BRILL

ASIASCAPE: DIGITAL ASIA 9 (2022) 273–301

ASIASCAPE: Digital Asia

brill.com/dias

To Exaggerate Data at All Costs: Data-Driven Fan Culture, Platforms, and the Remaking of the New Poor in China

Jiaxi Hou | ORCID: 0000-0002-6799-8261
Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies,
The University of Tokyo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, Japan
houjiaxi725@gmail.com

Abstract

Among Chinese fans of 'traffic celebrities' (*liuliang mingxing* 流量明星), generating excessive data either on digital platforms or various sales charts to inflate a specific entertainer's popularity has become a normalized ritual to demonstrate their fan identity. The so-called fandom economy effectively mobilizes fans from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to consume and participate, thus generating tremendous revenue. Although some fans can easily satisfy their consumerist desire for being economically powerful and socially successful, many others – who are seduced by the *communitas* of fan activism and agency as consumers – cannot or are not yet fully able to afford this lifestyle. Based on data from an eighteen-month ethnography, this study unpacks how these fans are seduced and, to some extent, included but still exploited in the transitional Chinese consumer society as what Bauman calls the 'new poor', for whom digital platforms have become a new structuring nexus and transform the existing power dynamics.

Keywords

consumer society – Douban – fan culture – new poor – traffic celebrities – Weibo

1 Introduction

Born in a small city in Hebei Province in 1996, Dong graduated from a local junior college with a major in administrative management. Although she lived

 | DOI:10.1163/22142312-BJA10035

near Beijing, she did not look for a job in the capital after graduation as many of her peers had done but, instead, has made a living by selling handmade fashion accessories at a Taobao e-shop that she runs. She works hard, sitting for over twelve hours every day, repeatedly weaving bracelets or decorating earrings with colourful beads. Her self-employment gives her a moderate income, about RMB 3,000 (around 440 USD) on average per month, but also chronic pain in her back and depression. To cheer herself up, she began to watch variety shows while working and gradually became a fan of a young and good-looking male 'traffic celebrity' (*liuliang mingxing* 流量明星). Traffic celebrities fall within a specific genre of media products in a global datafied social context in which social media platforms and user experience deeply intersect with the traditional entertainment industry (Cunningham & Craig 2019). In China, people who achieve their fame by building a fan base and can stimulate constant contributions by their fans to increase their internet traffic are called traffic celebrities. Becoming part of the fan community of this celebrity initially gave Dong tremendous pleasure, as she built intimate connections with people of similar interests on Weibo and Douban, two popular social media platforms in China. On these two platforms, she and other fans fought together against others who disliked their idol, shared derivative fan works with one another, and collectively generated social media data (views, likes, comments, etc.) to boost the popularity of their idol. However, the norm that fans should contribute not only to social media data but also to various sales charts by repeatedly purchasing both virtual and material products related to the celebrity quickly emptied her wallet. Without even realizing it, Dong found her bedroom filled with compact disks, posters, photo albums, and other products, all endorsed by the celebrity, and she had accumulated RMB 120,000 in debt by borrowing from a dozen digital platforms, including Weibo, Huabei, Jiebei, and Baitiao.[1]

Since early in the twenty-first century, the fan economy (*fensi jingji* 粉丝经济) in China has boomed and has profoundly reconfigured contemporary consumption practices and values. The market value of the Chinese fan economy in 2019 was over RMB 3,500 billion (around 518 billion USD) and is expected to grow a further 50 percent by 2023 (iResearch 2020). Much of the economic value has been generated from different types of celebrities through endorsements, e-commerce, and advertisements. From the perspective of brands and media industries, celebrity fans are often not only loyal consumers

1 Huabei (Spend) and Jiebei (Borrow) are two main products afforded by Alibaba, the Chinese multinational tech giant. Whereas Huabei works like a virtual credit card, Jiebei provides credit loans to its users. Baitiao is also a virtual credit card, but provided by JD.com, one of Alibaba's few rivals in the Chinese e-commerce industry.

but also sources of free labour that promote and distribute their products to a broader market. In public and academic discussions, celebrity fans often shift between being 'cultural dopes' of consumer capitalism (Grossberg 1992) and reformers or even guerrillas who actively negotiate with industry-oriented commodified culture as a subcultural power (Kelly 2004). Among all the types of celebrity fandom, fans of traffic celebrities have created the most controversies that have caused state authorities to adopt political measures intended to crack down on the 'chaotic' fandom around traffic celebrities since mid-2021. According to the state's official description, fans of traffic celebrities not only use various data mechanisms to inflate or even manipulate the meaning of popularity on social media platforms but also irrationally compete with one another in consumption, with a negative impact on public morality (Xinhua 2021).

However, amidst all the different stances in discourse, we rarely hear the voices of fans such as Dong, who are attracted by the *communitas* of fan activism but, at the same time, cannot afford the accompanying expensive lifestyle. Under what conditions are they attracted to the identity as a fan of certain traffic celebrities? Why and how did the norm that fans should always contribute data to co-produce a traffic celebrity through both social media metrics and commercial consumption become widely accepted? What social consequences does this data-driven participatory fandom have for the real lives of non-elite and socio-economically disadvantaged fans?

Based on his observations on the structure of consumer-oriented capitalist society, Bauman (2005) argues that consumption practices, in particular the ability to satisfy one's own desires, make a notable proportion of the world population into the 'new poor', apart from income, labour, and other existing sociological dimensions that determine poverty. Concentrating on the specific overlap between the new poor in contemporary Chinese consumer society and fans of traffic celebrities, this study explores how a form of excessive consumption is no longer limited to the upper and middle classes but, rather, also infiltrates the everyday experiences of the socio-economically disadvantaged through the cultural economy of fandom that is indistinguishable from digital platforms. Thus, it offers a snapshot illustrating how existing social inequality has been restructured by the current data-driven and platform-based fan culture. Acknowledging that the concept of the new poor has complicated connotations, and fans are individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, I use the new-poor fans as a case study to unpack the contextualized meaning of being part of the new poor in China, a transitional consumer society.

The following sections begin with a brief review of how celebrity fandom has become deeply embedded in the transformation of Chinese consumer society and was a significant factor in restructuring the power dynamics between

media industries, internet industries, and heterogeneous fan communities. Then, in the next section, I discuss the complicated meaning and components of the new poor in the Chinese context, identifying the new-poor fans as a specific portion of the socio-economically disadvantaged population between the commonly acknowledged middle class and the underclass. After introducing the research design in the third section, I analyze how different elements – data labour, new-poor fans' agency, hierarchical fan communities, and the economic dynamics of digital platforms – contribute to remaking some fans into the new poor. By illustrating the process and mechanism involved in this remaking, I argue that, rather than being completely excluded as an incapable 'other' who can seldom live a 'normal life' because of consumer inadequacy, as Bauman describes (2005: 38), new-poor fans in China are seduced by the consumerist data-driven fan culture and offered limited opportunities to participate. However, by claiming to support their social inclusion and satisfy their demand, digital platforms also generate risks and precarities that push these disadvantaged individuals into becoming the new poor.

2 How the Cultural Economy of Celebrity Fandom Restructures Chinese Consumer Society

Although China is still nominally a socialist country, consumerism has been profoundly entrenched in all aspects of the everyday experiences of the Chinese people since economic reform started in the late 1970s. This process was accelerated in particular by dramatic economic growth beginning in the 1990s. Media has played a role that can hardly be ignored in developing consumer culture in China and reconfiguring Chinese urban upper- and middle-class domestic life and public sociality in particular (Davis 2000). Observing window displays, advertisements, and soap operas, Chinese people have reconstructed themselves into 'desiring subjects' who are anticipated to imagine and practice appropriate needs, aspirations, and longings (Rofel 2007). By constantly accessing aspects of various hedonistic lifestyles proposed in marketized mass-cultural media, audiences/consumers learn to upgrade themselves to better quality (*suzhi*) through 'smart' consumption practices (Anagost 2004; Featherstone 2007).

