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Indenturing Celebrity: Governing China's Entertainment Industries

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Abstract

This article examines the governance of China's entertainment industries using the concept of "indentured celebrities"—famous people who are obliged to serve as ambassadors for Chinese government advertising and public diplomacy. The article introduces the idea of indentured celebrities in relation to Western sociological understandings of major celebrities as "national power elites," "powerless elites," and cosmopolitan "Big Citizens" who use their mediatized star power to exert unelected, "stateless" political influence. It then examines the expansion since the mid-2000s of regulatory controls over China's entertainment industries. Finally, it explores the "Fan Bingbing tax evasion case," revealing how online public censure, and the associated potential for government action, can coalesce to discipline celebrity behaviors. We conclude that regulatory frameworks and, to a lesser degree, "supervision by public opinion," indenture major celebrities to aid the ruling Chinese Communist Party,

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while undermining any scope to exert non-governmental political influence as per Western celebrities.

Keywords: China, celebrities, elites, entertainment, government, media

Entertainment celebrities in the People's Republic of China (PRC) occupy a contested ethico-political space as new cultural-economic elites in a rising world power and self-proclaimed socialist country. After the PRC's founding under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership in 1949, the nationalization of industry and centralized economic planning prevented private enterprise and the accumulation of significant private wealth. There was no celebrity-orientated entertainment industry in mainland China in the contemporary sense of the word until after the adoption of market-based economic reforms in December 1978 (Edwards and Jeffreys, 2010). From 1949 until the late 1980s, state-funded literary and arts workers (authors, actors, singers, and dancers) were trained at state academies, and either wrote for or performed in (politically didactic) state-produced events and broadcast media productions. Strict controls over the state-owned media also ensured that PRC media chiefly communicated Communist Party ideology and policies and promoted military and labor heroes as social role models. Hence, CCP members in institutional positions of authority comprised the only identifiable national power elite.

New elites (private entrepreneurs and entertainment stars) have emerged in China along with the increased incomes and commercialization of industry, media, and services that have accompanied and driven the PRC's economic reforms and shift

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to a more consumption-orientated economy (Edwards and Jeffreys, 2010; Sullivan and Kehoe, 2019). Starting in the late 1980s, government authorities gradually stopped financing the state-controlled broadcast media, requiring film, television, and radio producers to experiment with a party-controlled but market-oriented media system. Market competition forced commercialized media to expand their role as “information-entertainment” providers to attract audiences and advertising revenue. This resulted in a proliferation of television stations and entertainment programming on broadcast and eventually digital media. It also created multiple types of celebrities (film, sport, television, reality, and internet stars), some of which comprise an elite cultural-economic group by virtue of their extraordinary fame, wealth, and media visibility.

But what kind of elites are major entertainment celebrities, especially in the PRC context? Writing in 1956, sociologist C. Wright Mills (2000 [1956]) included film and sports stars in what he described as “the power elite.” Mills argued that North America’s post-Second World War economic recovery, technological innovation, and Cold War supremacy had created a new elite group—“the power elite,” which, unlike America’s local-society, small-town elites of the 1920s, involved a national, interconnected group of political, military, and corporate leaders and celebrities. Mills included celebrities within this new national elite, while noting that they lacked the institutional decision-making powers of political-military-corporate elites, because American film and sports stars are regularly in the public eye and political power elites want to be seen with them.

In 1972, sociologist Francesco Alberoni (2007) dubbed Euroamerican celebrities “the powerless elite” to differentiate them from the political-military-

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corporate-religious leaders of the national power elite, defined as people who influence the fortunes of the societies that they direct through their institutional decision-making powers. Alberoni argued that power elites and stars both attract national attention and thus have social influence, but the charisma of stardom does not translate into a political power relationship. This is because power elites are observed and evaluated primarily according to the social impact of their institutional activities and decisions, whereas public interest in celebrity centers on celebrity products and lifestyles. Additionally, although celebrities attract intense public scrutiny, their wealth, behaviors, and morals are typically viewed in a more indulgent fashion than are those of other members of society because celebrities personify ability-based, upward social mobility, and live at a distance from fans and “anti-fans.” Alberoni (2007: 65) concluded that celebrities combine maximum social visibility with the inability to control the opportunities of the public and are therefore “institutionally considered as *unimportant from a political point of view*” (emphasis in original).

Today, sociologists and development scholars variously praise or decry a “politicized enclave” of A-list Western entertainment celebrities (“Big Citizens”) for wielding their mediatized “star power” to exert unelected, “stateless,” political influence by fronting international humanitarian causes (Rojek, 2014: 128). Unlike celebrity career politicians, Big Citizens are not associated with national political parties and related obligations (Rojek, 2014: 133). Supporters claim that celebrity ambassadorial advocacy for the United Nations (UN) and international nonprofit organizations on issues such as human rights, poverty alleviation, and the environment raises the profile of an organization and campaign by attracting media publicity and new audiences/donors.¹ Critics maintain that celebrity advocacy is a

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self-serving branding exercise by privileged elites that buttresses neoliberal capitalism and discourages active citizen participation in efforts to redress global inequality and injustice (Kapoor, 2013; Rojek, 2014). Instead, they aver that it encourages “cause-sumerism” (the practice of purchasing goods with part of the purchase price being donated to a “distant” cause), and thereby disguises the ongoing exploitation of people and resources in developed and developing countries by Western governments and multinational corporations.

