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Observations of Chinese fandom: organizational characteristics and the relationships inside and outside the “Fan circle”

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Abstract

Chinese “Fan circle” oscillate between receiving praise for their charitable endeavors and being shunned by society because of their “toxic fan culture”. This study reveals that “Fan circle” are quasi-organizational communities that heavily rely on cultural links, emotional discipline, and consent to commercial interference. While they may have some understanding of the structural benefits that social changes bring to the entertainment industry, they seem to lack the ability to comprehend the limitations imposed by national policies. Additionally, they struggle to adhere to established norms and public order when organizing internal or external interactions. “Fan circle” are advised to understand the limitations of policies, and the uniqueness and complexity of these quasi-organizational communities should also be considered in the formulation of regulatory policies.

Keywords: Fan community/fan circle, Structural opportunities, Quasi-organization

Introduction

In China, the term “Fan circle” is commonly used to refer to fan communities. Since the Hunan Satellite TV talent show “Super Girl” initiated the star-making movement in 2005, mainland fans have quickly evolved from informal fan clubs to online communities and alliances, namely, fandom also known as “Fan circle”. The behavioral traits of “fan circle” are noticeable; they frequently exhibit strong feelings for their idols and are excited about purchasing their merchandise. “Fan circle” participants build extensive collaborative networks with a strong feeling of group identity because they are not content with casual gatherings and exchanges. “Fan circles” developed a hierarchical structure, with key fans controlling the conversation in the circle’s center. Additionally, fan circle enforce collective discipline by instructing people on how to become real fans (Zang 2011; Lv and Zhang 2019; Zeng 2020). With the 2018 Weibo Fan White Paper projecting that the total number of entertainment star Weibo fans reached 16.7 billion in 2018, an increase of 3.9 billion persons compared to 2017, fandoms today are enormous

groupings of people. A total of 25,757 entertainment stars, including artists in the entertainment industry, singers, actors, models, dancers, and online celebrities, were included in this white paper. Thus, assuming each star had a single “fan circle”, there were at least 25,757 “fan circles” in 2018.

“Fan circle” emerged from various talent shows in China’s entertainment industry imitating Europe, America, Japan, and South Korea. It was somewhat inspired by the globalization of fan culture, and some of its behavioral traits are shared with fan communities in South Korea and other countries. However, Chinese “Fan circle” are remarkable in one way; they prominently fuse two polarized societal images. On the one hand, fandoms are known for their frequent displays of fanatical and outlandish conduct, which is referred to as “bad fan culture”. This activity occasionally causes social issues, catches the attention of enforcement authorities, and is harshly criticized by the media. In the “Clean and Bright” campaign of the Cyberspace Administration of China, “bad fan culture” has been constantly identified as a problem that needs to be fixed over the past two years. Recently, regulatory bodies outlined their objectives for regulating “Fan circle” management and “encouraging fan communities to adore stars rationally” (Xinhua News Agency 2021a). In a notice on implementing comprehensive governance in the cultural and entertainment sectors, the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee Publicity Department specifically outlined eight requirements to enhance “Fan circle” chaos management, ranking product management, fan consumption management, star broker management, star self-restraint enhancement, and youths’ irrational pursuit of stars. Additionally, a long-term method for the management of fandoms is suggested to be researched and developed. On the other hand, fandoms have won accolades for occasionally displaying the “positive energy” (*zhengnengliang*) that society values. The “2020 Research Report on Business Models and Trends of Chinese Celebrity Economy” noted that the fan economy has developed into a significant development driver for the cultural industry, and its associated market size exceeded 3.5 trillion yuan in 2019. By 2023, the fan economy is projected to be worth more than 6 trillion yuan (Shanghai iResearch Consulting Co., Ltd., 2020:7). “Fan circle” organize charitable and public welfare activities, participate in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and take other actions that are not only praised by China Central Television and People’s Daily but are also seen by some researchers as positive contributions to social welfare and governance (Tian 2020; Lv 2020). Why do “Fan circle” have such a polarized societal reputation?

Research perspective and method

The social evaluation or social image problem of a “Fan circle” is essentially a problem of the relationship between the Chinese fandom and other social groups and mainstream values. If the social structure is understood as a whole composed of various social groups, the “Fan circle” phenomenon can be observed and explained from two perspectives: the tolerance of the social structure for the fandom and the ability of the fandom to bond the structure. Previous studies have provided some inspiration in this regard. For example, studies of fandoms in consumer sociology, cultural sociology, and emotional sociology, although not focused on the relationship between fan groups and social structures, have used three perspectives of celebrity worship (Douglas 2003; McCutcheon

et al. 2002), youth subculture (Ma and Lin 2018), and popular culture (Fiske 2006; Hall and Xiao 2018; Chen 1996); therefore, they are helpful for understanding the relationship between fandom and social structures. Among them, the study of celebrity worship helps to understand the psychological characteristics of celebrity worship in a fandom. The Birmingham School's understanding of social structure constraints on the characteristics of youth subcultures is very insightful. The popular culture studies perspective on capital-controlled consumption also offers extraordinary insight.

However, the perspective of celebrity worship cannot explain why Chinese fandom mainly revolve around celebrities in the entertainment industry; "Fan circle" are not entirely composed of young people and do not have the intense defiance revealed by the Birmingham School's observation of subcultures; and fandom are far more organized and powerful than the general popular culture audience, which exceeds the scope of popular culture research. In addition, "Fan circle" have a certain degree of organization and organizational ability. Fans form a huge group online and offline through various fandom. Therefore, existing social identity theories, especially Henri Tajfel's social identity theory about the division between "us" and "them", can provide some inspiration (Hogg and Abrams 2011; Zhou 2008; Hu 2020). Also, the theory of social exclusion (Silver 1994; Ding 2009) provides some hints on the issue of social structure tolerance. Although it is a theoretical framework that is more suitable for discussing social inequality issues, this theory at least proves that research should pay attention to whether the social structure itself excludes the fandom.

This article proposes the following perspectives and observations: (1) Whether a new group can be accepted by society depends first on whether there are structural opportunities. The "Fan circle" phenomenon in mainland China occurred during a period of social transformation, which is closely related to the policy reforms for the entertainment industry and entertainment groups since the reform and opening up, the increasing involvement of commercial capital in the cultural industry, and the diversified and middle-class-oriented social achievement standards, which provide structural opportunities for the growth of fandom in the context of social transformation. (2) "Fan circle" can partially understand the structural opportunities provided by social transformation to the entertainment industry, including partially understanding the legitimacy requirements from society and taking some positive actions to mitigate social criticism. However, as groups of quasi-organizations that mainly rely on cultural ties and emotional discipline and accept the intervention of commercial capital, there are obvious deficiencies in understanding policy constraints on organizing relationships inside the fan circle and coordinating relationships outside the circle in accordance with public order and good customs, as well as in understanding and using structural opportunities.