The fan, a particular type of consummate consumer and exuberant audience member, is a notable player involved in consumer-oriented transformation, as the behaviour of fans usually exceeds that of others in numerous ways in the establishment of relationships with their objects of attention, such as in the amount of focus, time, energy, and money that they invest, the

alternative interpretations that they create, and the fan-related communities that they develop (Kelly 2004). Fan cultures are often shaped by the fans' systems of production, distribution, and consumption (Fiske 1992). In reviewing the existing literature, this section traces three waves in which the cultural economy of fandom became deeply intertwined with the development of Chinese consumer society and how each wave restructured the social positions of participants in it.

The first wave was during the phenomenal rise of *Super Girl* (2004–2006), a TV song competition open to female contestants. Until then, the general Chinese audience did not seem to realize that fandom could also be a collective subculture, a significant economic force, and even a form of social activism, in addition to an individual hobby (Yang 2017). At that time, *Super Girl* manifested a new form of customized production in the Chinese music-entertainment industry that organically synthesized advertisers, commercial programme producers, record companies, and mobile telecommunication industries (Jian & Liu 2009). In particular, by inviting its viewers to select and vote for their favourite contestant through short message services (SMS), the show encouraged the enthusiastic audience that were unsatisfied with being merely recipients of entertainment to participate in the new star-making process on an unprecedented scale (Yang 2009). The fact that ordinary Chinese could vote, even if in the context of an entertainment reality show, caused a sensation both at home and abroad, as it felt to many like the achievement of democracy in the country (de Kloet & Landsberger 2016), with the critical difference that the show's voting scheme was 'one dollar, one vote', rather than 'one person, one vote'. To support a specific contestant, fans not only paid fifteen times more than the regular SMS fee when submitting a vote but also performed various kinds of unpaid labour to 'canvass' for additional votes through their own social networks (Jian & Liu 2009; Meng 2009). In other words, although the song contest involved the active participation of a grassroots audience in the collective production of popularly elevated superstars, the playground of fandom was still open only to mostly urban middle-class consumers who had sufficient socio-economic means to own mobile phones and could afford the extra cost of being a fan.

Super Girl was thus a milestone in which fandom became an essential part of the evolving Chinese consumer society. Some critics argued that the emergence of the fan economy altered the power relationship between the media and the audience in China (Cui & Lee 2010), while others stated that fans were not necessarily empowered because talent shows such as *Super Girl* just served as another media commodity that exploited enthusiastic fans as loyal consumers and voluntary labour by seducing them with a feeling of control (Jian

& Liu 2009; Meng 2009). It is indeed an oversimplification to celebrate the fans' participation as a sign of an open or even democratic China (de Kloet & Landsberger 2016), but it is also crucial not to underestimate the social implications of fan practices. In addition to consuming and participating through the pre-designed patterns created by media professionals, fans also develop their own 'shadow cultural economy' (Fiske 1992). For example, by pairing certain *Super Girl* contestants in fictional romantic relationships, some Chinese fans, mostly young urban women, not only significantly affected the popularity of specific contestants but also created alternative female subjectivities that were not consistent with dominant norms of gender, sexuality, and social relations (Yang & Bao 2012).

These informal types of fan economies prospered significantly, along with the rapid development of various internet technologies, and comprise the second wave of celebrity fandom. This phase was characterized by fans' diverse interests in celebrities of different ethnic, social, and cultural origins. Through the affective labour of many online subtitling groups and with the help of various technologies, such as peer-to-peer file sharing, social media networks and e-commerce websites, Chinese audiences could access a variety of media content – movies, TV dramas, anime, video games, and manga – from multiple sources, such as the United States, Europe, Japan, and South Korea, outside the realm of the state's strict media censorship (Hu 2016). Global popular culture was thus reconfigured among local fans in the form of hybridity (Zhang 2021). Some scholars praised this informal distribution through 'fansubbing' as inaugurating an important 'mental emancipation movement' among Chinese internet users (Olesen 2014). Some fan communities even had the potential to configure new 'fandom publics' (Zhang 2016). However, although the second-wave celebrity fandom is better understood under a tribalized logic, the neoliberal cultural hierarchy within and between different fan groups should not be overlooked (Zheng 2016). For example, some superfans, particularly those who adore South Korean celebrities, accumulated both economic and cultural capital by dominating the local transaction of cultural and material products among their fellow fans because they initially had more socio-economic resources and techno-cultural expertise (Zhang & Fung 2017). Among fans of different musicians, as another example, the existence of a music hierarchy to some extent reproduced existing inequality in social class through the tastes of cultural consumption (Li Gordan C. 2020).

The current third wave began along with the rapid expansion in the availability of low-cost mobile phones and the rising influence of various digital platforms among the more general Chinese population. Considering that over the past decade those with internet access doubled, reaching nearly 75 percent

of the general population (CNNIC 2022), we can claim that, for the first time, celebrity fandom, for which internet technologies are indispensable, has now become available to more socio-economically disadvantaged individuals. Like their predecessors who were obsessed with *Super Girl*, contemporary fans also 'vote' for celebrities but now on various social media platforms, rather than through SMS. In the common belief that data traffic can be a valuable asset for celebrities and themselves, fans often collectively used various data mechanisms – including but not limited to 'chart beating' (*dabang*, 打榜), content trafficking, and data visualization – to boost the visibility of a celebrity (Zhang & Negus 2020). Platform data metrics profoundly impact fans' collective emotion, vernacular language, and even relationship with the state (Wang & Ge 2022; Yin 2021; Yin & Xie 2021). Digital platforms not only transform celebrity fandom with these data-driven features but also facilitate new patterns of interaction between fans and celebrities. For example, fans can donate virtual gifts to the celebrities they love directly or purchase material commodities that are promoted or endorsed by celebrities during live streaming (Han 2021). Traffic celebrities thus serve as a new nexus that connects consumers, advertisers, content producers, and entertainment agencies, where digital platforms can extract value from fans more directly.

After three waves of evolution, the cultural economy of celebrity fandom has established hybrid formats that are not only deeply intertwined with the development of internet technologies but also involve multifaceted features of the affective, informal, and gift economies (Yang 2015). Consistent with the stream of literature on the third wave, this study concentrates on the interrelated relationship between celebrity fandom and digital platforms. However, it diverges from the existing research in the following ways. First, although previous studies have noted that fan communities are too heterogeneous to be generalized, most of them examine this diversity through the lens of fan objects or fan practices, rather than through the socio-economic backgrounds of individual fans (e.g. Yang 2017; Zheng 2016). Celebrity fans in the previous waves – though always described as grassroots audiences – were mostly members of the urban middle class, who enjoyed plenty of socio-economic and techno-cultural privileges compared to other little noticed and deprived populations, such as rural residents, rural migrants, junior college graduates, and laid-off workers. Acknowledging the Chinese reality in which the middle class comprises only a small percentage of the general population (Li 2005), this study focuses on fans in less privileged social groups, for whom celebrity fandom and even internet services have not infiltrated and impacted their leisure activities, cultural consumption, and everyday experiences until very recently. Looking at these newcomers to celebrity fandom, the current research

investigates the broader socio-economic dynamics in which celebrity fandom that is facilitated and mediated by various digital platforms reconfigures social inequality.