Entertainment celebrities in China are not members of the PRC power elite, but, contrary to the powerless elite thesis, they are important from a political perspective and consequently have been “indentured” to serve the nation (and not act as independent Big Citizens). The political importance of PRC celebrities stems from their public visibility and access to means of mass communication, and therefore an omnipresent, although not always exercised, potential to influence public opinion in unpredictable ways. However, the PRC's system of one-party rule limits the space for national celebrities to become career politicians and/or engage in non-government-supported ambassadorial advocacy. This system precludes the existence of effective opposition political parties and removes the need for mediatized political competition—a perceived driver of the celebritization of Western politics, for example, the rise in North America of politician celebrities, politicians who use others' celebrity, and celebrity politicians and advocates (Jeffreys, 2016). It also limits the space for non-governmental humanitarian activism led by charismatic individuals and civil society organizations.

At the same time, the PRC government is adeptly adopting modern communication strategies to promote policy goals, including using celebrities in

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government advertising (domestic political messaging) and public diplomacy (communication with international audiences). Celebrities have been indentured to serve the nation in this context because the success of their careers is not only beholden to the appreciation of their audiences as in Western contexts, but also contingent on their willingness to endorse government-defined national values and aspirations. PRC celebrities are indentured, to use the old meaning of the word, in the sense that they enter into an agreement with other parties to do or refrain from doing certain acts, in return for a benefit or reward. In this case, the benefit is to remain in the public eye and retain the lucrative side-benefits that accompany a public profile. But in return they must justify their fame and wealth by conforming to government (and sometimes public) expectations that they are law-abiding, civic-minded citizens who will help deliver the “Chinese Dream” of the PRC being a prosperous, world-leading country by the time of its centenary in 2049 (Xi, 2014).

This article reveals how China's celebrities are indentured to act as ambassadors for domestic political messaging and public diplomacy as follows. First, it explores the expansion since the mid-2000s of formal regulatory controls over the PRC's entertainment industries. Second, it examines the 2018 “Fan Bingbing 范冰冰 tax evasion case” to demonstrate how supervision by public opinion in the form of online public censure, and the associated potential for government action, can coalesce to discipline celebrity personas and behaviors. We conclude that these regulatory frameworks and populist practices indenture major entertainment celebrities to serve the nation, while undermining any scope to exert non-governmental political influence as per the Big Citizens of Western societies.

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Regulating China's Contemporary Entertainment Industries

In a recent article on the politics of celebrity in China, Jonathan Sullivan and Séagh Kehoe (2019: 242) argue that China's celebrities can reach and potentially influence large audiences, concluding that this makes celebrities and star-making industries a focus of PRC government efforts to regulate and use "celebrity power." They add that the governance of China's entertainment industries is achieved through formal legal and regulatory frameworks, which are "supplemented by informal, soft controls in the form of government pronouncements and state media editorials setting out norms and expectations" that are supported by "Chinese publics" (Sullivan and Kehoe, 2019: 245–46).

While Sullivan and Kehoe point usefully to the political relevance of PRC celebrities, their account of the governance of China's entertainment industries contains significant gaps. First, their description of the formal regulatory system is outdated; the system has been overhauled since 2017. Second, they fail to distinguish between different types of media and neglect to show how formal and informal controls are conjoined in practice. Our keyword search for the term "celebrity" 明星 on the database of *People's Daily* 人民日报,² the print media news outlet of the CCP, revealed that there were no editorials 社论 on the topic of celebrity during the five-year-period between 2016 and 2020. The "government pronouncements" to which Sullivan and Kehoe refer appear instead to be notices about new or desired industry-specific regulations, while other entertainment-related communications are constrained to social media posts on the newspaper's official account on Sina Weibo,³ a Twitter-like microblogging site. While the print version of *People's Daily* and its

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Weibo account demonstrate what the PRC government thinks about various issues, the print newspaper deals exclusively with the traditional, consequential “hard news topics” of politics, business, and international affairs, whereas the Weibo account is used purposively to engage with and potentially shape public sentiment by providing (micro-)comments on selected trending social issues (Xu and Sun, 2021: 181), including “soft news topics” such as entertainment and celebrity scandals. Finally, Sullivan and Kehoe offer little to no empirical evidence to support the claim that Chinese publics make celebrities conform to social norms: how precisely do publics do this? As we discuss later with reference to the Fan Bingbing case, the main mechanism is the assemblage of populist, contingent practices known as “supervision by (online) public opinion.”

Regulatory controls over China's cultural industries (news, publishing, copyright, radio, television, film, arts, internet, entertainment) have expanded dramatically since 2017 in line with government plans for the PRC to have the world's biggest media and entertainment market. The Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development for 2016–2020 stated that the cultural industries would be a pillar of the national economy by 2020, requiring all levels of government to work toward that goal (Xinhua, 2017). Government incentives have ensured that the value of China's media and entertainment market, already the second largest in the world after the United States, is burgeoning (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020).

Economic planning for 2021–2025 recommends further developing the cultural industries to promote China's “soft power” in domestic and international arenas (Xinhua, 2020).