The above explanation is based on literature research and field observations. In terms of literature, we focused on examining ideological policy texts and other historical documents since the reform and opening up. In fieldwork, we selected two "fan circle," A and B, and conducted two years of observation (from July 2018 to July 2020). Based on the characteristics of fandom gathering both online and offline, we used traditional ethnography and netnography (Kozinets 2016; Guo and Zhang 2017) to conduct online and offline fieldwork. In addition to observing "Fan circle" A online, the second author served as a manager in fandom for a year and observed the member composition,

structural characteristics, and action strategies of fandom B. We also conducted two groups of semi-structured interviews offline from February to April and October 2020. The first group consisted of 20 fans from two “fan circles”, the interview questions mainly involved the process of fan identification formation, attitudes toward the boundaries of fandom, and understanding of fan consumption. The second group included 20 people outside the “Fan circle”, and the content of the interview mainly involved their awareness of and attitudes toward fans.

The conception and characteristics of social structural opportunities

The structural opportunities of “Fan circle” are distinguished from accidental chances and primarily refer to the systemic opportunities produced by social transformation. Since the Chinese reform and opening-up, social transformation in China can be interpreted as the adjustment of the state-society interaction. The modern state generally bears the capabilities and interests to intervene in society; therefore, modern society is the product of restructuring the state-society relationship.

Suppose the state is the moon and society is the shadow. The three types of contemporary society—full moon (society under omnipotent state), waning gibbous (society under regulatory state), and potentially waning crescent (society under night watchman state)—can be distinguished based on the manner of the state intervention and the outcomes. Full moon type describes a society that has undergone a complete transformation at the hands of a supreme power. The waning gibbous type refers to a society in which the state intervenes in social and economic affairs on a large scale. The term “waning crescent type” describes society under the night watchman state. These three types of societies have different structural characteristics. The social and political spheres essentially overlap in the first type of society, where the state, which predominates, chooses the concentrated administration of society. As a result, the social structure has a concentrated feature. The types of social elites are limited since social performance requirements are wholly consistent with those of the state. To lower governance costs, the state retains habitual social rules in some fields and levels, but the social elements are generally directly managed by the state through various systems. In the second form of society, the state holds a dominant position, but there is still room for society to grow and maintain itself. Although the state continues to have heavy intervention in society, its management structure is not consolidated. The social structure also has no concentrated elements; the elite groups and social achievement standards vary. The third form of society predominated in pre-modern nations, where many areas and professions were independent, and the state managed society primarily by maintaining public safety. The scale of the political core and the periphery has an effect on the management structure, which has a particular circular feature. These three types or patterns of society have the potential to transform. The primary driving forces are shifts in elite values, changes in the capabilities and demands of the organizational operation in diverse societal domains, and shifts in the state’s assessment of management costs and legitimacy.

The shift from full moon type to waning gibbous has provided at least two structural opportunities for emerging groups such as the “fan circle”. First, the state has reopened the social sphere and the socially relaxed sphere, and social management has evolved from a concentrated management type to a “tree-like” relaxed management type, which

provides new organizations, particularly those in the entertainment business, more room to operate. Second, commercial capital has significantly increased in scale, capability, and social influence. It has the capacity to attract individuals wherever it pays attention and enters. The power of commercial capital to support a group's expansion increases with the company's economic value. Commercial capital frequently favors industries and social groupings that have a greater social standing or level of acceptance. These two elements create the social context for developing fandom. It is not difficult for "Fan circle" to advance in the social structure if they are able to handle the legitimacy criteria from the government and society correctly.

Specifically, the structural opportunities offered by the transitional society primarily consist of "national concession", "capital favoritism", and a diverse social atmosphere of interest. Among these, the role of capital is most prominent. Although fans have audience subject initiative, previous research on fan culture has often shown that they are still emotional, impulsive, and readily controllable consumers. They not only spend much money on products associated with the idol they follow while being controlled by the cultural business but also give feedback on the market. Because of this, the cultural sector is content to provide star images that appeal to the audience, develop devoted followers, and boost the fan economy (Fiske 2006:173–174; Hall and Xiao 2018; Fiske 2002). The "Fan circle" scenario is slightly more convoluted but not unique. As China began to promote the great development of the cultural industry from 1978 to 2021, commercial capital came to recognize the cultural and entertainment sector as an industry with enormous consumer demand, low investment, and quick and generous returns. Commercial capital was heavily invested in this sector and produced enormous profits.¹ Celebrities have benefited most from the industry, increasing their income and social standing, creating a strong incentive for other members of society to work in the cultural and entertainment sector.² Celebrities reap financial rewards from capital investments in the cultural and entertainment sector and generate enormous profits for investors.

Celebrities and commercial capital highly value the celebrity economy and intend to build fan base for their themes. They consider fans to be the fundamental components of the celebrity economy and the main metric for estimating a star's value and impacting capital returns. They try to keep the fandom interested. In particular, beginning in 2011, internet giants such as Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent started investing in the entertainment sector and learned about the business model that relies on fans as the primary consumers. They used big data algorithms to calculate the worth of celebrity attention and developed a business model with "flux" as its central component (Gao 2018). The commercial worth of celebrities is represented in this model by "attracting internet traffic"; the key to boosting internet traffic is to increase the number of followers. This

¹ China's cultural media industry has achieved a total output value of 2,908.25 billion yuan in 2022, according to the "Media Blue Book" research group (source: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/IDAPNV230530X1P1.html>). The cultural and related industries in China have continued to expand, as reported by the National Bureau of Statistics, owing to the development and growth of various market players. In 2022, the operating income of China's cultural industry reached 16,550.2 billion yuan, reflecting a growth rate of 1.0% and an increase of 169.8 billion yuan from the previous year (source: http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/zxfb/202306/t20230629_1940907.html).