3 Locating New-Poor Fans in Digital China

The connotations of poverty have dynamically changed, along with the constant remoulding of social structures. Whereas the media usually reduce the problem of poverty to spectacle of famine or occasional disasters that are far from ordinary people's daily lives, Bauman (2005) proposes that contemporary consumption practices establish a notable proportion of the world population as the 'new poor' in a consumer-oriented capitalist society. The aesthetic of consumption replaces panopticon institutions such as mass factories that discipline people's behaviour and their perceptions of their social position in a consumer society, and the principles of poverty also shift from unemployment to unqualified or insufficient consumption (Ibid.: 24). Individuals are thus divided into two categories: those who have the requisite resources to satisfy their desires, and those who do not (Ibid.: 79). Unlike the poor, who serve as labour in an industrial society, the new poor, as flawed consumers, have little value in a consumer society and are thus neglected, stigmatized, and marginalized (Ibid.: 115). Moreover, as society becomes more affluent in general, poverty is perceived less as an outcome of an unequal distribution structure than as an individual's own 'choice incompetence' (Ibid.: 76).

Dramatic economic growth in China over the past few decades has been accompanied by the emergence of the new poor, who are seduced by consumerist desires but cannot satisfy them. However, the composition of the new poor is further complicated by the country's complex social reality. On the one hand, the decline in labour security not only generated a general consciousness of relative deprivation and disillusion among a growing number of educated people who were frustrated by the lack of opportunities but also expanded poverty to a portion of the population that was previously secure or even hopeful (Standing 2016; Szablewicz 2014). On the other hand, some rural migrant workers, peasants, and other enduring marginal groups also gained the opportunity to upgrade their living standard by working as generic and temporary labour in sweatshops created by investment from global and domestic capital. The complex connotations of the new poor are further exacerbated by the platformization and informatization of Chinese society (de Kloet et al. 2019), the slowdown in Chinese economic growth, the Sino-American trade war, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wang (2014) has previously argued that rural migrant workers and the educated precariat were the two most representative social groups of the new poor population in China. Nonetheless, this study does not intentionally restrict the new poor to those two groups or define them only by their occupational characteristics. Nor are the new poor viewed as a static social group determined by a set of fixed indexes, such as their monthly income, regions, occupations, or education background. Multiple groups exist that can hardly be defined with existing sociological categories. The difficulty of naming them prevents these unprivileged individuals from building a collective consciousness or speaking for themselves and excludes them from wider public or academic recognition, and this further embodies them as a marginalized part of society (Spivak 1988).

The use here of the term 'new poor' is not intended to confirm a 'Western' concept with Chinese empirical evidence or to arbitrarily label individuals with a sociological term. The term is used here only as a stopgap for describing a portion of the Chinese population in between the middle class and underclass that is hard to define. First, the new poor make up an 'invisible poor population' because they do not live below the poverty line and therefore cannot benefit from the state's poverty alleviation campaigns (Huang 2018). In terms of material and cultural consumption, they are the 'have-less' in between the 'haves' and 'have-nots', whose access is often lower in quality, limited in amount, and cheaper in cost (Qiu 2009). The new poor are thus different from the middle class, which might also be occasionally trapped in feelings of anxiety and inadequacy (Tsang 2014). Unlike the Chinese middle class, the new poor not only have limited consumption choices but also more often struggle between an insecure and deficient income, constantly rising living costs, and ubiquitous consumerist desires. Moreover, the new poor should not be directly equated with the working class because they tend to lack stable identities based on labour due to their precarious working conditions.

Obviously, celebrity fandom is not the only option available to the new poor for consuming and participating in entertainment. Earlier generations of rural migrants actively adjusted how they imagined and identified themselves to find pleasure in commercial films, even though they were hardly the presumed audience of this urban and middle-class centric entertainment (Sun 2014). Rural inhabitants have devoted plenty of time to watching videos, playing games, and social networking with low-cost mobile devices (Oreglia 2014). Inexpensive internet cafés have become temporary resting places for the urban homeless, as many of them are fans of video games, which they could play not just for fun but also to earn a meagre income (Tian & Lin 2020). Connected to short video and live-streaming platforms, some disadvantaged music fans, who are denunciated as vulgar and low quality, express

their own frustrations by appropriating elements from pop music (Hou 2021). The embeddedness of various digital platforms in everyday lives has created additional opportunities for the new poor to be incorporated into consumer society. However, digital platforms, like many other actors in social aggregates, should be viewed as mediators, rather than intermediaries, because they profoundly intervene, remould, and dislocate the process of cultural production, distribution, and consumption, instead of merely facilitating it or creating predictable outcomes (Latour 2005: 39–42). Using particular systemic structures (Eubanks 2018), designs (Costanza-Chock 2020), algorithms (Noble 2018), and datafication mechanisms (Couldry & Mejias 2019), digital platforms evaluate, represent, reproduce, and transform existing social inequality. By focusing on new-poor fans of traffic celebrities, this study demonstrates that the perceptions of the new poor are restructured in the context of Chinese celebrity fandom by reshaping the actions, performances, and subjectivities of the participants involved.

4 Methodology

From December 2019 to May 2021, I conducted a digital ethnography on multiple online fan communities of different traffic celebrities, particularly on Weibo and Douban, where fans most frequently interact. As a massive social media platform, Weibo is usually regarded as the Chinese counterpart of Twitter, but it specifically features a large amount of entertainment and depoliticized commercial content (Jia & Han 2020). In contrast, Douban is a popular platform that specifically gives users the ability to score and discuss a range of media content, including books, films, TV shows, and musical albums. Fans also often use the forum function on Douban to anonymously share their experiences and reflections on being fans. With particular functions, such as Star Power Rank and Super Topic on Weibo and scoring and group discussions on Douban, they are remarkable platforms for fans not just to play with the quantified popularity of specific traffic celebrities but also to interact with other fans, learning and sharing how to deploy data in broader contexts.

I collected data from the following three sources. First, I actively participated in the online fan communities and observed how fans engaged on the platforms, interpreted their understanding of various data metrics, and how they intentionally gamed not just social media data metrics but also quantified data in a broader context. Specifically, I followed their posts, participated in their discussions, and documented some of them in snapshots and field notes. In accordance with the fans' everyday use, I switched between four Weibo accounts and three Douban accounts during my ethnography.

Second, I conducted several rounds of interviews with twelve fans in particular and collected over sixty hours of recordings with their consent (anonymized details of the interviewees are in the Appendix). Although I also consulted with fans who found it easy to meet the standards of a qualified fan, I chose only those who articulated their perception as inadequate consumers during interviews. To fully protect their identities, I anonymized all of them with code names in the following sections. All the participants involved in the study were women born between 1990 and 2000. This means that they grew up in the post-Tiananmen era, a period characterized by a rapid transition into a consumer society. Furthermore, my attention to young female fans is based on the reality that women, from adolescent girls to young women, account for over 90 percent of traffic celebrities' fan groups (Sun 2021). Nonetheless, this does not mean that similar consumerist desires have a smaller impact on other social groups, such as male counterparts (e.g. Gerth 2020; Lee & Song 2017).

Third, I also sought information from news reports, blogs, commentaries, business reports, and policy documents. Discourses from various sources helped provide a more comprehensive understanding of how meanings are constructed in today's multimedia world (Dicks et al. 2006). Moreover, these materials could put my online observations into an offline historical and social context (Pink et al. 2015).

5 To Work on the Data: A Female Labourer in the Digital Data Sweatshop

Within the fan communities of traffic celebrities, 'working on the data' (*zuoshuju*, 做数据) is commonly believed to be a fundamental responsibility and a part of the daily ritual for all 'qualified' fans. Whereas rich fans can simply pay for the value-added services offered by platforms or hire third parties, such as click farms, to complete this mission, new-poor fans often need to find time to work on the data themselves. Working on the data does not mean casually scrolling down one's social media timeline or idly checking the newest updates of a celebrity. Rather, because the work is repetitive and very intense, fans usually poke fun at themselves for being female workers on an assembly line in a sweatshop (*shuju nügong*, 数据女工), except that their products are digital data. Figure 1 shows the 'everyday' tasks by Bai Jingting's fan group, indicating that fans should engage in 'chart beating' on fourteen ranking charts on eight digital platforms, including social media platforms (Weibo, WeChat, and QQ), search engines (Baidu and Sogou), and content-streaming platforms (Youku, iQiyi, and Tencent video). For each chart, fans might need to engage in many actions on a daily basis, including but not limited to registering,

FIGURE 1
The multiple daily data work of Bai Jingting's fan group
SCREENSHOT BY THE AUTHOR, 5 JANUARY 2020

following, viewing videos, liking, reposting, commenting, voting, and donating and purchasing virtual gifts. Many platforms also have a 'punching in' function to reward fans who can work on data continuously, with a priority on visibility and penalizing those who cannot, making the process more like working in a sweatshop than a leisure activity. Whenever a celebrity attends a new variety show, acts in a new TV drama, or endorses a new brand, fans initiate specific branding campaigns in addition to the daily data generation tasks.