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Unlike in Western contexts, there is a political expectation that China's commercial and increasingly international cultural industries will boost the domestic economy while advancing socialist culture, a task unified under the rubric of "building spiritual civilization" (Xi, 2014). The Central Guidance Commission for Building Spiritual Civilization 中央精神文明建设指导委员会, established in 1997 under the supervision of the Propaganda Department (now rebranded in English as the Publicity Department) of the CCP Central Committee, is tasked with the mission of tying economic growth and socialist culture. Rebranded in English in 2012 as the Central Commission for Guiding Cultural and Ethical Progress 中共中央精神文明建设指导委员会, the commission's mission has been framed since the 2000s in terms of promoting national values and a civic culture, and therefore "appropriate" art, literature, and media practices (Xinhua, 2001). These goals are reiterated in a 2019 document titled "Outline for Building Civic Ethics in the New Era" 新时代公民道德建设实施纲要—that is, the post-2012 era of Xi Jinping's presidency (Xinhua, 2019).

Appropriate cultural-media practices in the PRC context generally refer to the creation of products that directly or indirectly support government advertising and public diplomacy. Such products promote government-endorsed national values and policy goals, support the PRC's revolutionary history, counter negative (Western) cultural influences, and communicate a positive international image of China (Xi, 2014). For example, Article 23 of the National Security Law of the PRC states that China's strength and cultural competitiveness will be enhanced by advancing traditional Chinese culture and socialist core values, while guarding against negative cultural influences (National People's Congress of the PRC, 2015). Traditional

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cultural virtues are a feature of government advertising designed to build a civic-minded citizenry and refer to revamped Confucian guidelines for ethical behavior such as displaying harmony, benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom, honesty, loyalty, and filial piety. The socialist core values, defined at the CCP's Eighteenth National Congress in 2012, are prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship. These virtues and values emphasize civility and civic mindedness rather than what is often presented as a return to old-school "socialist morality" (Ni, 2021).

The PRC's media-communications system was restructured in early 2018 with the aim of developing the cultural industries and improving China's international reputation. The State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television was dismantled. Three government-run broadcasters: China Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International, and China National Radio, were merged into a state-media conglomerate called the "Voice of China," managed by a new government organization, the National Radio and Television Administration, and supervised by the Publicity Department (Zhang, 2018). Other new organizations—the National Film Bureau, the State Press and Publication Administration, and the National Copyright Administration—were also placed under the Publicity Department's supervision.

Hence, the CCP's Publicity Department now exercises direct regulatory control over all film, television, radio, book publishing, and news media. This includes supervising domestic film production, content, distribution, and screening, and major film events, as well as international joint productions, film importing and exporting, and global exchange initiatives. Similar controls are exercised over internet

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businesses and content by the Cyberspace Administration of China, established in 2014 under the supervision of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, directed by PRC President and CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping.

Supporting this restructuring, the first Film Industry Promotion Law of the PRC, effective March 2017, and the first Radio and Television Law of the PRC, issued as a draft for public comment in March 2021, outline the government-identified rules of conduct for entertainment industry professionals (Central People's Government of the PRC, 2016; National Radio and Television Administration, 2021). Article 1 of the Film Industry Promotion Law states that the law aims to facilitate the healthy development of the film industry, advance socialist core values, and enrich people's cultural lives (Central People's Government of the PRC, 2016). Article 3 adds that film creation, distribution, and screening should prioritize social rather than economic benefit. Article 9 urges film industry organizations to create self-discipline regulations to strengthen knowledge of the law and professional ethics. It also encourages actors, directors, and other personnel to comply with Chinese laws and regulations, respect social norms, abide by professional ethics, adopt self-discipline measures, and establish a positive social image. Article 16 prohibits films from showing content banned by laws or administrative regulations, including content that endangers the constitution, national security, ethnic unity, and religious policy, or promotes pornography, gambling, drug use, violence, or crime. As films in China cannot be screened on broadcast or digital media without a government release permit, the law requires entertainment industry professionals to manage their public personas and products, in accordance with government-endorsed national values and policy goals.

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The draft Radio and Television Law outlines similar but more explicit rules of conduct for entertainment professionals (National Radio and Television Administration, 2021). The law supports the broadcasting of content that supports socialism, China, national policies, and scientific/cultural innovation (Article 45). Conversely, it bans content that denigrates the CCP, socialism, revolutionary heroes, and Chinese culture and history, as well as content that promotes misinformation, obscenity, violence, illegality, and crime (Article 19). The law stipulates that radio and television practitioners shall abide by Chinese law and professional ethics and establish a positive social image (Article 62). It further bans the broadcasting of products created by media producers/performers who have broken relevant laws and regulations (Article 32). These stipulations are enforced through a system of fines, product boycotts, and suspensions of business licenses, which includes penalties for exceeding national caps on remuneration for stars/creators 主创人员 (Article 65).