² A search with the keyword "entertainment" on "Tianyancha.com" reveals the number of registered (currently in operation) entertainment companies since 2005. From 2005 to 2010, 26,225 entertainment companies were registered nationwide. From 2010 to 2015, 79,250 were registered, and from 2016 to 2019, there were over 100,000 registered entertainment companies.

model encourages using organizational or quasi-organizational techniques to create fan cohesion. Moreover, it operates as a chain of scale operations to draw in and retain fans. Internet goliaths have provided specialized technology assistance and online venues for organizing scattered individual fans into quasi-organizations. These internet companies greatly contribute to the growth of “Fan circle” and increase its popularity through their enormous influence.

Wang Ning (2007) claimed that the paradigms of “capital manipulation theory”, “social comparison theory (competitive consumption)”, and the combination of the two is insufficient to explain this phenomenon of Chinese consumerism. The “state transference theory” perspective must also be used to understand it. The term “transference” used in this article refers to two dimensions to reform and opening up: one is the rearrangement of the state-society relationship from full moon type to waning gibbous one. The management of society by the state has also changed from being concentrated into a tree-shaped structure, which has aided in the emergence of a new area for social interaction. The second approach involves the release of sizable activity space for cultural and entertainment sectors and consumer groups. The so-called concentrated management structure refers to the social system that was built around the state’s goals and ideology through institutional arrangements such as work units, streets, and mass organizations to stabilize the regime and build the state in the early days after the People’s Republic of China was founded; at that time, all social forces were mobilized to serve the state-building.

With the complex condition of multiple private and public cultural undertakings and companies, the state primarily implemented two reform strategies in the culture and entertainment sector. The first involved restructuring industry associations and incorporating groups, organizations and individuals into the state administration. The second strategy emphasized the ideological attributes of culture and arts by replacing traditional folk self-organized entertainment activities with state-organized entertainment activities on a broad scale. Since the reform and opening-up, the state has focused on promoting the rich and sound cultural and entertainment life of the masses and gradually changed the relationship among culture and arts, the market, and politics through policies and institutional arrangements.

As a result, the state’s management of society has changed from a concentrated structure to a tree-shaped structure, which is reflected in its three progressive management distinctions. The first step is to stop merely measuring everyone and everything using the traditional, strict political criteria. In his speech of congratulations to the Fourth National Congress of Chinese Literature and Art Workers in 1979, Deng Xiaoping clearly stated, “The party’s leadership over literary and artistic work is not about issuing orders, not about requiring literary and artistic work to be subordinate to temporary, specific, and direct political tasks, but about helping literary and artistic workers gain conditions to flourish literary and artistic undertakings in accordance constantly”(Deng 2006: 211–213). Since then, policies in the cultural field, especially in the cultural and entertainment aspects, have, on the one hand, complied with the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee’s proposal to focus on economic construction, strengthen the market-oriented reform of the cultural and artistic fields, promote the transformation of state-owned cultural institutions into market-oriented operation, and stimulate the industrial and commodity attributes of culture (Li 2013). On the other

hand, it is suggested that the focus should be changed from "Art serve politics" to "serving people and socialism" (People's Daily 1980). Mass media such as television and radio have turned to organizing various cultural and entertainment programs while serving the construction of socialist material and spiritual civilization in an effort to attract a wider audience (News Bureau of the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee 1992; 68–69). Among these programs, there has been a rapid increase in the number of evening variety shows, represented by the China Central Television Spring Festival Gala, which focuses on a balance of cultural entertainment in terms of content and form.

Second, traditional, strict moral education criteria are no longer universally applied to all cultural and entertainment forms. During the market-oriented reforms in the cultural field from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, "pure entertainment" content emerged and increased rapidly, with which "pure entertainment" genres such as celebrity concerts, karaoke, and video screenings appeared; as a result of market-oriented and entrepreneurial media changes, radio and television programs were hastily adjusted to catering to the masses' preferences for cultural and entertainment consumption. "Pure entertainment" TV programs such as Happy Camp (launched in 1997) and Lucky 52 (launched in 1998) rose to prominence. As long as they adhere to the national regulatory framework, these new shows stand out for their amusing nature.³

Third, traditional state media entertainment standards are no longer the sole criteria for measuring and demanding all media. The state has classified and managed the entertainment system and mass media based on their ideological attributes since 2000,⁴ imposing different requirements on official media (primarily satellite channels) and internet media in terms of entertainment program production. According to the "Opinions on Further Strengthening the Program Management of Satellite Comprehensive Channels on TV" issued by the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television in 2011, the former is a comprehensive channel primarily for news and publicity that needs to increase the proportion of various types of programs such as news, economy, culture, science and education, children's programs, and documentaries while controlling the number of entertainment programs such as variety shows, talk shows, and reality shows. For the latter, the state focuses on creating various theme types and mandates that the program material adhere to a particular level of prevailing societal values. There is considerable market freedom in the choice of subject content and production standards, and there is no rigid cap on the number of entertainment program productions.

³ In 1988, the Ministry of Culture and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce jointly issued *A notice on strengthening the management of the cultural market*, which first introduced the concept of "cultural market" and adopted an approving attitude toward cultural expressions with entertainment as the main purpose. In 1989, the "Several Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Prosperity of Literature and Art" clearly stated that "as long as they do not violate the Constitution, laws and relevant national regulations, all works that are harmless in ideology, commendable in art, and can provide people with artistic enjoyment and entertainment are allowed to exist." In 1997, the "Several Opinions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Further Improving Literary and Artistic Work" proposed "as long as works can educate and enlighten people and provide them with entertainment and enjoyment of beauty, they should be welcomed and encouraged."

⁴ The state has classified and managed mass media based on ideological attributes. Party newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations, and news agencies are the mouthpieces of the Party and the people. Nonparty newspaper and magazine publishers, except for a few that retain their public service nature; have mostly been transformed into enterprises and pushed toward the market. Some of them may be subject to licensing management. The book distribution system, film and television production agencies, and artistic performance groups are completely open to the market based on lawful management (Li 2013: 565–566).

The government has released a significant quantity of cultural resources to the market and society as a result of the above-mentioned reforms, giving the new fan organizations that arose after 2005 an unheard-of opportunity for growth. The cultural and entertainment sector has greatly benefited the state's economy and solidified the nation's orientation and trust in this area of reform.⁵ These reforms have produced two significant opportunity consequences in addition to directly creating a framework that accommodates new fan communities such as "fan circle". First, as a result of the country's change in policy in this area, commercial capital has poured into the culture and entertainment sector, directly supporting the emergence of fandom during the transformation process in these sectors. Second, this change has also resulted in a more relaxed attitude of other social groups toward the entertainment industry and fandom, giving "Fan circle" the chance to become socially accepted.