Fans of traffic celebrities pay attention not only to the quantity of social media data but also to its quality. For example, they often actively monitor the comment sections on Weibo, Douban, and content-streaming platforms, to ensure that praise is more noticeable than negative or unrelated comments. To perform these tasks, enthusiastic fans usually have at least two or three accounts on Weibo and Douban – and some fans might have dozens. They try to 'humanize' each account with a certain level of maintenance. Specifically, if a fan uses only a newly registered Weibo account with few personal touches, the data on which they comment or that they like might be erased or not counted by the platform's algorithms, as it will be identified as coming from an 'astroturfing' bot.[2] Therefore, fans, as free data labourers, also need to switch between their multiple Weibo and Douban accounts, leaving personal touches on them to prepare them for future data generation missions.

To generate data effectively, fans act in accordance with a collective understanding of how platform data metrics work. Rather than merely serving as unaware sources of data to be mined by platforms, fans have a rich understanding of how to increase the visibility of their own social media accounts and elevate the position of a traffic celebrity on various popularity charts. Their native knowledge of a platform's datafication strategy is first achieved based on their adept usage, frequent engagement, and discussion. At the same time, they learn from the detailed descriptions that platforms publicize on how each ranking chart calculates popularity. Weibo stimulates fans' active contributions to its data metrics and is a particularly radical platform that carefully explains how each ranking chart is calculated based on a combination of variables and how each variable is weighted and can be increased to affect the popularity output (see Figure 2). This apparent transparency also serves as a mechanism to direct usage into specific patterns.

Moreover, individual fans, especially those who are among the new poor, also learn from the fan leaders and, in particular, the data teams of each traffic celebrity. Data teams are usually made up of experienced and digitally savvy

2 AstroTurf was a famous commercial brand of artificial grass used in sporting facilities, and 'astroturfing' was coined as slang for artificial grassroots efforts.

FIGURE 2 The detailed explanation of Weibo's celebrity chart
SCREENSHOT BY THE AUTHOR, 4 JANUARY 2020

fans who are perceived as having a better understanding of statistics or data science. Some of them are closely connected with talent agencies or media institutions in preparing tutorials for teaching other fans how to generate data more effectively. By gaining information from various sources, data teams act as key opinion leaders in fan communities; they play an important role in translating data metrics into specific uses and thus have more power in defining how and why fans should work on data (see Figure 3).

Liu, a fan of Jackson Yee, explained that data teams organized an intensive campaign for generating data to compete with fans of Karry Wang and push Yee to the top of Weibo's celebrity ranks. During this campaign, as an

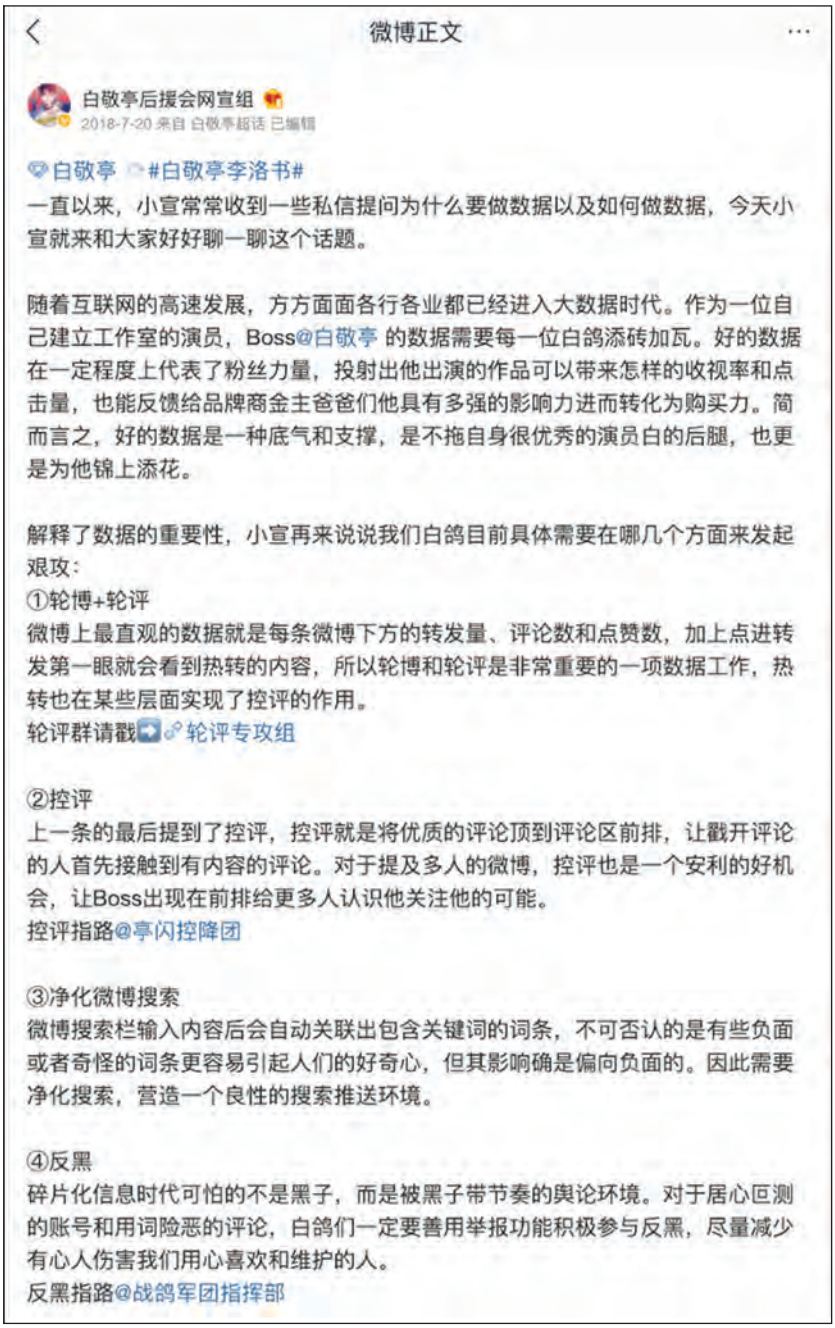

FIGURE 3 The data team of Bai Jingting's fan group explains the necessity of 'working on data' to individual fans
SCREENSHOT BY THE AUTHOR, 5 JANUARY 2020

individual fan, she followed the commands of the data teams. Yee and Wang are both members of the same Chinese boy group, TFBoys, and both are now in the top tier of traffic celebrities. During this chart-beating campaign, the key variable was the number of virtual flowers donated to each celebrity within a seven-day period. As she described it,

> The competition is like long-distance running. You need clever strategies and teamwork to win.... First, I was added to the data teams' QQ chat group and received some Weibo accounts in addition to my own.... Following the data team's requirements, I bought virtual flowers through these accounts but reserved some flowers, rather than directly donating all of them, because timing mattered if we wanted it to be calculated effectively. The data team monitored the data changes between Wang and Yee and decided when we could collectively sprint to surpass Wang's fans. (Personal communication, 24 December 2019)

In organizing these campaigns and spreading tutorials, data teams reinforce that the fans' have an inescapable responsibility to generate data and boost the popularity of a particular traffic celebrity. The flowchart in Figure 4 depicts how, defined by platforms and fan leaders, working on the data becomes a governmentality that coaxes new-poor fans in particular into becoming free data labourers. Even though some dissident fans question the point of data generation, they still engage in intense data labour so that they can be acknowledged as 'qualified' fans of a traffic celebrity.

