references to historic ties between China and Japan, as well as performances that embody these connections, such as singing in an imagined 1930s style or practising a cultural art shared by the two nations, such as calligraphy. These new significations, whether intentional or not, have allowed Sola to move into new fan bases and new spheres of media interaction that disassociate her from her sexualized shōjo image, and resignify her as an admirable, if still at times 'clumsy', cultural mediator. One potential indication of this is her massive female fan base across several social media platforms, and the ever-growing media hype about her potential to teach us lessons in 'safe' and peaceful forms of subversive resistance.

#### **The vulnerability of diva-hood**

Sola's celebrity status has dragged her into debates surrounding China–Japan relations and at times has made her the target of sexually violent online threats and criticisms. Her rise to stardom in China has paralleled escalating tensions within the region, triggered by, but not limited to, stand-offs over a series of islands known as the Senkaku in Japanese and the Diaoyu in Chinese. The escalating situation in the South China Sea islands has resulted in a series of disputes and incited major anti-Japan riots in September 2012.

**Figure 5. During anti-Japanese demonstrations in China, Aoi Sola posted a piece of Chinese calligraphy on her Weibo which stated 'Friendship between the People of China and Japan'.**

During the riots, Aoi Sola posted a piece of Chinese calligraphy on her Weibo which stated 'Friendship between the People of China and Japan', appealing for peace between the common people of both nations.

Reactions to Sola's calligraphy suggest both the 'carnavalesque' nature of contemporary online Chinese media (Herold 2011), as well as the ways in which female celebrity is positioned within it. Over 130,000 comments were left in response to this Weibo posting, ranging from sexually violent threats ('friendship your mother's cunt, I'll beat you to death, bitch' [youhao ni magebi dasinigegouride]) to wistful comments about the impossibility of cosmopolitan politics ('a shared hope ... but things are very tense at the moment sister Sola' [gongtongqiwang ... danshi xianzaijushihenjinzhangya kongjie]) and even to declarations of love ('Teacher Aoi, we'll love you forever ... no matter what' [canglaoshi women yijiu aini ... wulunruhe]).

I read the diverse and at times violent language used by some commentators along the lines of David Herold's comment that contemporary online media in China acts much like Bakhtin's 'carnival' (Herold 2011). As Bakhtin notes, the carnival is 'a place for working out, in concretely sensuous, half-real and half-playacted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals' (Bakhtin 1984, 123,

italics in the original). The mode of interrelationship being worked out here, however, is perhaps less between individuals than between competing images of China's relationship with the rest of the world, particularly Japan. This resonates with Iwabuchi's analysis of the role of transnational media in East Asia which makes alternative 'Asian modernities' imaginable via flows that complicate dominant Anglophone media (Iwabuchi, Thomas, and Muecke 2004; Iwabuchi 2002). With the rise of China as a military and economic power within the region, we can see how fantasies of a Chinese future where military aggression is possible are played out and enacted upon the figure of Aoi Sola. Similarly, a more inclusive but potentially equally nationalistic future of Chinese peaceful inclusion or cosmopolitanism is played out in the declarations of love found within these comments.

Regardless of how we interpret each comment, what is evident is that Aoi Sola, as a prominent transnational female celebrity, exacts very particular responses. This suggests as much about how we think about some potentially universal aspects of 'diva' status as it tells us about contemporary media and nationalism in China. For example, some of the language used to dismiss Sola's calligraphy resonates with scholarly understandings of the way in which women's bodies relate to national imaginaries. Jan Jindy Pettman observes that 'the state is often gendered male and the nation female – the mother country' (Pettman 1996, 49). Similarly, Julia Kristeva argues, 'The biological fate that causes us to be the site of the species chains us to space, home, native soil, motherland' (Kristeva 1993, 33–34, emphasis in the original). Considering the associations between gender and the nation, the propensity for a 'diva' to circulate transnationally, as much as within a particular milieu, becomes more tenable. However, it also comes with vulnerabilities. Sola, as a porn actress turned goddess who still carries the traces of her entertainment past, is uniquely situated to become the subject of praise and derision in a kind of carnivalesque everyday transnational politics. Furthermore, she is the best diva to love for those with ironic dispositions because she is the diva least likely to be accepted by hegemonic forms of nationalism.

### **Conclusion**

The rise of Aoi Sola to diva status fits into extant analyses of celebrity, such as that by Dyer and more recently Galbraith and Karlin. Sola is embedded in highly constructed and enmeshed webs of meaning that situate her uniquely within East Asian mediascapes. These analyses also hark back to some social science classics on religion, such as Durkheim's work, suggesting a resonance between the 'deified' female celebrity as embodied in the 'diva' and other kinds of social symbolism. Sola, through becoming a transnational celebrity, could be seen as a 'totem' through which Chinese web users can imagine China's relationship to the world, its multiple nationalisms and the desire for divergent kinds of Asian modernity.

At the same time, Sola's own role in the ways she is perceived should not be ignored, suggesting that greater attention to the intersections between medium, message and agency is needed. The case of Aoi Sola shows how considering the ways star personas move might help us to overcome this theoretical problem. Using the metaphor of the 'meshwork' I have attempted to show how multiple lines of

movement have constituted the web of meanings that is Sola's celebrity status. Sola's celebrity status has produced a line of movement in itself, a trajectory that also suggests her own deft weaving within the meshworks of transnational media in East Asia. However, trajectories, as Michel de Certeau notes, are not signs of an indeterminable free will, but rather show that the forces that produce us also produce sites of excess that we co-opt with 'artisan-like inventiveness' (de Certeau 1984: xix).

Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages ... and although they remain subordinated to the pre-scribed syntactical forms ... the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop. (de Certeau 1984: xviii)

The question of a star's role in the construction of their own star persona has become increasingly relevant, as new technologies create markets for different kinds of celebrity construction. Through a new technological medium, Aoi Sola has been able to redirect the trajectory of her star persona through negotiation of the sites of excess produced within media meshworks found in East Asia. Much like the link between transcendence and 'diva' status suggested in this special issue, these sites of excess have provided lines of movement through which her star persona has transformed. The sexualized and gender-specific forms of excess that she has negotiated, however, have also created vulnerabilities, which the consumers of her image and star persona have co-opted for their own purposes. It thus appears that the concept of the diva is 'good to think' with (Levi-Strauss 1966). However, unlike the static metaphors such as binary, structure or network, the propensity of the female image to be used for symbolic purposes is due to its semiotic mobility and its ability to move between sites of excess and transcendence.

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