The government's reform of the arts and entertainment sector does not imply a *laissez-faire* approach; rather, it has always upheld the fundamental tenet of deference to the party's leadership and the socialist system and ideals. Regarding a tree-shaped management structure, the state has been directing and regulating the value concept and action orientation of the relevant groups through party and government channels to prevent deviation from socialist core values and the expectations of mainstream culture. This applies to daily entertainment activities, including fandom. The People's Daily, for instance, released a column in March 2020 praising the "Fan circle" that demonstrated constructive deeds and positive value orientations during the COVID-19 pandemic. The state also employed administrative management techniques to control the misbehavior of "fan circle". Creating a "clean and clear" summer internet environment for children in 2020 required the Cyberspace Administration of China to issue a notice in July of that year.

This campaign targeted value-oriented messages and behaviors that encourage juveniles to follow their idols mindlessly and engage in fan-on-fan violence. According to a report from the Xinhua News Agency in August 2021, the Cyberspace Administration of China had increased its supervision efforts once more, launched special campaigns, and urged website platforms to modify their product orientation and functional design, upgrade their management strategies, and control and direct fan groups to follow stars rationally. For instance, steps have been taken to prevent young people's irrational idol-chasing behavior and to delete features that encourage followers to "support" and "vote for" their idols.⁶ Ranking rules have also been optimized. Over 4,000 infringing accounts

⁵ According to the "Prosperity of Cultural Undertakings and Rapid Development of Cultural Industries—Achievements of Economic and Social Development of the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of P.R. China Series Report No. 8" published by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2019, in 2018, China's cultural industry achieved an added value of 3.8737 trillion yuan, which was 10.3 times higher than that of 2004. From 2005 to 2018, the annual average growth rate of the added value of the cultural industry was 18.9%, which was 6.9 percentage points higher than the GDP growth rate during the same period. The proportion of the added value of the cultural industry to GDP increased from 2.15% in 2004 and 2.36% in 2012 to 4.30% in 2018, and the proportion has been increasing year by year. In terms of the contribution to economic growth, from 2004 to 2012, the average annual contribution rate of the cultural industry to GDP growth was 3.9%, and from 2013 to 2018, it further increased to 5.5%. In terms of specific programs, according to statistics from the "Report on the Development of China's Cultural Industry" released by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2006, the total direct revenue for all parties involved in the "Super Girl" program was approximately 766 million yuan. Analyzing the economic law of the multiplier effect between upstream and downstream industries, the total contribution of "Super Girl" to the social economy was at least tens of billions of yuan (<http://zjrb.zjol.com.cn/html/2006-01/13/content-731.htm>).

⁶ "应援Support" and "打榜Vote for" are both internet terms. "应援Support" refers to fans cheering for their idols. Offline support activities mainly include distributing items and using unified symbols to cheer for idols at their performances, as well as picking up and dropping off idols at the airport. Online activities include posting related topics

have been dealt with, over 1,300 troublesome groups have been shut down, 814 inappropriate topics have been dropped, and 39 small Apps suspected of attracting customers and fundraising have been intercepted and deleted. Overall, more than 150,000 harmful messages have been removed. Additionally, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television conducted a month-long special inspection and correction of online variety shows. This required additional efforts to strengthen the primary responsibility of production and broadcasting institutions for online variety shows, direct fans in a positive direction, and improve the management of “paid spammers” and “anti-fans” on platforms (Xinhua News Agency 2021a). In conclusion, the fact that the state has maintained both openness and restraint in managing the entertainment industry is a fundamental aspect of the structural opportunities available to new groups such as fandom.

The way in which the “fan circle” perceives and uses the structural opportunities will determine whether they can function freely and gain societal approval, as these opportunities do not guarantee results. The author discovered from a field study that some fandoms only have a partial awareness of the structural open opportunities and may not be adept at understanding structural constraints or may lack the full capacity to ensure that the fan community adheres to such constraints. This intricate performance is associated with the quasi-organizational form of “fan circle” In the following section, two “fan circles”, A and B, demonstrate this.

The characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of a quasi-organizational structure

Descriptions of Two “fan circles”

“Fan circle” A was founded in April 2019 and is a representative example of the conventional category of fandom that centers on an idol group. In a talent competition on a variety show, the audience chose the top nine male contestants out of 100 who took part in the show, creating the idol Group E of “Fan circle” A. The team came together following the contest. Each of the nine group members had his own fandom prior to the group’s formation. After “Fan circle” A was created, many fans joined numerous fandoms, adoring both Group E and one or more of its members, which had an impact on the coherence of “Fan circle” A. Therefore, only 155,000 people participated in “Fan circle” A on Sina Weibo’s “super topic” forum, compared to Group E’s up to 600,000 Weibo followers.⁷ However, “Fan circle” A’s consumption power is fairly obvious. During the

Footnote 6 (continued)

and voting for idols online. “打榜Vote for” or “打投(voting through charts)” refers to fans following the entertainment program’s designated channels to vote for their favorite idols or contestants, in order to win a higher ranking. For example, this may involve buying branded products associated with the program and scanning the QR code or scratch card inside the packaging to receive multiple votes. In May 2021, in a certain talent show program, fans purchased a large number of sponsored dairy products to help their idol win, and after scanning the QR code on the bottle cap to vote, they dumped the products, which was referred to as the “dumping milk incident.” The program was reported and was summoned by the management department to discuss the issue.

⁷ “超话Super Topic” forum, whose full name is “Super Topic Forum,” is a networking application launched by Sina Weibo in mid-2016 to facilitate communication and interaction between celebrities and their fans by forming groups and circles. The popular topics generated within these groups often have significant influence. In 2018, an independent app called “Super Topic Community” was launched. Sina Weibo also upgraded the “Super Topic Forum” by adding a ranking function that releases a weekly celebrity topic-ranking list based on factors such as the number of fans and the level of attention. Both celebrities and fans are very concerned about the rankings, and as fans’ “super topic” points are zeroed at the end of each month, to keep their idols at the top of the charts or ranking consistently high, fans must become active users and continue to show interest, thus maintaining a large number of points at all times.

talent show's final round, the nine participants' respective fandoms raised a total of RMB 4.01 million, 3.04 million, 1.27 million, 1.59 million, 1.41 million, 1.92 million, 1.1 million, 1.82 million, and 1.06 million. The debut album by Group E was purchased by fans for approximately RMB 6.3 million and sold 699,342 copies. Fan club and core fans are the primary organizers of "Fan circle" A.