The use of commercial data to affect people's perceptions of popularity and therefore their consumption choices is not an exclusively digital phenomenon but, rather, a marketing strategy of long standing, particularly in the distribution of cultural products, such as popular music or books (Hakanen 1998; Miller 2000). It is significant here that, first, digital platforms' data metrics have become a key determinant of popularity. Second, individual fans have replaced commercial agencies in this case by trading on their free and affective labour towards co-producing a traffic celebrity. Third, social media platforms benefit from free data labour by fans, especially new-poor fans, who have fewer choices than rich fans, other than performing these data missions. More important, as repeatedly spread and emphasized by fan leaders, the perceived meaning of social media metrics reinforces the malleability as well as the power of datafication, normalizing this value among fans in a broader socio-economic context and mobilizing new-poor fans' agency to participate and even make a difference.

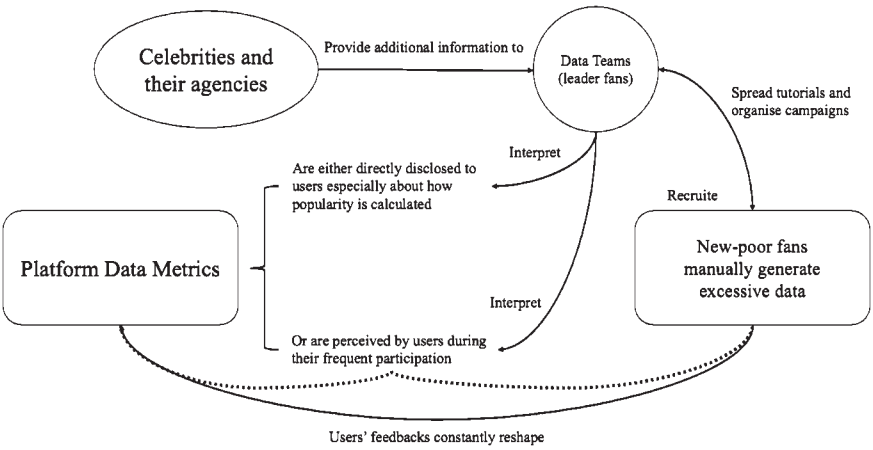

FIGURE 4 The mechanism of how different actors anticipate that new-poor fans in particular should work on data

6 To 'Defy the Sky and Change One's Fate': A Tactical Consumer Taking Advantage of Digital Platforms

Digital platforms as well as media and entertainment industries exploit fans' labour, as they can profit from a celebrity's inflated popularity in numerous ways (Han & Hou 2021). Yet what is truly popular also becomes more illusionary, as data are no longer representative of actual popularity but, rather, something that can be manipulated and messaged by different participants amidst unsymmetrical power dynamics to produce particular outcomes. To some extent, fans' collective labour in generating excessive or even fake data reduces the quality of social media datasets, making tech companies' data-based prediction of users' behaviours less reliable and undermining the prevalent power of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Thus the assumption that fans simply lose their sense of self when quantifying their affection through platform data metrics is an oversimplification (see also Couldry & Mejias 2019). This section discusses why fans are motivated to perform this tedious data labour and how new-poor fans demonstrate their affective, digital, and calculated agency to create gaps in the overwhelmingly exploitative data-driven fan culture.

Consistent with celebrity fandom in other social contexts, Chinese fans, including those who are new poor, are also obsessed with fan commodities because they not only access additional information about certain celebrities but also embody their desire for intimacy in a visible and tangible

way (Galbraith & Karlin 2019). However, Chinese fans are also obsessed with the data, particularly in economic transactions that can later be visualized quantitatively. In other words, replacing material or virtual goods and services that are used to embody fans' affection, data become the new fan object that is simultaneously a process and a goal (Yin 2020). By generating data not just on social media but also on various sales charts using real money, fans aim to collectively demonstrate the celebrity's mobilizing ability; compete for future resources from formal investors, such as content producers and advertisers; and secure a brighter future career for the celebrity. This data fetishism is grounded in an aspiration for success and the power to have an impact, which becomes increasingly impossible for individuals, especially the new poor, to achieve in their own lives.

The term *nitian gaiming* 逆天改命, which appears frequently in the fans' justification of their free data labour and excessive consumption, indicates that they view the process of inflating data as a way to influence, in addition to being a method of building intimacy or experiencing intertextual pleasure. The word literally translates as 'defying the sky and changing one's fate' and figuratively indicates that the future career of a specific idol can be positively affected because of fans' efforts at data generation, as even fate – usually determined by more powerful players in this game, such as producers or sponsors – can be changed with collectively manipulated popularity. The best and dominant way to visualize not just an idol's popularity but also the economic strength of his or her fan groups is numbers. A remarkable case of defying the sky and changing a celebrity's fate is Yang Chaoyue, a contestant participating in Tencent's girl group reality show *Produce 101* (2018). Unlike the other, well-prepared competitors, Yang generated controversy regarding her impoverished rural background, low educational attainment, and poor performance on stage. Because Yang was far from the usual type of perfect pop idol favoured by media producers and advertisers, she attracted significant support from fans, including those who had a similar background. They purchased commodities in excess to participate in voting, enthusiastically worked on social media data to escalate her position in the rankings, voluntarily monitored social media content to clean up negative comments, and thus attempted to change her seemingly doomed fate. Although some fans argued that as a rural girl with little performing talent, Yang only served as a newly-designed persona that the entertainment industry used to exploit fans – and, if it was the case, it was extremely successful – for Yang's fans, the process of selecting her from the 101 contestants and helping her to win the game was empowering, for they publicly demonstrated their preferences by working on various types of data.

Compared to their yearning for their celebrity's success, the new-poor fans' constant participation hardly justified their meagre income or savings. Particularly when satisfaction is constructed on the basis of how much consumption contributes to sales or social media data, 'proletarian shopping', such as window shopping with no actual intention to buy, a tactic employed by incapable consumers to experience peripheral pleasure in a consumer society, now becomes meaningless (Fiske 2000). However, new-poor fans are still not completely excluded. Because they are digitally savvy, they use various tactics afforded by digital platforms to pretend that they are temporarily qualified consumers. Trading in second-hand goods, virtual credit cards, and even online loan providers backed by different Chinese tech giants are the three most readily available options for them to partially afford the economic costs of being a qualified fan.

For some fans, purchasing fan commodities is legitimized as an investment or speculation practice, rather than merely consumption. A common phrase they use when promoting a traffic celebrity to potential new fans is *rugu bu kui* 入股不亏, which means that you will not lose money if you pay for a celebrity, just as investing in a promising company's stock will yield returns. By indicating that a traffic celebrity can become more popular because of the fans' tedious data labour and excessive consumption, the economic value of these fan objects also increases. Therefore, rather than constantly acquiring fan commodities to satisfy their own affective pleasure, new-poor fans often resell these commodities on second-hand e-commerce platforms at the right time to 'restore their health bar' so as to be able to invest in other traffic celebrities when necessary.

In addition, all twelve interviewees mentioned using digital credit systems, especially Huabei and Baitiao, as an inevitable part of their daily consumption practices. Huabei has provided over 70 percent of its 729 million users with the first chance to experience loan services with a lower threshold than that of physical credit cards backed by banks (Li Huo 2020). These digital credit services offer temporary access, so that the new poor can be included. Credit bridges the anxieties and conflicts between those who are capable of consuming and those who are not. Because they are familiar with the affordances of multiple platforms, two interviewees mentioned that they also tried to pay a digital credit card bill with money borrowed from other platforms. Even though they fell into debt as a result of this process, as long as they could find new online lenders, they could maintain a fragile balance under the already precarious condition.