These organizational and legislative changes are formalizing a system of regulatory controls over the entertainment industries that has been gaining momentum since the mid-2000s. Following the PRC's post-1978 adoption of economic reforms, the Propaganda Department started using internal censorship measures in the form of "blacklisting" to constrain the development of artistic and commercial media forms (and the careers of certain celebrities) that were viewed as politically sensitive, even stars/products in domestic niche and overseas markets. In such instances, state-funded media organizations and cultural departments would receive an internal notice suggesting that the works should be blacklisted for being "spiritually harmful." Thus, the music of Cui Jian 崔健, the "godfather of Chinese rock," was neither played nor

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shown on state-run radio and television for almost twenty years because one of his songs, “Nothing to My Name” 一无所有, was used as an unofficial anthem by students during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (Amar, 2020).

In the mid-2000s, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT, 1998–2013), subsequently the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT, 2013–2018), started issuing regulations to control new commercial entertainment media, especially reality shows. In 2006, SARFT limited the number of national and inter-provincial talent competitions, ostensibly to stop industry exploitation of people aged under eighteen and the promotion of outlandish judging regimes and participant behaviors (Central People's Government of the PRC, 2006). In 2011, it instructed satellite channels to increase programming about news, economics, documentaries, culture, science, education, and children, and to restrict talent, dating, talk, and game shows to a maximum of two shows per channel per week (Sina, 2011). Presaging current film and television laws, it instructed satellite channels to produce “ethics-building programs” depicting traditional Chinese virtues and socialist values.

Also foretelling current legislation, SAPPRFT targeted illegal behavior on the part of entertainment professionals in a 2014 public notice on strengthening the management of broadcast and online media products. Dubbed “the block on misdeed artists” 封杀劣迹艺人, the notice instructed all media platforms to cease showing products involving actors, directors, and screenwriters convicted of engaging in drugs, prostitution, and other illicit activities (Sohu, 2014). It stated that film, television, and radio professionals should disseminate “positive energy” by providing excellent

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products and presenting a good public image. Disseminating positive energy is a political slogan associated with Xi Jinping; it refers to the practice of projecting an optimistic, uplifting attitude to realize the Chinese Dream. As per current legislation, the ban on broadcasting products involving producers and performers associated with illegality provides a clear economic incentive for relevant industries to vet personnel in line with government directives to protect their businesses, and for performers to self-govern their public personas to protect their careers. It signals a shift to proactive industry-professional self-regulation rather than reactive government censorship.

Shortly after, in 2015, Xi Jinping gave a speech to senior members of the Publicity Department calling for the cultural industries to strengthen party leadership; fifty media organizations subsequently signed the “Pact on Self-Disciplining the Professional Ethics of New Media, Publishing, and Film and Television Broadcasting Personnel” 新闻出版广播影视从业人员职业道德自律公约, agreeing to protect the CCP's reputation, abide by the law, and promote the socialist core values, positive energy, and a good professional image (People.cn, 2015). At a related symposium, A-lister Fan Bingbing endorsed the pact, stating that celebrities should be professional, abide by the law, and deliver positive energy by providing a good personal example (Sina, 2015).

The pact started a process of indenturing celebrities to the service of government, which is now encapsulated in law and in the Publicity Department's oversight of the entertainment industries. In 2016, SAPPRFT responded to an inspection of its work by the CCP's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection by issuing a Rectification Notice (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television, 2016). Foretelling current legislation, the Rectification Notice

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advocated party leadership of all media, restricting the scope of television entertainment programs, and capping celebrity pay. It further recommended banning entertainment professionals convicted of criminal or illegal acts from attending and winning national film, television, radio, and celebrity awards, and banning associated products. The Cyberspace Administration of China similarly issued a raft of regulations from 2016 onwards to manage internet and livestreaming content, including celebrity/social-influencer product endorsements, by outlining rules of industry-professional conduct and encouraging self-censorship (Xu and Zhang, 2021).

Multiple examples demonstrate the use of indentured celebrities in government advertising and potentially regional-diasporic public diplomacy. In the run-up to the CCP's Nineteenth National Congress in 2017, CCTV issued a four-part series of celebrity-endorsed public service advertisements (PSA) titled the "Glory and the Dream—Our Chinese Dream" 光荣与梦想 我们的中国梦 (CCTV, 2017). More than thirty celebrities, including A-list film stars Li Bingbing 李冰冰 and Jackie Chan, appeared in the PSAs, which were featured on entertainment platforms across China. The PSAs endorsed major political slogans associated with Xi Jinping, including the Chinese Dream and socialist core values. In 2019, the Publicity Department released PSAs endorsed by young popstars and actors promoting the socialist core values and China's emerging social credit system (see YouTube, 2019). Regulations issued in 2020 by the National Radio and Television Administration urged broadcasters to restrict high performer salaries and encourage performer participation in public welfare programs. Hence, PRC celebrities look set to become a

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regular feature of mediatized events promoting government-endorsed, rather than Big Citizen, philanthropy (see Deng and Jeffreys, 2019; Hood, 2015).

The tightening of laws and regulatory frameworks and the restructuring of the PRC's media-communications system under Publicity Department supervision represent important channels through which entertainment creators and celebrities have been indentured to aid the CCP in its objectives. The next section examines the 2018 Fan Bingbing case to reveal how online public sentiment and the associated potential for government action can also coalesce to indenture China's celebrities. Sociologists argue that celebrities are members of an "open" rather than self-perpetuating elite because their fame depends on positive audience sentiment, which is revokable (Alberoni, 2007: 9). This observation raises the question of how and in what circumstances can Chinese publics revoke stardom?