"Fan circle" B was founded in late 2018 and belongs to a different, more common category of fandom that centers on a single idol. "Fan circle" B's idol Y also came from a talent show and was arranged by the brokerage company to transform into a singer and actor. Y has approximately 4 million followers on Weibo and 280,000 active users in the "super topic" forum. Fans from "Fan circle" B have a strong sense of character substitution: Y has a clear and delicate appearance, so some female fans regard Y as a boyfriend or partner, calling themselves "girlfriend fans" or "wife fans"; Y's behavior is more conservative and mature than that of ordinary young male stars, so he is also considered to have a "fatherly style", attracting a group of "daughter fans"; in addition, there are also some "clay sculpture(ni su) fans" and "couple fans", which are fans who treat Y as a woman and fans who love Y and another star to form a virtual couple, respectively. The main organizers and managers of "Fan circle" B are the fan club, established by professional fan G, who was appointed by the brokerage company and received guidance from the company.

Chinese "Fan circle" experienced tremendous denial before 2010. For instance, in 2006, the director of the Science, Education, Culture, Health, and Sports Committee and deputy of the Standing Committee of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference criticized the "Super Girl" phenomenon, claiming that its followers are teenagers who have been unknowingly poisoned by the entertainment industry. The environment has changed since 2006 when the two "fan circles" A and B were founded. Their reputation or level of acceptance in a society largely rests on two elements. One factor is the level of organization, or whether the fandom is organized, somewhat organized, or unorganized with only sporadic "collective" actions. Typically, clear objectives, goals, systems, and related actions can only be organized when an organization exists. Another factor is the capacity to interact with the outside world, specifically, the degree to which the fandom is aware of external social demands or pressures and the coping mechanism to be employed among active adaptation, dissociation, and confrontation. To increase group cohesion internally, "fan circles" A and B primarily opt for quasi-organizational strategies and practices that increase compliance and correspond to the two goals of operating cost control and legitimacy, respectively. They also employ neutral strategies to avoid conflict with the mainstream in relationships outside the fandom and increase social tolerance. However, the quasi-organizational tactics of these two "fan circles" show that it is not always possible to control the fans in the group and maintain a strategy that complies with social expectations.

Quasi-organizational characteristics

"Fan circle" A and "Fan circle" B share several organizational traits, such as an internal professional division of work and hierarchical stacking. Each "Fan circle" has a power structure of concentric circle with the core layer consisting of powerful major fans with a voice, functional groups such as the "Anti-black fans" data group, and

groups such as the fan club authorized by the agency the next layer comprises fanatical followers, less powerful organizations, and graphic sites that produce resources. The largest group of common fans is in the outer layer. After social media became popular, regular fans could move from the circle's periphery to the center and become "big fans". Their access to information, interpersonal relationships, and technology contribute to their discourse power. A fan said,

I think there are three ways to become a "big fan": one is through creative output. Regardless of how their drawing, videos, or pictures turn out, if they have output, people will like it. The second is being a wealthy woman who spends a lot of money; this kind of fan will also have many followers. The third is being someone who likes to speak out and often says things that hit people's sore spots, such as saying their idol is very pitiful and then saying things are heart-tormenting to fans; otherwise, they will say something that everyone can relate to, and they can lead the discussion. I think these three types of people are more likely to become big fans (Interview with fan AJ).

Internal classification of the fandom often surprises those outside the circle with its level of detail. Fans are categorized by their identity, including support groups, "casual fans", "die-hard fans", "passers-by fans", "frontline fans", "fan girl", "battle fans", "fans disguised as anti-fans", "passers-by disguised as anti-fans", "passers-by disguised as fans", "anti-fans disguised as fans", and "Couple fans" by status, including "career fans", "data fans", and "work fan"; by relationship, including "family fans" ("mom fans", "sister fans", and "girlfriend fans") and "pseudo-family fans" ("aunt fans", "uncle fans"); and by gender, such as "clay sculpture fans". Different types of fans exhibit differences in behavior and language symbols. For example, "mom fans" in "Fan circle" A usually use endearing words such as "baby" and "sweetie" to address their idols, while girlfriend fans often use terms of endearment such as "hubby" or "boyfriend". The classification and names of fans are still increasing.

The institutional division of labor within the fandoms is far more professional than the above categories. Taking the fan club in the core circle as an example, it has both production and management functions and includes multiple functional groups such as video production, finance, external relations, micromanagement, and copy writing. The "Fan circle" B fan club has even established independent data stations, which operate under the support group's unified guidance. The decision-making process consists of four parts: suggestion adoption, call for proposals, voting, and results announcement. Errors in the process or other failures in work are subject to accountability from other fans.

However, "Fan circle" A and B behave more like "quasi-organizations". Despite having the aforementioned organizational structures and division of labor, they neither act entirely like associations nor are registered associations, and their members have a considerable degree of mobility. Compared to the average association, they rely more on cultural and emotional links, while their key norms are established by explicit or implicit institutions. In conclusion, A and B have the following three traits: to maintain a high level of internal cohesion, the organization (1) has a form that is halfway

between official organizations and regular gatherings, (2) has a system but depends more on emotions, and (3) practices distinctive daily discipline.

Halfway between official organizations and regular gatherings

The “Fan circle” clearly does not belong to a formally registered civil society organization in China. Its organizing method and basic system mainly follow the rules of the “super topic” forum itself. “Super topic” is an online community on Sina Weibo, a landmark place where fans gather and interact, as well as the main activity place of fandoms. “Fan circle” are provided with the main platform by “super topic” and the fans are managed according to the rules of “super topic”. They can post and reply as long as they follow the “super topic” community. The administrator has no right to control the entry and exit of “super topic” members but can block and delete posts by users who violate the rules. Each fandom imitates each other in this regard, with minor differences. The idol in “Fan circle” A is an idol group, and fans have their preferences for different members of this idol group, so they are prone to internal friction. To maintain order, the fan club has supplemented more detailed rules for the “super topic” of “Fan circle” A. For example, as an idol group’s Fandom, “Fan circle” A prohibits advocating for the rights of individual idol members of Group E in “super topic”. Fans of Group E must support each idol indiscriminately. If they want to fight for one idol’s rights, they must fight together to avoid conflicts between posts advocating for different idols’ rights. “Fan circle” B only revolves around one idol, and apart from the default rule that prohibits negative news about the idol being mentioned in “super topic” it mainly applies the general rules of “super topic”. Both “Fan circle” have implicit or undisclosed rules, such as fan support fundraising. Due to the large number of participants and huge amounts of money involved, disclosing some accounts may face social pressure and legal risks. To reduce this impact, fandoms rarely mention fundraising publicly and often use the homonym “orange” instead.

