'Tainted celebrities': What's behind China's crackdown on the entertainment industry?

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SINGAPORE - In 1998, the period drama My Fair Princess became a smash hit across Asia, making stars out of Vicki Zhao, Ruby Lin and Fan Bingbing at a time when mainland Chinese dramas were hardly mainstream outside the country.

Some two decades later, dramas and variety shows from China have become staple fare across Asia, but Zhao and Fan have gone from being the entertainment industry's shiny new faces to symbols of the problems plaguing it.

Fan, 39, one of China's best-paid actresses, disappeared from public view for months in 2018 after getting into trouble for tax evasion.

Zhao, 47, who has courted controversy over her business interests, has practically been erased from the Chinese Internet. Her works were removed from Chinese video streaming platforms, but it is not known why she was targeted in particular.

This comes amid Chinese authorities issuing a flurry of directives in recent months to clean up the entertainment industry in the wake of various scandals, notably the arrest of Canadian-Chinese pop star Kris Wu for rape.

Last Thursday, China's media regulator, the National Radio and Television Administration, issued guidelines calling for a boycott of "immoral personnel", so-called "sissy idols" and "idol selection shows", among other things.

What lies behind the crackdown on the entertainment industry?

"When celebrities with a huge following do funny stuff, the authorities have to do something," says Associate Professor Foo Tee Tuan, a film studies expert from the Singapore University of Social Sciences.

Wu, for example, had more than 50 million followers on his Weibo account before it was deleted following his arrest.

Prof Foo notes that the Communist Party of China has always been mindful of the influence of the film and television industry, and this year marks the 100th anniversary of its founding.

"It's not just a political party but is, to some extent, also a moral authority," he says.

Associate Professor Zhang Weiyu, from the communication and new media department at the National University of Singapore, says moral guidance has been a component of Chinese governance since Maoist days.

What is different this time, says Dr Xu Jian, a scholar in Chinese media and celebrity studies at Deakin University, Australia, is that Beijing is not just going after "tainted celebrities" like in past years.

He says this round of government regulation targets "the ecosystem of the star industry", including fan communities, online platforms and idol shows, usually involving contestants competing to be part of boy bands.

These shows have come under fire for encouraging viewers to spend to vote for their favourites.

Eyebrows were raised when fans reportedly bought an estimated 48 million yuan (S$10 million) worth of milk to vote in their idols in talent show, Youth With You 3, which was sponsored by a milk brand. A video showing people pouring away milk sparked anger about the amount of waste generated by such shows.

"This is more comprehensive and aims to rectify the entertainment circle systematically from production to promotion to consumption," Dr Xu says of the clampdown.

Prof Zhang, who researches fan culture, says commercial interests play a significant, if not always visible, role in creating problems in the entertainment industry.

Online platforms need "traffic", such as visitor numbers, to appeal to advertisers, she says. This can help them attract investors or do well in the stock market.

They thus invent features, such as rankings of celebrities based on voting, to get fans to use their platforms. The authorities have since ordered that these rankings be removed.

Says Prof Zhang: "Fans invest real money in this game of boosting traffic numbers because they believe that such numbers can support their idols.

"Celebrities encourage fans to play the 'traffic' game because these numbers help the cultural industry behind them to gain advantages in the stock market - a manifestation of the financialisation of the cultural industry."

While fans behaving badly is not unique to China, Dr Xu says the key difference is their sheer numbers there. "The destructive force if they go wrong would be much stronger," he adds.

China University of Political Science and Law scholar Zhu Wei told China's Legal Daily newspaper that the over-deification of celebrities has led to a warped fan culture, and fan groups have immense mobilising power online and offline.

Take the so-called 227 Incident, an organised boycott against popular actor Xiao Zhan, 29, starting in February last year. Unhappy that their idol had been featured in homoerotic fan fiction, Xiao's fans reported the Archive Of Our Own fan fiction site to the authorities, causing it to be blocked in China.

Users of the site retaliated by calling for a boycott of the actor and the brands he endorses, flooding these brands' pages with negative comments. Xiao's agency later made a public apology.

Beside boycotts, there have also been reports of fans stalking their idols or of rival fan groups clashing online.

A few weeks ago, some fans of A-list Chinese actress Zhao Liying, 33, had their Weibo accounts suspended for attacking popular actor Wang Yibo, 24, on social media. The pair had co-starred in period drama The Legend Of Fei (2020), but the show did not do as well as expected.

Zhao's fans were unhappy that their idol might be acting alongside Wang again in another show and got into a war of words with his fans online. The actress later issued an apology.

As with many sectors in China facing increased government scrutiny in recent months, such as tuition or online gaming, rapid development has meant the authorities have had to play catch-up in regulation.

"For a long time, certain sectors were like the Wild West. There's no regulation and you can do practically anything," says Prof Foo.

The Chinese government is now trying to set norms - albeit belatedly - for the entertainment industry in how celebrities, fans and the businesses fuelling their growth should behave.

Says Prof Foo: "It's like the party coming out to say, 'Ultimately, I have the final say. You have to toe the line.'"