Online Public Sentiment and the Fan Bingbing Case

Some scholars of celebrity in China contend that a longstanding tradition of public figures acting as moral exemplars has ensured that government and public expectations are basically aligned. In this view, PRC celebrities are expected to be good social role models with high moral standards, who model individual success and consumerism rather than class struggle. Sullivan and Kehoe (2019: 246) argue that normative values like "filiality, faithfulness in marriage and the collective good are dominant social norms that [PRC] celebrities are expected to conform to by the state, business and publics." Min Xu, Stijn Reijnders, and Sangkyun Kim (2021: 97) conclude from fifteen interviews about Chinese audiences' engagement with celebrity

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culture that the “intersections between the desirable qualities of famous people and the value system promoted by the Chinese government are clear.”

While superficially true, this argument ignores the fact that government values and social norms are not always aligned, and fans, anti-fans, and other interested audiences may interact with celebrity differently. In China, as elsewhere, celebrities are insulated to some degree from the social consensus. Audiences usually or eventually forgive celebrities for their lavish consumption practices and sexual affairs. Actor Huang Xiaoming 黄晓明 is still a star despite public criticisms of his US\$31 million wedding to actor-singer Angelababy, as are actors Chen He 陈赫 and Dong Jie 董洁 after reported extramarital affairs. Film star Zhang Ziyi 章子怡 and other A-listers survived intense media and public scrutiny for allegedly failing to donate to the national 2008 Sichuan earthquake disaster-relief efforts (Jeffreys, 2011).

The argument that government and public expectations are aligned also does little, in the cases where it does occur, to shed light on the chief mechanism—“supervision by public opinion” 舆论监督—that brings about that alignment in practice. Supervision by public opinion refers to an assemblage of populist, contingent practices, which can translate into government action in specific circumstances. The expression entered the Chinese lexicon in the late 1980s, when CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang stated in his 1987 report to the Thirteenth Party Congress that the CCP “should use all kinds of all kinds of modernized news and propaganda tools to increase reporting on government and party affairs” and “allow supervision by public opinion to play a role” (Chen, 2017: 624). Originally exercised

chiefly by broadcast media through investigative reporting, supervision by public opinion is now a routine component of party and government work.

While tighter government controls over China's media have inhibited investigative journalism, online whistleblowing and public outcry has coalesced to form a new model of supervision by public opinion known as "internet or online supervision" 网络监督 (Xi, 2016; Xu, 2016). The general aim of such networked supervision is to expose the wrongdoings of party and government officials and public figures, especially corruption, malfeasance, and crime. The PRC government has incorporated these practices into its revitalization of "mass line" 群众路线 (that is, from the people to the people) forms of governance, to encourage public participation in and support for policy objectives. In a 2016 speech at a national conference on cybersecurity and informatization work, Xi Jinping instructed party and government officials to accept the new supervision channel of the people and proactively respond to public concerns online. Local governments are now monitoring, soliciting, and analyzing online public sentiment, outsourcing the work to research institutions, media organizations, and businesses that do data mining, sentiment analysis, and cloud computing (Hou, 2017).

We examine the case of Fan Bingbing below, a film star who Sullivan and Kehoe (2019: 249) (presumably writing pre-scandal) assert has been "rewarded handsomely" for adhering to "state ideals," because it provides a striking example of supervision by public opinion of a major celebrity resulting in *direct* rather than *indirect* regulatory action. Our examination shows that celebrities in China, as elsewhere, are not insulated from the social consensus when they are seen to act

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above the law or fail to comport themselves in ways commensurate with the economic privilege and moral leeway allowed them. It further suggests that government action against celebrities occurs in contingent, strategic circumstances to achieve pragmatic policy goals rather than strictly morality-impelled social control.

Fan Bingbing, born in 1981, is an internationally renowned celebrity with around 64 million followers on Sina Weibo.⁴ Fan stars in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Iron Man 3* and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* and won “Best Female Actor” at China’s 2017 Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival. She topped the annual Forbes China Celebrity lists during 2013–2017, which measure celebrity income and “marketability.”

Fan “disappeared” from public view in early June 2018 and reemerged on October 3, ending global media speculation about her whereabouts, to publicly confess on social media that she owed the PRC government 884 million yuan (US\$129 million) in evaded taxes (<https://weibo.com/fbb0916>, October 3, 2018, 12.03). A search for the name “Fan Bingbing” on the Dow Jones Factiva global news database from June 1 to October 3, 2018,⁵ reveals that Fan was the subject of nearly 370 international news items during this period. Many Western journalists focused on the unusual nature of a celebrity disappearance, suggesting that it showed that “no one is safe in the PRC” because “everyday life is dominated by politics” and “the law is whatever the CCP says it is” (Kuo, 2018: n.p.). Others more fabulously claimed that Fan’s gender, beauty, wealth, and fanbase made her an “existential terror” for a patriarchal regime headed by Xi Jinping, who is reportedly “dwarfed in stature by Fan’s stardom” (Liao, 2018).