The daily activities of “Fan circle” are more focused on certain objectives and take the form of free encounters. Encounters mainly fall into two types. Ritual encounters take the form of large-scale online gatherings of fans to commemorate a particular occasion or time, such as holding celebratory rites, comparable to the interactive ritual chain theory described by Collins (2009). Impromptu meetings with clear objectives typically are organized by the fan organization and the core fans, and the regular fans participate. Fans interested in working together enter the group, which the initiator organizes or commissions to establish based on a personal network. The group automatically disbands once the assignment is finished.

The aforementioned form of quasi-organization, which is affordable and easy to meet people, has been chosen by “Fan circle” A and B. Even if “Fan circle” A and B are extremely inexpensive to run, they can nevertheless organize or maintain collective fan action to some level. However, their organizational strength and, particularly, their capacity for discipline are inferior to those of formal organizations. As a result, the fandom have also chosen this strategy.

Utilizing a structure but relying more on emotions

Fandoms seek to strengthen feelings of internal justice and internal adherence through transparency and supervision. Both “Fan circle” A and B have published their process of

selecting members: first, they post recruitment notices on the platform, listing detailed membership requirements such as the skills applicants should have, their availability and experience, and the ability to resolve fandom disputes. Interested fans must submit formal resumes, including personal information such as education and age, loyalty to the celebrity, suggestions and plans for the group, and personal experiences. Selected candidates will also undergo an internship period of three days to one month, after which they must be formally announced to become regular members. The basic requirements for selecting members of the fandom A fan club include “being at least 18 years old; not being involved in other part-time work; being a fan of the group, without any biased or inappropriate comments about any member of the group; having a ‘super topic’ level of 8 or above; being serious and responsible, and avoiding being enthusiastic for only a short period.”] Some of these groups have more detailed skill requirements. For example, the video group requires that members be “proficient in using video software such as Adobe Premiere and After Effect⁸ and have enough time to complete various editing tasks independently.”

In addition, frequent member turnover in fandoms can lead to problems. Some managers of fan clubs have fled with large amounts of funds, making it difficult to recover the money. Some fandoms have strengthened supervision and established a self-regulatory system from bottom to top, requiring detailed accounting for each fundraising activity and organizing regular audits by members. However, the binding and unifying function of such systems is not very strong, mainly because the fandoms are organized by the fans and are relatively flexible in terms of joining and leaving, with a high mobility of members. They can only control the entry point to some extent, and it is difficult to supervise other aspects. In some fandoms, such as “Fan circle” A, there is a phenomenon called “multi-tantō,” in which fans have multiple idols and join multiple fandoms. “Fan circle” A explicitly prohibits this, but such restrictions are hardly effective. In “Fan circle” B, the original fan club had 20 members, but after one year, only 11 remained. Professional fan C left without notice; others left due to internal disputes or busy schedules. The position of the fan club’s leader changed three times in one year. Furthermore, not all fans in “Fan circle” B completely trust the fan club. This is because professional fan C raised approximately 1 million yuan in funds for the final vote by selling fan support merchandise during his tenure as manager, but the merchandise was not made by the time the final ended, and C left without notice. Some fans no longer strictly accept the unified organization and leadership of the fan club. Some core fans with high loyalty and financial resources have formed small groups to organize activities and raise funds separately for fan activities rather than entrusting their funds to the fan club for unified management as ordinary fans do.

The internal order and unity of “Fan circle” A and B cannot rely entirely on institutional mechanisms, so they focus on emotional connections and frequent online interactions to cultivate and strengthen emotional bonds, enhance group cohesion, and strengthen the collective emotional experience of fan groups, thereby inspiring their participating motivation. In terms of form, emotional mobilization in “Fan circle” is particularly prominent

⁸ Adobe Premiere is used for video editing, and After Effect is used for making simple special effects.

in using unique symbols that are specific to a fandom and distinguish it from other fandoms, which stimulates fans' sense of identity. "Fan circle" A has unique fan role categories, support colors, support items, and internal symbols known only to insiders, such as abbreviated idol names. When interacting online and offline, fans frequently use various language codes to confirm their identity, participate in designing support slogans, and wave standard support sticks and chant support slogans in unison at concerts. The weekly release of idol group performances on variety shows ("group variety shows") is a grand ceremony in "Fan circle" A, in which fans discuss previews and remind each other to watch on Weibo; after the show is released, fans express their thoughts and discuss program details; some fans edit the program a second time to make emoticons and videos. When fans believe that the agency treats their idol group unfairly, they will discuss countermeasures, exchange anger in online communities, and develop detailed strategies for safeguarding their rights. "Fan circle" A also intentionally cultivates a sense of community intimacy through online interaction, offline communication, personal problem discussions, and member assistance, where fans who meet online will meet offline, exchange names, participate in activities together, and even become friends in real life.

There are primarily two methods used in fandoms to mobilize people emotionally. The first is to "heart-torment fans", exaggerating the unfavorable situations in which idols find themselves to arouse sympathy in the audience; statements such as "our idol only has us" and similar expressions are used to accomplish this. The second method involves enlisting smaller groups with closer ties among their members to help rouse the audience. For example, when the organization spends money on idols, some fans feel that "I'm actually a very thrifty person because I really don't have that much living expenses. But when everyone starts spending money together, it feels a bit embarrassing not to spend money" (Interview Data: fan DPG). Some fans who have stayed in fandoms for a long-time express satisfaction that their sense of companionship has increased significantly through the process of collective participation: "When you interact with friends, your enthusiasm for something will last a long time...when you join in (interact), there is a real feeling of accompanying the idol's growth. I don't regret joining this 'fandom.' Compared to when I was alone before, my emotions have become much more real... many grapevine messages and behind-the-scenes materials were discovered through (interactions)" (Interview with fan DXG).

Another fan remarked, "I remember before the Chinese New Year, we organized a hot pot dinner and singing party together. Gradually, everyone's relationship became very good. Because we have a good relationship, we will love our idol more. I think (being a fan) is a way of communication, just like the way you make friends in your real life" (Interview with fan SJ).

Discipline in daily life

"Fan circle" A and B concentrate on two key themes when disciplining fans in their daily lives: "how to become a real fan" and "what a qualified fan should do." In other words, they emphasize eligibility requirements and emotional labor, primarily teaching fans that the initial contribution just qualifies them as fans and that a greater level of contribution is required to preserve their identity and character as fans and enjoy the corresponding entitlements. The term "effort" primarily refers to devoting time or resources to idols.