7 To Be Counted: How Flawed Consumers Are Pressured to Take Risks in Order to Boost Data

This section examines the broader socio-economic implications of new-poor fans' data labour and excessive consumption, particularly the unsymmetrical power dynamics that put new-poor fans in disadvantaged social positions despite their own affective, digital, and calculated agency. Specifically, two of the interviewees described being trapped by online loans; eight experienced anxiety at least once when the payment due date of their digital credit cards approached, and all of them used different strategies, including skipping meals, to save money so that they could continue to support the celebrities they adored. Without a large-scale survey, it would be difficult to estimate the percentage of new-poor fans of traffic celebrities who have similarly negative experiences. Nonetheless, this section demonstrates a pattern in which platform-based and data-driven celebrity fandom in China claims to include and support the new poor but actually profits by extracting economic value from them, mirroring the global expansion of the poverty industry (Hatcher 2016). Also, the process would not be possible without the heterogeneous and hierarchical characteristics of fan communities of traffic celebrities.

Subtle differences exist between fans who are consuming to fulfil their intertextual, affective, or intimate desires and those who are spending money as a prerequisite to fandom. The latter logic prevails among Chinese fan communities of traffic celebrities. When *Spotlight*, a digital audio track by Xiao Zhan, who is arguably the country's most sought-after traffic celebrity, was released in early 2020, his fans set consumption quotas for themselves in the pursuit of higher sales data to bolster his popularity. The most widely shared standard, suggested by several fan leaders on Weibo, indicated that students should each buy at least 105 downloads of the song, whereas those who were employed should each purchase at least 1,005. Multiple purchases are always seen as the fans' inescapable responsibility, whether for commodities directly related to traffic celebrities (music downloads, albums, posters, magazines, concert tickets, photobooks, etc.) or for products from brands that they endorse. Fans who spend little money or have no receipts to share as proof of a purchase, regardless of the reason, will be called out and barred from further participation in the group. The pressure not only shapes the nature of fans' desires but also coerces them to repeatedly consume.

Xu, a recent college graduate who was still looking for a stable job at the time of our interview, recounted that other fans had been continually pressuring her, questioning how she dared to claim that she was a truly devoted fan

despite spending little money. She described her experience of being shamed and harassed.

> A number of them just kept @me in the WeChat chatting group and asked me why I cannot pay more and 'contribute some data'. But at that time, I had been extremely thrifty for three months to save every penny I could just to support [the celebrity]. I also maxed out my credit card.... In total, I already spent maybe RMB 4,000 or 5,000, a lot money for me at least.... Of course, they didn't care. They said we all owe him [the celebrity], so we all have to work hard, to spend money and pay [him] back.... It's just so tiring to be in the community, enduring being PUA-ed all day.[3]

The new-poor fans' own desires, and peer pressure by fan leaders who are often socio-economically more powerful, leads some of them to rely not only on digital credit cards but also on online loans, though the latter may have higher risk and more severe financial and even social consequences.

While conducting this study, when I scrolled down my own Weibo timeline, regardless of which account I was accessing, the platform's lending application (called Jieqian 借钱, which means borrowing or lending money) popped up almost every fifteen minutes, advertising that anyone could immediately borrow RMB 200,000 from Weibo for any purpose. Because many fans' timelines are usually filled with fellow fans' discussions about how to pay in order to contribute data, this lending service offers a particularly attractive solution to obtaining the funds for satisfying one's desires. Moreover, Weibo Jieqian is just one of many such apps in the growing online lending industry in China, in which both tech companies and the informal economy play important roles. Echoing Dong's experiences mentioned in the introduction, Qian felt trapped by one of these online loans. Although, with the help of family members, she was able to escape this trap, the experience still left significant emotional scars.

> I applied for RMB 20,000, but did not receive that much. Maybe about RMB 17,000.... And I could not repay it because, after six months, I had to pay over RMB 4,000 in interest. Then, I began to get phone calls from the lender every day. They said they had access to my contact lists and could

3 A translated excerpt from Xu's Douban post (original in Chinese), accessed 25 March 2021. PUA originally meant 'pick-up artists', men who strategically seduce women, but now the term is often directly used in Chinese as an internet slang to mean emotional manipulation and gaslighting in various types of relationships.

> tell everyone that I had borrowed money.... I was terrified at that time because I really did not want either my friends or relatives to know this. I was afraid that my parents would feel ashamed and disappointed.... Finally, I told my mom, and she helped me out, even though she was also in debt. I don't know where she got that money.... I just thought I could deal with it by myself, because, at that time, I had just started working and earning money for myself. But the debt snowballed. It kept growing bigger and bigger. (Personal communication, 25 April 2020)

The mainstream media did not pay much attention to the depressing but unremarkable experiences of people like Dong and Qian, but they did report on some online lending services that had asked female college students, in particular, to provide photos of themselves in the nude, along with authenticated identity information, in exchange for larger loans (Xinhua 2018). The state authorities were highly concerned about the related moral panic and the excessive debt among the younger generation that could cause financial and social instability. Several online lenders and peer-to-peer lending platforms have thus been shut down or forcibly reformed (Zhang 2020).[4] Nonetheless, by concentrating on the excessive debt incurred by female college students, government policies largely narrow the scope of poverty to a small share of the population involved. Desperate fans who borrow money using nude photos as collateral are eye-catching examples that distract the broader public from recognizing that the poverty trap for inadequate consumers affects not only a few college students but also other members of the new poor. Moreover, by allowing and supporting higher digital credit and larger online loans as supplements to income in the e-commerce ecosystem, the authorities acknowledge the necessity of credit and debt for the achievement of a prosperous Chinese consumer society. The Chinese government problematizes only excessive debt and the improper use of debt by unqualified individuals, a pattern also seen in neoliberal societies worldwide (Marron 2012). From this perspective, the young women have only themselves to blame for their inability to manage risk and balance consumption behaviours. Because the risk in obtaining credit is mostly borne at the individual level, poverty is more likely to be interpreted as the outcome of bad personal choices, rather than structural inequality (Bauman 2005).

4 It must be noted that online loans and peer-to-peer lending are regulated in China in numerous ways due to complicated motives of different related entities. The state authority's banning related services and platforms upon using female borrowers' nude pictures as collateral is only an example, rather than a full picture of the Chinese online lending industry.

Trading in second-hand goods, digital credit cards, and online loans are all tactics used by fans to temporarily fulfil their desires and to be included in both their fan communities and the broader consumer culture. This financial inclusion, specifically lending to the poor, has become the last hope for the new poor to avoid, reduce, or at least delay the pain of social exclusion (Soederberg 2014: 1–2). However, this illusionary inclusion not only fails to solve the problem but assists in enlarging the poverty trap for vulnerable social groups, not just through secondary forms of exploitation such as by extracting interest and fee-based revenue – as shown by Qian's experience (Ibid.: 4). Credit and loans also function to discipline and extract future labour value from consumers who are not yet sufficiently capable (Ibid.: 44). Burdened with RMB 120,000 in debt, Dong is now under pressure to look for a new job with higher pay while continuing to run her e-shop, working longer hours every day. New-poor fans also become exploiters of their future selves because the perception of time has been distorted by the asynchronous rhythm between a fulfilled desire and its cost to be paid in the future (Adkins 2018). Paradoxically, when most new-poor fans perceive a gloomy future for themselves, they affectively invest in the future of one or several traffic data celebrities to pursue a kind of collective or vicarious success, all the while depleting their current labour and money.