Cui Yongyuan 崔永元, a Chinese household name as a former CCTV anchor and online activist against genetically modified food, kickstarted rumors that Fan was guilty of tax evasion in May 2018. Cui posted a copy of a “yin-yang contract” on his Weibo account,⁶ which had 17 million followers at the time (now over 19 million). A yin-yang contract refers to the practice of having two contracts for one employment (or property), one of which cites a lower fee than the actual salary, with the lower costing used for accounting purposes. His initial and subsequent posts said that “someone” (Fan) had been paid 10 million yuan and 50 million yuan for four days of work on a sequel to the award-winning movie *Cell Phone* 手机, starring Fan Bingbing (Zhihu, 2018). Although Cui later apologized to Fan and claimed that the contracts were not hers, his first post on May 29 attracted over 80,500 comments, was reposted 46,000 times that same day, and was also widely circulated on WeChat.

Cui's apparent exposé of celebrity tax evasion became a hot-button issue overnight and a medium for public debate about the law and income inequality. Netizens criticized Fan for allegedly breaking the law and evading taxes while receiving an astronomical fee for quick work. One response to Cui's posts, which received thousands of likes, highlighted the discrepancy between Fan's purported income and that of everyday Chinese by exclaiming: “60 million!!! How many lifetimes would it take another Chinese to earn that much money?” (梧桐相执手, May 29, 2018, 13:09). Another response contrasted Fan's alleged salary to that of revolutionary-era soldiers, implicitly asking whether massive income inequality is acceptable in the PRC: “My God! It makes me so sad when I know that veterans had

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to make a living by collecting [and selling] garbage for recycling!” (李楊说 QuQ, May 29, 2018, 13:05).

The online outcry was evidently too “loud” for government regulators to ignore; on June 3, 2018, the State Taxation Administration issued a statement saying that it valued the public exposure of yin-yang contracts in the film and television industries, which tax departments in Jiangsu province and elsewhere were now investigating. Although the statement did not explicitly mention Fan Bingbing, subsequent rumors suggested that she had businesses registered in Jiangsu province and in Khorghos City in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, an international free trade zone (Frater, 2018). *People's Daily* endorsed the taxation authority's action on its Weibo account, stating that tax evasion in the film and television industries should be investigated because “All are equal before the law. No one is beyond the law, no matter how famous and well networked they are and how many fans they have” (Sina, 2018a). On June 27, the Publicity Department, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, State Taxation Administration, State Administration of Radio and Television, and National Film Bureau took further action by ordering a cap on astronomical remuneration, initiatives against tax evasion, and banning government-funded investment in tax-exempt charitable foundations run by certain entertainment businesses for inflating celebrity wages (Xinhua, 2018a).

Supervision by public opinion in the form of Cui Yongyuan's posts and responses to them thus catalyzed government action on tax evasion in the entertainment industries; but the nature, amplification, and resolution of the Fan Bingbing case is intimately related to policy agendas, not just government attention to online whistleblowing and public sentiment. Supervision by public opinion typically

only results in central government action when straightforward action can be taken that presents the government in a positive light as responsive and capable (Jeffreys and Xu, 2018). Cui's revelations about celebrity tax evasion took place in the context of a government-led anti-corruption campaign that involved targeting rich, corrupt officials and overseeing government austerity measures. As part of this campaign, state-owned enterprises were banned from using public money to pay exorbitant celebrity salaries. Celebrity income is consequently a legitimate object of public scrutiny in the PRC, as are the actual or imagined connections between potentially corrupt politicians, entrepreneurs, and celebrities.

The "corrupt" financing activities of entertainment companies and celebrities (including Fan Bingbing) were already a salient feature of news reporting at least as early as 2016. A search for the keyword "celebrity" 明星 on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) Core Newspaper Database between 2016 and 2018 revealed that around 240 of 1,620 articles, or 15 percent of the total, focused on celebrity-related problems.⁷ In 2016, the key issue (accounting for half of around fifty articles on celebrity-related problems) was "sky-high pay" 天价片酬 and related policy solutions. High performance fees were criticized for inflating media and entertainment industry share prices and cinema ticket prices and limiting film and television quality by reducing producer and screenwriter budgets. Proposed solutions included capping celebrity pay and introducing higher taxation rates for celebrities with some charity-related tax benefits (e.g., Xinhua, 2016). In 2017, the key issue (half of around 80 articles on celebrity-related problems) was financial impropriety: notably, listed media corporations' failure to disclose to regulators income streams

that were themselves related to high salaries paid to celebrities. These corporations were able to offset the cost of hiring celebrities, and thereby inflate their own net profits (and potentially share prices as well) by purchasing unlisted “shell” companies whose profits were generated by the same celebrity-fee income (e.g., Xinhua Finance, 2017). In 2018, the key issues (around 50 of 110 articles on celebrity-related problems) were high celebrity salaries and financial impropriety, including tax evasion. By way of comparison, in 2019, news coverage of these issues had virtually disappeared: of around 715 articles on celebrity, 90 articles focused on celebrity-related problems, but only ten were about high salaries and financial impropriety.