The topic of “how to become a real fan” mainly highlights the eligibility of the fandom and strengthens fans’ sense of belonging. Both “Fan circle” A and B have announced their eligibility, and anyone can become a fan, but not every fan can enter the “fan circle”. Only eligible fans can join the “fan circle”, participate in “Fan circle” activities, receive support items, and have the opportunity to get close to their idols.

The threshold for “Fan circle” A is as follows: following all members of the idol group on Weibo and “super topics”; following Group E’s official Weibo and fan club; no content attacking Group E or its members on Weibo; the idol group’s “super topic” level being greater than or equal to 9, and all members’ personal “super topic” level being greater than or equal to 6; fundraising or album purchases exceeding 46 yuan. “Fan circle” A reiterates, emphasizes, and enforces these rules, on the one hand, excluding some “passers-by fans” who have a favorable impression of idol Group E but are not willing to spend time and money on “Fan circle” A, and on the other hand, reminding those who have joined to establish fandom awareness. Some fans also show enthusiasm for actively implementing these rules in distributing supporting items and other activities. Interviewee TT said, “Only by obtaining the qualification of a fan can I have more voice. In this way, my opinions will also have a group of followers (recognition). Anyway, when you become a fan, you will inevitably be influenced by these things such as qualification and identity” (Interview with fan TT).

The discussion of “what a qualified fan should do” centers on training and advising newcomers to the fandom to continue supporting their idols, particularly through emotional and selfless labor that some academics refer to as “emotional labor”. (Yang 2015). In the early days of the fandoms, the main areas of labor were improving application software and creating online communities. Later, the main focus of labor was on voting (voting for idols on the ranking list), forwarding (forwarding Weibo posts related to idols), controlling comments (posting a large number of comments on idols’ Weibo posts to influence public opinions), and reporting negativity (reporting negative comments about idols). Both “Fan circle” A and B emphasize that fans must regularly fulfill these obligations to maintain the status of a qualified fan.

Emotional labor is not mandatory, but the fandom repeatedly emphasizes the importance of labor for idols, encourages fans to participate, and often uses various positive and negative incentive language interchangeably. On the social platforms of “Fan circle” A, comments such as “Don’t you want to do a small favor for him by contributing some data? If you don’t want to, you don’t deserve to be a fan of him!” often appear. In the publicity group’s Weibo posts, words such as “important” and “effort” are used frequently, and reward systems to reward fans who actively complete tasks, such as the opportunity to participate in the idol group’s activities at close range, are established. “Fan circle” A also emphasizes the concept of “spending money on him if you love him”, believing that only fans who buy related merchandise for idols will enable them to obtain more commercial resources.

Therefore, fans who do not contribute anything to their idols are denounced by the fandom as “baipiao fan” and are rejected. Many fans in “Fan circle” A and B are willing to respond to the call voluntarily. A fan ZD said, “From the moment you like him, you don’t want him to fall behind. Every fan will feel that the one they like should get the best. As a fan, I just want to give him the best” (interview with fan ZD). Some fans even feel a sense

of self-satisfaction from emotional labor, as T'Z said, "This (labor) is not for him, (it's) for myself. Although the beneficiary is the idol, fans are actually doing it for themselves in this process because liking a celebrity is just liking one's own aesthetics. In fact, liking him is liking yourself, not the celebrity himself, but his image and packaging. So I think no matter what you do for the idol, you please yourself" (interview with fan T'Z).

Due to the large-scale and collective emotional labor organized by the fandoms, which brings considerable honor to idols and directly affects chart rankings and music sales. Some fans even feel that they have participated in creating a superstar: "I am following a kind of talent show (star), which may be a little different from the usual kind of star. His fate is determined by fans" (interview with fan A'J).

Dynamics inside and outside the "fan circles" and the Pitfalls

The quasi-organizational nature of the fandom brings about low-cost operations, which not only have some organizational efficiency but also avoid the costs required for general organizational maintenance. This involves clear systems and continuous attention to the action coordination brought about by member cohesion and emotional discipline. When a fandom has a certain internal coordination, more direct problems usually arise from behavioral patterns that differ from other groups and face social legitimacy pressures. If the fandom cannot coordinate external relations, it lacks one of the basic functions of a quasi-organization. The early survival pressure of the "Fan circle" was obvious, so there was a certain awareness of external requirements. Both "Fan circle" A and B have noticed the need to transform external legitimacy requirements into internal rules, develop strategies to balance inter-group conflicts, reduce social resentment, and design "positive energy" actions to increase social acceptance. There is even some awareness that mainstream group recognition is an important indicator of a fandom. However, compared with the "soft efforts" of the fandom to improve social acceptance, fans' perception of social constraints and their periodic changes from the government departments and public opinion is far weaker than their perception of social openness and tolerance; as a quasi-organization, a fandom lacks the "hard ability" to convey social requirements to fans and restrain members from going too far. It is often difficult to control the mutual transmission of members' extreme words and deeds, which leads to various social incidents. Therefore, the effects of various actions taken by "Fan circle A and B to increase social acceptance still appear unsatisfactory.

Trying to balance inter-group rivalry

Previous studies on fandom discovered that fans deliberately distinguish between their in-groups and out-group identities (Voci 2006). Strictly speaking, fandoms draw boundaries between fans and non-fans and between this fandom group and that fandom group, and conflicts correspondingly fall into two categories: negative evaluations from outside the fandom and challenges to the fandom's idol from competing "fan circles". Conflicts do occur, and fans place particular importance on conflicts, especially those related to their fandom's idols. Some even view protecting their idols as protecting the collective sense of honor, believing that "if I don't defend (my idol), I will not only lose face, but I won't even dare to say that I am a fan. If I can't even maintain my identity, won't I gradually disappear into the crowd? So, in order to protect the sense of honor of this shared

destiny community, I must do this. I must praise him and protect him. I even have to suspect that someone wants to harm him" (interview with fan TT). Of course, upon reflection, some fans also remark, "I think (inter-group conflicts) are planned. Because in a verbal battle, big fans will be heart-tormented and feel that this idol is so pitiful and can't live without me, they will become more determined to support this idol. It may seem absurd to outsiders, and they may think fans are really boring. But the 'fan circle' gains a new vitality through these activities. Every conflict is planned, and there are people who specifically steer the direction (in the group). The (fan community) needs these conflicts. With conflicts, at least the group won't be lifeless" (interview with fan TZ).