8 Conclusions

This article illustrates that the current data-driven and platform-based celebrity fandom in China seduces some socio-economically disadvantaged individuals, who are in between the middle class and the underclass and are hard to define, into becoming fans of traffic celebrities by mobilizing their affective, digital, and calculated agency. In this process, social media data metrics not only extract fans' labour value but also serve as an apparatus of discipline in shaping these data workers' perceptions of the power of data in broader social contexts. Either voluntarily or under pressure to exaggerate data at all costs in a collective fan space, the disadvantaged fans, who have fewer choices than their richer and more powerful fellow fans, commit to performing tedious data generation tasks and to maintaining an extravagant lifestyle that they cannot afford – all to demonstrate their preferences and help produce traffic celebrities.

Contrary to Bauman's observation that the new poor – people who cannot satisfy their own consumerist desires – can only be excluded in a consumer society, digital platforms offer some temporary strategies for Chinese fans who perceive themselves as inadequate consumers to pretend to be qualified and

delay their pain, in particular through the use of virtual credit cards and online loans. However, this illusionary inclusion not only fails to solve the problem but helps to expand the poverty trap, in which all the social costs are borne only by the fans, individually. By examining the inequality involved in celebrity fandom, I argue that the perpetuation of the new poor is not limited to exclusion or stigma. It involves mobilizing the agency of the disadvantaged themselves, seducing them into participation, and reshaping them as new exploitable subjects. The remaking of new-poor fans shows that digital platforms' data metrics, together with their other functions, such as online lending, not only had a profound effect on the cultural economy of celebrity fandom but, more important, became a nexus for reinforcing existing unequal social structures. This study thus provides a contextualized discussion about how the complicated meanings of the new poor are reconfigured through digital exclusion/inclusion in today's transitional consumer-oriented Chinese society.

References

Adkins, Lisa (2018), *The Time of Money*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Anagost, Ann (2004), 'The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)'. *Public Culture*, 16(2), 189–208.

Bauman, Zygmunt (2005), *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.

CNNIC (2022), 'The 49th China Statistical report on Internet development'. China Internet Network Information Centre Online. Retrieved 20 April 2022 from http://www.cnnic.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/202202/P020220407403488048001.pdf. (in Chinese).

Costanza-Chock, Sasha (2020), *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Couldry, Nick & Mejias, Ulises A. (2019), *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.

Cui, Li & Lee, Francis L.F. (2010), 'Becoming Extra-ordinary: Negotiation of Media Power in the Case of *Super Girl's Voice* in China'. *Popular Communication*, 8(4), 256–272. https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2010.512829.

Cunningham, Stuart & Craig, David (2019), *Social Media Entertainment*. *Social Media Entertainment*. New York: New York University Press.

Davis, Deborah S. (2000), *The Consumer Revolution in Urban China*. Oakland: University of California Press.

De Kloet, Jeroen & Landsberger, Stefan (2016), 'Fandom, Politics, and the Super Girl Contest in a Globalized China'. In: Zwaan, Koos & de Bruin, Joost (eds.), *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate, pp. 135–147.

De Kloet, Jeroen, Poell, Thomas, Zeng Guohua, & Chow W. Yiu Fai (2019), 'The Platformization of Chinese Society: Infrastructure, Governance, and Practice'. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 12(3), 249–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1644008.

Dicks, Bella, Soyinka, Bambo, & Coffey, Amanda (2006), 'Multimodal Ethnography'. *Quantitative Research*, 6(1), 77–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794106058876.

Eubanks, Virginia (2018), *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Featherstone, Mike (2007), *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Fiske, John (1992), 'The Cultural Economy of Fandom'. In: Lewis, Lisa A. (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. New York: Routledge, pp. 30–49.

Fiske, John (2000), 'Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power and Resistance'. In: Schor, Juliet & Holt, Douglas B. (eds.), *The Consumer Society Reader*. New York: New Press, pp. 306–329.

Galbraith, Patrick W. & Karlin, Jason G. (2019), *AKB48*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Gerth, Karl (2020), 'Consumerism in Contemporary China'. In: Akram, Tanweer & Rashid, Salim (eds.), *Faith, Finance, and Economy: Belief and Economic Well-Being*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 75–105.

Grossberg, Lawrence (1992), 'Is There a Fan in the House? The Affective Sensibility of Fandom'. In: Lewis, Lisa A. (ed.), *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. New York: Routledge, pp. 50–68.

Hakanen, Ernest A. (1998), 'Counting Down to Number One: The Evolution of the Meaning of Popular Music Charts'. *Popular Music*, 17(1), 95–111.

Han, Xiaofei (2021), 'Historicising Wanghong Economy: Connecting Platforms through Wanghong and Wanghong Incubators'. *Celebrity Studies*, 12(2), 317–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2020.1737196.

Han, Xiaofei & Hou, Jiaxi (2021), Fake Popularity for Real Money: Enlarging Data Bubble on Chinese Digital Platforms. In *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research, 2021*. https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12179.

Hatcher, Daniel L. (2016), *The Poverty Industry: The Exploitation of American's Most Vulnerable Citizens*. New York: New York University Press.

Hou, Jiaxi (2021), 'A Platform for the Underclass Youth: Hanmai Rap Videos, Social Class, and Surveillance on Chinese Social Media'. *First Monday*, 26(9). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i9.10587.

Hu, Kelly (2016), 'Chinese Subtitle Groups and Flexible Accumulation in the Age of Online Viewing'. In: Iwabuchi, Koichi, Tsai, Eva, & Berry, Chris (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, pp. 45–54.

Huang, Shuai (2018, 11 May), 'Yinxing pinkun renkou shi xiaofei shehui de xianjing ma? [Is the Invisible Poor Population the Trap of Consumer Society?]'. China Youth Online. Retrieved 14 March 2021 from http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2018-05/11/nw.D110000zgqnb_20180511_2-08.htm.

iResearch (2020), '2020nian Zhongguo hongren jingji shangye moshi ji qushi [The 2020 Report on the Chinese Celebrity Economy]'. Retrieved 20 January 2022 from http://www.199it.com/archives/1090553.html.

Jia, Lianrui & Han, Xiaofei (2020), 'Tracing Weibo (2009–2019): The Commercial Dissolution of Public Communication and Changing Politics'. *Internet Histories*, 4(3), 304–332. https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2020.1769894.

Jian, Miaoju & Liu, Changde (2009), 'Democratic Entertainment Commodity and Unpaid Labor of Reality TV: A Preliminary Analysis of China's Supergirl'. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 10(4), 524–543. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370903166382.

Kelly, William W. (2004), *Fanning the Flames: Fans and Consumer Culture in Contemporary Japan*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Latour, Bruno (2005), *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lee, Tracy K. & Song, Geng (2017), 'Masculinity and Aspiring Consumption: A Reception Study of Men's Lifestyle Magazines in Contemporary China'. *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, 3(1), 39–58. https://doi.org/10.1386/eapc.3.1.39_1.

Li, Gordon C. (2020), 'Distinction in China: The Rise of Taste in Cultural Consumption'. PhD dissertation, *The London School of Economics and Political Science*. Retrieved from http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/4144/.

Li, Huo (2020, 29 November), 'Reining in Credit Lending: Are Fintech Giants' Easy Loans Luring Youngsters into "Consumption Traps"?' China Global Television Network. Retrieved 2 March 2021 from https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-11-29/Are-fintech-s-easy-loans-luring-youngsters-into-consumption-traps--VOHsQ7s61q/index.html.

Li, Qiang (2005), 'Dingzixing shehui jiegou yu jiegou jinzhang [Inverted T-Shaped Social Structure and Structural Strain]'. *Shehuixue yanjiu*, 2, 55–73.

Marron, Donncha (2012), 'Producing Over-Indebtedness: Risk, Prudence and Consumer Vulnerability'. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 5(4), 407–421. https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2012.703144.

