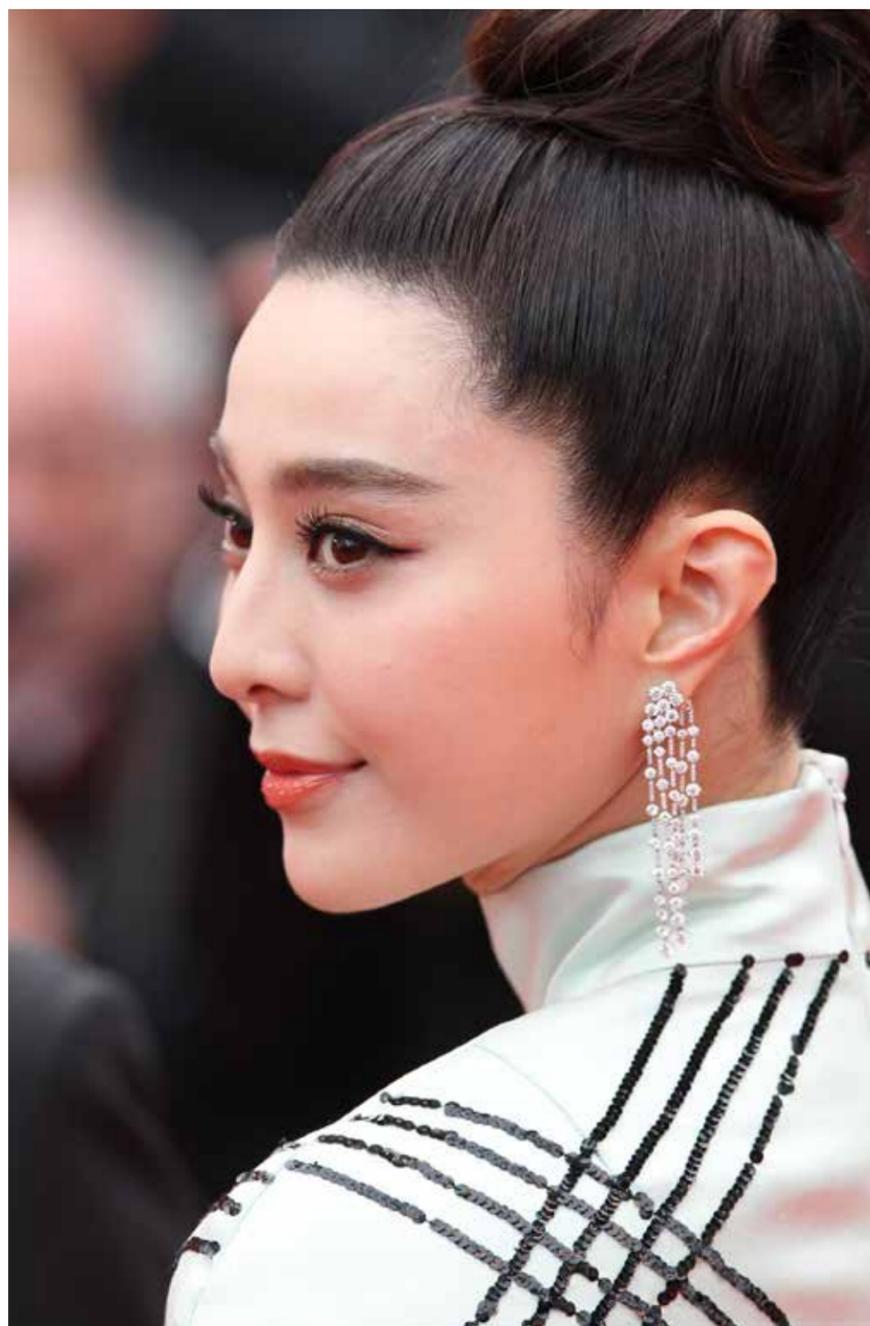


THE FALL OF A STAR?

As China's biggest actress disappears after revelations of massive tax-dodging, MARTA COLOMBO explores the consequences of her fall from grace



THREE MONTHS AGO, China's highest-paid actress and sweetheart simply disappeared. While it does sound like the intriguing first line of a noir novel, this actually happened – and the star in question is the beloved Fan Bingbing. According to reports, Fan, who is also known for her extensive philanthropic activities, was last seen entering a children's hospital in early July and then remained mysteriously absent for months.

Fan, arguably the country's best-known celebrity both locally and internationally, has starred in countless Chinese movies and TV series and made her first Hollywood appearance with her prominent role as Blink in 2014's *X-Men: Days of Future Past*. Earlier this year, it was also confirmed that she had a role in the Adrien Brody and Bruce Willis-led movie *Air Strike* (its Chinese release was cancelled by director Xiao Feng in mid-October) and she made a triumphant entrance on the red carpet at Cannes. Fan's rise to global stardom, in short, seemed unstoppable – until she up and vanished.

Chinese news outlets and social media speculated for months about what could have happened to the actress, and her more than 60 million followers on Weibo (China's Twitter) were desperate to find answers. Some theories linked her absence to Beijing political intrigue and even to games of rivalry and jealousy.

Her disappearance became an enthralling public affair that was on everyone's lips, a story equally eerie and amusing – until early October, when the China's State Administration of Taxation formally accused

the actress of tax evasion. According to Chinese news agency Xinhua, after a long investigation, the state organ found that Fan and the companies she owns could be hit by an astounding RMB 883 million (US\$129 million) in fines.

Soon after the report was made public, Fan posted a compelling apology on her Weibo account, marking her first post since June. "Today I'm facing enormous fears and worries over the mistakes I made! I have failed the country, society's support and trust, and the love of my devoted fans... I beg for everyone's forgiveness!" she wrote. "I shouldn't have lost my ability to govern myself in the face of economic interests, leading myself to break the law," she continued in a longer apology letter she posted.

While Fan was nowhere to be found, her fans fabricated the most absurd theories to fill the void of that their heroine left in their hearts. The actress represents much more to many young Chinese than her successful career and lavish lifestyle. She embodies – likely for some, embodied – a strong and fierce contemporary Chinese woman, a beautiful, successful and kind mother, an entrepreneur and an artist.

In a recent video campaign for diamond corporation De Beers Group titled "Women of Forever," Fan represents China as a global ambassador. "Women today are very powerful; they take control of their work and career, and in the meantime take care of their families," she says in the interview. In the video, she also goes on to stress how important it is for successful women to treat themselves and celebrate their value.

Her influence and role, as well as the way she has been portrayed by local media throughout her unstoppable rise to stardom, have contributed to make her a symbol of a generation. Born in 1981, Fan is a product of the Deng Xiaoping era, when China first turned outward after years of cultural, economic and political isolation.



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The fact that Fan was chosen by many international brands and directors alike was also a matter of national pride, especially as the Chinese movie industry has been desperately trying to impose itself internationally and to be culturally relevant outside the region. Fan, who has never lived in the US or abroad, who comes from a humble family from China's rural provinces and whose first language is Chinese, in short, was an example of Chinese excellence. So the big question is: will China ever forgive Fan?

While fans are disappointed, critics are concerned; many, in fact, argue that there is another side to this story. While it's not unusual for somebody to disappear from the public eye in China, in a country where the central government's grip on most aspects of society has been growing exponentially over the past decade, many are left wondering if this episode will increasingly affect the film and entertainment industries too – not just in terms of censored content, but in terms of overall control. #