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Article

# From the “Cost of Living Narrative” to “Class Perception Divide”: The Social Consequences of Public Figures' Discourse and Their Ethical Responsibilities in the Arts and Literature – Taking the Controversy Surrounding Yan Xuejing's Live-Streamed Remarks as an Example

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## Abstract

Taking the recent widespread controversy surrounding Yan Xuejing's live-streamed remarks as a case study, this paper analyses how public figures' discourse within commercial communication spheres is amplified by algorithms through digital expression and metaphorical labelling, thereby triggering class perception fractures and group emotional polarisation. Employing Xi Jinping's key directives on literary and artistic endeavours (‘centring on the people’ and ‘seriously considering social impact’) alongside the ‘integrity and artistic excellence’ standard as normative benchmarks, the article distinguishes between legal liability and ethical responsibility in the arts. It contends that the issue lies not in ‘discussing money’ per se, but in the absence of empathy within the mode of expression and the imbalance in public exemplification. This paper contends that such discourse has already produced foreseeable social consequences of value misalignment at the communication level. While not necessarily equivalent to ‘incitement of group hostility’ in legal terms, it warrants serious reflection and correction in terms of artistic ethics and social responsibility.

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## I. Problem Statement: Why Has the ‘Social Impact’ of Public Expression Become the Core Criterion for Evaluation?

Xi Jinping emphasised that literary and artistic endeavours must adhere to a people-centred approach, treating the public as both connoisseurs and critics. He further required practitioners to give serious and rigorous consideration to the social impact of their works (or words and deeds) (Xinhua News Agency, 2015). Within a communication landscape dominated by livestreaming economies and platform algorithms, the ‘everyday expressions’ of public figures inherently carry public significance and exemplary weight. Their social impact often hinges not on subjective intent, but on how they are interpreted, translated, and amplified (The Paper, 2026).

## II. Factual Boundaries and Key Public Sentiment Points

According to multiple media reports, Yan Xuejing's live-streamed remarks discussing household expenditure and Beijing's cost of living—including statements such as ‘it takes a million or so to get by’—sparked intense backlash and prompted platform intervention (The Paper, 2026; Lianhe Zaobao, 2026). Public discourse further centred on her disparaging remarks and implied

attitudes towards critics during interactions. Online commentary summarised this as delegitimising labels—comparing critics to ‘pickled cucumbers/sour netizens’—interpreted as an identity distinction signalling ‘I am not like you.’ This analysis focuses solely on communication outcomes and class perceptions, refraining from inferring the individual's subjective intent (The Paper, 2026).

### **III. Discourse Mechanism Analysis: From Digital Shock to Class Perception Fracture**

#### *3.1. Digital Shock and Empathy Deficit*

High monetary figures possess potent stimulatory effects within livestreaming contexts. When expressions like ‘hundreds of thousands still struggle to sue’ are algorithmically disseminated to broader audiences, they risk being decoded as dismissive of ordinary workers' plights, thereby triggering emotional threshold breaches and moral aversion (Lianhe Zaobao, 2026).

#### *3.2. Discrediting Labels and Constructing ‘Us/Them’*

Branding critics with derogatory metaphors like ‘sourpusses/trolls’ serves a discrediting function at the communication level: it translates structural critiques (costs, income, public exemplarity) into individual emotional issues, thereby completing identity segregation. This distinction reinforces the ‘us (successful)/them (envious)’ dichotomy, amplifying perceived class antagonism and shifting discourse from public issues back to personalised confrontations.

#### *3.3. Platform Amplification Effect*

The emotional amplification and secondary editing facilitated by platforms create a causal chain of ‘mismatch—polarisation—escalation’: misaligned value signals → identity-based interpretation → self-reinforcing emotional polarisation.

### **IV. Normative Evaluation: Xi Jinping's Literary and Artistic Outlook and the Requirement of ‘Integrity and Artistic Excellence’**

#### *4.1. The Test of ‘People-Centred Approach’*

A people-centred approach does not prohibit discussion of personal lives, but demands that narrative sequences and value frameworks prioritise understanding and respect for the circumstances of the majority populace (Xinhua News Agency, 2015). Under this standard, the aforementioned statements failed to establish effective empathetic groundwork, resulting in ‘public judgement’ manifesting intensely through expressions of anger.

#### *4.2. Public Exemplification of ‘Integrity and Artistic Excellence’*

‘Integrity and artistic excellence’ demands the unity of artistic achievement and social character, requiring artists to become pioneers and trailblazers in shaping societal ethos (People's Daily Online, 2016). Employing provocative monetary figures and derogatory metaphors within commercial livestreaming contexts risks being interpreted as an imbalance between righteousness and profit, thereby undermining the credibility of arts and literature and eroding social cohesion (Xinhua News Agency, 2015).

### **V. Distinction of Responsibility: Legal Liability and Ethical Responsibility in the Arts**

Whether an act constitutes ‘incitement to group opposition’ in the legal sense requires fulfilment of strict criteria and must be determined by judicial authorities in accordance with the law. Based on currently available public materials, this incident more closely aligns with a scenario where

inappropriate expression has provoked social division. It is inappropriate to assign legal characterisation in the absence of both substantive criteria and due process. Concurrently, from the perspective of artistic ethics and social responsibility, public figures should bear responsibility for foreseeable societal consequences: avoiding legitimising labels, preventing identity segregation, and refraining from allowing market logic to override public ethics. Regarding the boundaries between reputation rights and online expression, principles outlined in the Civil Code's section on personality rights should be adhered to (Zhong Lun Law Firm, 2021).

## VI. Constructive Pathways

1. Clarification and Correction: Define factual boundaries and rectify misinterpretations amplified by secondary editing (The Paper, 2026).
2. Narrative Reconstruction: Shift personal narratives towards structural issues (housing, education, healthcare costs) while prioritising empathy (Xinhua News Agency, 2015).
3. Demonstrate restraint: Reduce provocative figures and disparaging metaphors to restore rationality in public discourse (People's Daily Online, 2016).

## VII. Conclusion

The crux of Yan Xuejing's controversy lies not in 'whether one can discuss money,' but in how it is discussed and for whom. When expression employs disparaging metaphors to delineate identities, its social impact may evolve into fractured class perceptions. In light of Xi Jinping's artistic philosophy and the standard of 'integrity in both moral character and artistic skill,' this consequence demands serious reflection and correction: returning to the people's standpoint, rebuilding empathetic expression, and assuming the ethical responsibilities of public figures in the arts (Xinhua News Agency, 2015; People's Daily Online, 2016).

**Thesis Notes:** Yan Xuejing, a Chinese mainland actress and errenzhuan performer, graduated from Jilin University of the Arts (specialist diploma). She initially gained prominence on local variety stages before transitioning to film and television. Her portrayals in realist and family-ethics themed works have earned her considerable public recognition. In recent years, her participation in commercial communication platforms such as live streaming has drawn public scrutiny over her public statements and communication style, establishing her as a case study in the relationship between public figures' discourse and artistic ethics.

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