Meng, Bingchun (2009), 'Who Needs Democracy If We Can Pick Our Favorite Girl? Super Girl as Media Spectacle'. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 2(3), 257–272. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750903208996.

Miller, Laura J. (2000), 'The Best-Seller List as Marketing Tool and Historical Fiction'. *Book History*, 3(1), 286–304.

Noble, Safiya Umoja (2018), *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York: New York University Press.

Olesen, Alexa (2014), 'A Mournful Farewell to Chinese Copyright Pirates'. Retrieved on 15 January 2022 from https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/25/a-mournful-farewell-to-chinese-copyright-pirates/.

Oreglia, Elisa (2014), 'ICT and (Personal) Development in Rural China'. *Information Technologies & International Development*, 10(3), 19–30.

Pink, Sarah, Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2015), *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Qiu, Jack L. (2009), *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Rofel, Lisa (2007), *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Soederberg, Susanne (2014), *Debtfare States and the Poverty Industry: Money, Discipline and the Surplus Population*. New York: Routledge.

Spivak, Gayatri C. (1988), 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In: Nelson, Cary & Grossberg, Lawrence (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271–313.

Standing, Guy (2016), *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Sun, Wanning (2014), *Subaltern China: Rural Migrants, Media, and Cultural Practices*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Sun, Yi (2021, 23 March). 'Benduan jizhe fanquan wodi riji: Zhuixing quankao shaoqian, fensi beishouge [Investigating Fan Culture: Fans Are Exploited for Their Affection]'. *Beijing Daily*. Retrieved 2 April 2021 from http://ie.bjd.com.cn/5b165687a010550e5ddc0e6a/contentApp/5b16573ae4b02a9fe2d558f9/AP60595e1ae4b0063e4e800c4d.html?isshare=1&contentType=0&isBjh=0/.

Szablewicz, Marcella (2014), 'The "Losers" of China's Internet: Memes as "Structures of Feeling" for Disillusioned Young Netizens'. *China Information*, 28(2), 259–275. https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X14531538.

Tian, Feng & Lin, Kaixuan (2020), *Qibuhuaigui: Sanhe qingnian diaocha* [Why Not Return Home: A Report about Homeless Youths in Sanhe, Shenzhen]. Beijing: Dolphin Books.

Tsang, Eileen Yuk-ha (2014), *The New Middle Class in China: Consumption, Politics, and the Market Economy*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wang, Erika Ningxin & Ge, Liang (2022), 'Fan Conflicts and State Power in China: Internalised Heteronormativity, Censorship Sensibilities, and Fandom Police'. *Asian Studies Review*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2022.2112655.

Wang, Hui (2014), 'Liangzhong xin qiongren jiqi weilai: Jieji zhengzhi de shuailuo, zaixingcheng yu xinqiongren de zunyan zhengzhi [Two Kinds of New Poor and Their

Future: The Decline and Reshaping of Class Politics and the Politics of Dignity of the New Poor]'. *Open Times,* 6, 47–70.

Xinhua (2018, 29 January), 'Luodai mozhao shenxiang nvdaxuesheng yuqiweihuan hai bei qiaozha duoren beibi zisha [Naked Loans Severely Harm Female College Students Forcing Some to Commit Suicide]'. Retrieved 5 July 2020 from http://www.xinhuanet.com/legal/2018-01/20/c_1122287076.htm.

Xinhua (2021, 15 June), 'Zhongyang wangxinban qidong qinglang fanquan luanxiang zhengzhi zhuanxiang xingdong [CAC Initiates Internet Clean-Up Targeting Chaotic Fandom]'. Retrieved 5 April 2020 from http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-06/15/c_1127564199.htm.

Yang, Ling (2009), 'All for Love: The Corn Fandom, Prosumers, and the Chinese Way of Creating a Superstar'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(5), 527–543. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909337863.

Yang, Ling (2015), 'Fensi jingji de sanchong mianxiang [Three Aspects of Fan Economy]'. *Zhongguo qingnian yanjiu*, 11. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/41453881.pdf.

Yang, Ling (2017), 'Platforms, Practices, and Politics: A Snapshot of Networked Fan Communities in China'. In: Goggin, Gerard & McLelland, Mark (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories*. New York: Routledge, pp. 370–383.

Yang, Ling & Bao, Hongwei (2012), 'Queerly Intimate: Friends, Fans and Affective Consumption in a Super Girl Fan Fiction Community'. *Cultural Studies*, 26(6), 842–871. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2012.679286.

Yin, Yiyi (2020), 'An Emergent Algorithmic Culture: The Data-Ization of Online Fandom in China'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23 (4), 475–492. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920908269.

Yin, Yiyi (2021), 'My Baby Should Feel No Wronged: Digital Fandoms and Emotional Capitalism in China'. *Global Media and China*, 6(4), 460–475. https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364211041681.

Yin, Yiyi & Xie, Zhuoxiao (2021), 'Playing Platformized Language Games: Social Media Logic and the Mutation of Participatory Cultures in Chinese Online Fandom'. *New Media & Society*, https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211059489.

Zhang, Qian & Fung, Anthony Y.H. (2017), 'Fan Economy and Consumption: Fandom of Korean Music Bands in China'. In: Yoon, Tae-Jin & Jin, Dal Yoon (ed.), *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. 129–144.

Zhang, Qian & Negus, Keith (2020), 'East Asian Pop Music Idol Production and the Emergence of Data Fandom in China'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23 (4): 493–511. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920904064.

Zhang, Weiyu (2016), *The Internet and New Social Formation in China: Fandom Publics in the Making*. New York: Routledge.

Zhang, Xiwen (2021), 'Why Most Chinese Fans of American Superhero Movies Are Girls: A Gendered Local Fandom of a Global Hollywood Icon'. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2020.1870709.

Zhang, Zhuoqing (2020, 29 December), 'Fanquan jiedai zhuixing Yinbaojian jingti wangluo pingtai youdao guodu jiedai [Fans Use Online Loans to Support Celebrities, CBIRC Warns about the Potential Harm of Online Loans]'. Retrieved on 3 January 2021 from http://www.nbd.com.cn/articles/2020-12-29/1584028.html.

Zheng, Xiqing (2016), 'Borderless Fandom and Contemporary Popular Cultural Scene in Chinese Cyberspace' (PhD dissertation, Washington University). Retrieved from https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/handle/1773/36544/.

Zuboff, Shoshana (2019), *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

Appendix: List of Interviews

	Code name	Year of birth	Fans of whom	Interview date	Method
1	Bao	1991	Jackson Yee	9 March 2020 25 October 2020	WeChat Call WeChat Call
2	Li	1994	Bai Jingting	5 December 2019 23 December 2019	WeChat Call WeChat Call
3	Lin	1999	TNT boy groups	30 October 2020 8 December 2020	WeChat Call WeChat Call
4	Liu	1993	Jackson Yee	24 December 2019 4 November 2020	Face to face (Tokyo) WeChat Call
5	Ma	1998	Bai Jingting	17 December 2019 9 December 2020	WeChat Call WeChat Call
6	Qian	1997	Unwilling to disclose	4 April 2020 25 April 2020 9 June 2020	WeChat Call WeChat Call WeChat Call
7	Dong	1996	Unwilling to disclose	23 April 2020 4 January 2022	WeChat Call WeChat Call
8	Wang	1990	Zhu Yilong	29 October 2020 2 November 2020	WeChat Call WeChat Call
9	Xu	1996	Unwilling to disclose	5 March 2020 24 October 2020	WeChat Call WeChat Call
10	Zhao	1995	Wu Lei	24 October 2020 9 December 2020	WeChat Call WeChat Call
11	Zhang	1990	Xiao Zhan	2 March 2021 13 April 2021	Tencent Meeting Tencent Meeting
12	Zhu	1992	Cai Xukun	25 April 2021	Zoom Call