The furor surrounding the Fan Bingbing case also relates to the PRC government's pledge to improve overall living standards, reduce income inequality, and innovate social governance. As outlined at the 2017 National Party Congress, this means curbing excessive incomes, prohibiting illicit incomes, raising low-level incomes, and ensuring equitable access to public services (Xi, 2017). The main redistributive mechanism to realize these goals is tax reform, as detailed in an amendment to the Individual Income Tax Law submitted to the PRC's legislature in June 2018, passed on August 31, and effective January 1, 2019 (National People's Congress of the PRC, 2018). The reforms aim to raise government revenue and stimulate the economy by introducing a unique taxpayer identification number, consolidating tax residency rules, raising the tax-free threshold, amending progressive tax rates, clarifying tax deductible items, and introducing an anti-tax-avoidance rule.

Tax reforms and entertainment industry regulation are central to the denouement of the Fan Bingbing case, as demonstrated by a press release by Xinhua News Agency at 10 a.m. on October 3, 2018, which ended the mystery of her

disappearance. The release stated that Fan had been investigated by tax authorities since early June, based on information received from members of the public (Xinhua, 2018c). As a result of that investigation, which ended on September 30, Fan had been ordered to pay US\$129 million in late and evaded taxes and fines, according to Article 201 of the 2011 Criminal Law of the PRC.⁸ It added that Fan was treated leniently, as stipulated in Article 201: she had received an administrative punishment for first-time tax evasion and would not face criminal charges providing she paid the monies owed by a fixed time. It ended by saying that personnel in the film and television industries that underwent self-examination and made remedial payments to tax authorities on or before December 31, 2018, would not face administrative penalties. In other words, the central government used the Fan Bingbing case to offer (wealthy) film and television professionals a temporary amnesty while warning them of a forthcoming crackdown on tax evasion supported by the amended tax law.

A few hours later, just after noon on October 3, Fan posted an “apology letter” on her Weibo account confessing to tax evasion and begging forgiveness for putting money before the law, because “without the good policies of the party and the state, without the love and protection of the people, there would be no Fan Bingbing” (<https://weibo.com/fbb0916>, October 3, 2018, 12.03). The apology ended with Fan promising to be a law-abiding citizen-entrepreneur who would be a good social role model and spread positive energy henceforth; it was reposted nearly 330,000 times and had received more than 2.4 million likes by the end of 2018. The wording of the apology, which repeats government discourses on appropriate celebrity conduct, suggests it was crafted with the aid of the Publicity Department, and presumably was the agreed-upon cost of avoiding potential criminal investigation for tax fraud.

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Certainly, media responses on the legality of her punishment indicate that some commentators believed that Fan had been treated far too leniently by government authorities, even as her reputation and career lay in tatters (Renmin ribao, 2018).

While Fan's apology echoes government discourses on good celebrity conduct, the responses of fans were more indulgent and highlight the heterogeneous nature of public opinion. Most fans said that they forgave Fan and expressed ongoing love for her (<https://weibo.com/fbb0916>, October 3, 2018, 12.03). Only a few respondents said that she should be ashamed of herself. This support explains why Fan still endorses international luxury products (Zhang, 2020), even as it remains unclear when or if she will make a film and television comeback.

Official media commentary issued online shortly after Fan's apology indicates that the case had "advertising value" for the central government as a means of providing legal education. Xinhua, CCTV, and *People's Daily* released opinions and social media posts suggesting that the case warned artists in the film and television industries to abide by the law and showed that everyone is equal before the law, regardless of individual wealth, fame, and beauty (CCTV News, 2018; Sina, 2018b; Xinhua, 2018b).

The commentaries praised the combination of supervision by public opinion and government action for generating visible law enforcement, while informing readers that individual income taxation is the cornerstone of modern governance and a citizen obligation. As they added, public consensus also confirmed that high-income earners have a greater obligation to contribute to a modern governance system by paying higher taxes and financially supporting charities. The commentaries concluded by appealing for citizen compliance with the tax reforms, telling film and television

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professionals, public figures, and ordinary citizens alike to view Fan's case as a warning to abide by the law.

Advertising the tax reforms via a celebritized cautionary tale was therefore an effective way for the government to communicate that underreporting of income and tax evasion would henceforth not be tolerated, without scaring everyone into silence and pushing the problem further underground. A news article published in early 2019, which interviewed senior officials at the State Taxation Administration, the State Administration of Radio and Television, and the National Film Bureau, stated that the self-correction of tax records by film and television professionals between October and December 2018 had generated government revenue of nearly 12 billion yuan (Sina, 2019). The article added that self-discipline on the part of film and television professionals, combined with Taxation Administration oversight, would ensure the lawful payment of income tax.

In summary, supervision by networked public opinion has ensured that China's celebrities are a legitimate focus of government attention because many people want government action on financial impropriety by the super-rich, just as they desire action against corrupt officials. The Fan Bingbing case suggests that the government could take further action without public backlash, even though celebrities have large fanbases. The fact that the government received nearly 12 billion yuan in self-corrected taxes from film-television professionals by late 2018 suggests that additional action might be forthcoming and could be conducted without harming China's developing cultural industries. Although media-entertainment company share prices fell around the time of Fan Bingbing's case, they soon rose and the share price trend has remained stable over a five-year period.⁹

But a large-scale, government-led celebrity witch hunt is not a likely scenario, despite Western media claims to the contrary after the introduction of new measures to strengthen the governance of individual taxation and tax-related incentives in the entertainment industries (State Taxation Administration, 2021; Turland, 2021). This is because the cautionary tale telegraphed to major and lesser celebrities by the Fan Bingbing case is clear. Celebrities as newly rich elites can anticipate regulatory leniency and continued public visibility only when they accept the legal and citizen obligations associated with economic privilege. Notably, while the new tax guidelines recommend publicizing typical tax evasion cases to promote legal education and industry compliance, they promise leniency for businesses and individuals that promptly correct their accounting practices (State Taxation Administration, 2021).

Since the Fan Bingbing case, the governance of celebrity conduct in the PRC, and its interaction with the disciplinary force of public opinion, has continued to evolve in new ways. In particular, the shift to industry professionalization and self-governance allows public sentiment to be harnessed through semi-official organizations that occupy the space between government and industry. This shift is illustrated by the “Management Measures for the Self-Discipline of Performers in the Performance Industries” 演出行业演艺人员从业自律管理办法, issued by the China Association of Performing Arts (CAPA) 中国演出行业协会, a national nonprofit organization, in 2021. CAPA runs a performing arts expo in Beijing and produces an annual report on the value of China's performance industry, which is cited regularly in *People's Daily*. The “Management Measures” reiterate the legal-professional behaviors outlined in national laws, adding that non-compliant members and their

products will be boycotted, and urging performers to participate in public welfare activities.

Although these measures only cover voluntary members, CAPA has been vocal on social media about the need to boycott (non-member) celebrities for alleged criminal and “poor” behaviors, and *People's Daily* has reposted the CAPA regulations and claims in efforts to shape netizen opinion. Commenting via its Weibo account on the arrest on suspicion of rape of Chinese Canadian popstar Kris Wu 吴亦凡, *People's Daily* averred that no celebrity is above the law and celebrities should be good (not bad) role models (Sohu, 2021b). Also commenting via its Weibo account about an online apology posted by actor Zhang Zhehan 张哲瀚, *People's Daily* criticized Zhang's ignorance of PRC history, while implicitly celebrating the anniversary of the CCP's victory over Japan in the Second World War (Sohu, 2021a). Zhang had attracted public criticism for posting photographs of himself at a Japanese shrine to war heroes (a Chinese symbol of war crimes). This controversy cost Zhang multiple brand endorsements as businesses became concerned about reduced product sales following the CCP's centenary; media companies also removed his products from music-video sharing platforms in acts of industry self-censorship designed to preempt potential government action. Both examples illustrate government efforts to highlight regulatory frameworks and steer public opinion through the opportunistic medium of celebrity gossip.

Conclusion

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Celebrities in contemporary China are members of an indentured elite group rather than “the power elite,” a “powerless elite,” or “Big Citizens,” as defined in the sociological literature (Alberoni, 2007; Mills, 2000, Rojek, 2014). Government incentives, as framed in PRC laws and regulations, promote cooperative public behaviors on the part of professionals in the entertainment industries who wish to maintain their careers. The need for celebrities to maintain maximum public visibility, combined with supervision by public opinion of celebrity activities, further encourages cooperative celebrity behaviors. These kinds of regulatory and populist practices reduce the potential for PRC celebrities as new cultural-economic elites to embody an alternative social voice and vision as per Western Big Citizens.

The indentured-elite status of PRC celebrities is underscored by the use of prominent celebrities as mouthpieces for government advertising, and more starkly by the Fan Bingbing tax evasion case. The case, which drew international media attention following Fan's dramatic disappearance and subsequent contrite re-appearance charged with tax evasion/arrears in the realm of US\$129 million, threw a harsh spotlight on the illegal financial activities of entertainment companies and A-list celebrities. New laws and regulations that have arisen as a response to this problem, and other similar infringements, encourage celebrities to act as cost-effective endorsers of PSAs and media events promoting public policy and welfare goals. This trend is being reinforced by the ongoing shift to industry professionalization and self-governance, which allows professional associations to play a new role in harnessing public opinion to discipline the conduct of entertainment celebrities. Indentured to the state, celebrities justify their existence as elites by performing a politically useful purpose.

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The examples we have presented illustrate the expanding network of regulatory constraints that enmesh PRC entertainment celebrities and curtail their potential to use their wealth, visibility, and ability to exploit the mass media to independently influence public opinion. These constraints dissolve any notion that entertainment celebrities' elite status and the indulgence afforded toward their more extravagant individual behaviors somehow makes them "above the law." But they also create behavioral incentives that follow directly from broader governmental strategies to address inequality, prevent economic crime, and regulate public conduct in line with the CCP's core values. In short, bringing entertainment celebrities under an expanding regulatory umbrella ensures they can remain in the public eye, but are unable to use their mediatized star power to exert non-governmental political influence as per the Big Citizen celebrities of Western societies.

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1. See, for example, the UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors program:

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2. Available at <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/43063/43079/43084/index.html>.

3. Available at <https://weibo.com/rmrh>.

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5. Available at <https://www.dowjones.com/professional/factiva/>.

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8. A translation is available here: www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/criminal-law-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china.

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9. See, for example, the share price history of the Chinese multinational entertainment company Huayi Brothers: <https://cn.investing.com/equities/huayi-brothers-media-corp-historical-data>.