If the two types of conflicts in which "Fan circle" are involved are intense, they usually directly bring social resentment to the fandoms, which are viewed as a "hysterical crowd" (Jansen 2009) and are given derogatory names such as "brain-dead fans" (*naocanfen*). Some fandoms have started to adopt direct and indirect response strategies under social pressure, trying to minimize the possibility and intensity of friction. The direct response strategies of "Fan circle" A and B are to improve the "Anti-black-fans" method, requiring fans of the fandom to proactively discover potentially conflicting remarks before inter-group conflicts occur and report and persuade anti-fans to remove such remarks. During this period, the "Fan circle" management team will restrain fans from engaging in private conflicts. At the same time, "Fan circle" have set up a functional group—the "Anti-black-fans" station, which is specifically responsible for "Anti-black-fans" actions. If the "Anti-black-fans" actions are ineffective and inter-group conflicts cannot be avoided, usually, some fans will come forward to try to mediate and reduce negative social impacts to the minimum. Indirect response strategies mainly do not target specific "Anti-black-fans" events but rather broadly reduce and prevent social resentment from the fundamental level, which will be discussed later. "Fan circle" are not afraid of conflicts with other fandoms and even regard conflicts as a kind of "team-building" activity, believing that conflicts can, to some extent, mobilize the morale of the fandom. Therefore, "Fan circle" A and B actually adhere to the principle of "small strife for fun, big tirade for harm" and usually try to minimize conflicts when responding to external "Anti-black-fans" affairs and internal disputes.

Attempting to reduce social disgust

"Fan circle" A and B perceive social disgust toward fans who behave inappropriately, so they attempt to avoid or reduce social disgust by adopting two methods: idol maintenance and self-restraint. First, idol maintenance is used. "Fan circle" A and B continue to use the fandom logic that idols and fans are two sides of the same coin. The idols represent the fans' interests and values, and the maintenance of the idol's image is beneficial to improving the public's perception of the fandom and fans. Fans will feel ashamed if the idol has negative news and receives negative social evaluation. "Fan circle" A and B also use the "comment control" method to maintain the idol's image. "Comment control" refers to manipulating comments, where fans use the templates provided by the fandom to post numerous comments praising the idol or defending the idol in the public comment section of relevant social media platforms to control the direction of the comments and dispel negative comments. If the effect is not good, the "comment control" scale and scope must be adjusted promptly.

Second, self-restraint is used. “Fan circle” A and B also use the second logic that the “fans’ behavior, idols pay the price”; in other words, if the fans have a bad influence, the consequences will ultimately be borne by the idol. Therefore, fans who love their idols must control their own words and actions, listen to the advice of the fandom, and avoid excessive behavior that could embarrass their idols. Fans in the “Fan circle” often use the phrase “be cautious in words and actions” to advise themselves and each other. “Fan circle” A and B release notice on important commemorative days (such as national memorial days), requiring fans to “limit entertainment” on that day and not discuss entertainment topics on the platform to avoid social disgust. “Fan circle” A’s publicity team once issued a Weibo post, requiring fans not to post any comments related to Group E in public places on national memorial days and strictly prohibiting arguments and conflicts. The notice repeatedly emphasized the seriousness and importance of this matter and required internal monitoring and reminders.

Attempting to design and organize “positive energy” actions

Sometimes, “Fan circle” A and B also show awareness of following the national orientation and mainstream values, especially when government policies become strict or government departments make clear statements due to certain unexpected events. “Fan circle” A and B consciously cooperate and organize “positive energy” actions, usually choosing to organize public welfare activities and to participate in public expression to maintain the positive public image of idols and the fandom.

The “positive energy” actions designed by the fandom are mainly divided into two categories: daily actions and support actions. Daily actions are generally initiated in the name of fans collectively. On January 22, 2020, People’s Daily reported that the outbreak of COVID-19 in Hubei Province was spreading, medical supplies were urgently needed, and emergency support was to be requested. “Fan circle” A immediately responded, and the fan club organized five batches of donations in the following month. The first batch was initiated within the support group, and several members voluntarily purchased 3,050 pairs of disposable latex gloves and sent them to Wuchang Hospital in Wuhan City. Other fans requested the fan club to open a funding link to donate in the name of Idol Group E fans collectively. In the second batch, the fan club used the funds raised to purchase 380 protective goggles for Huanggang Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital and 200 sets of protective clothing for Wuchang Hospital in Wuhan City. The third batch donated ten medical UV sterilization vehicles to the Second People’s Hospital in Yichang City. The fourth batch donated 30 disinfection lamps to Puai Hospital in Anlu City, Xiaogan City, Hubei Province. The fifth batch was initiated by “Fan circle A to mobilize fans’ overseas network to purchase 500 sets of protective clothing and urgently airlift them back from Australia to support the Zhijiang People’s Hospital in Yichang City, Hubei Province.”⁹

⁹ During the same period, many “fandoms” took similar actions by purchasing and delivering supplies to Wuhan. On the day following Hubei Province’s request for support, the various “fandoms” collectively raised 300,000 masks to be sent to Wuhan, drawing praise from the media. Phoenix News and Tencent News both published articles praising the efforts and calling for a reevaluation of this fan community, stating “it’s amazing” that “they had turned their ‘fandom power’ into a force for aid and support of Wuhan.”

Support actions are public welfare activities initiated and carried out in the name of idols, and special time nodes, such as an idol's birthday, are usually chosen. "Fan circle" A and B usually try to choose public welfare activities close to their respective idols' image and characteristics when participating in or initiating activities in the name of "fans of XX." In April 2020, "Fan circle" B chose to help poor children in mountainous areas, mainly considering that Y is the ambassador of the "China REACH: Rural Education and Child Health project" launched by the China Development Research Foundation and the "Youth Celebrity Public Welfare Advocate of 2019".] The fan club's management team proposed specifically targeting the impoverished mountainous areas in the province where Y was from and donated vegetables, stationery, and other materials to the loving homes in that area in Y's name, highlighting Y's significance in giving back to his hometown. This type of supportive public welfare behavior not only helps maintain the idol's reputation but also helps change the impression that outsiders have of fandoms. One interviewee said, "I think there are many negative impressions of fan groups in society. They may also want to change these impressions, so they will do public welfare or something society can accept. I guess fans want to make everyone feel that they just like their stars and haven't caused any bad effects" (Interview with non-fan ZJP). "Fan circle" A and B are also aware of this, and one fan remarked, "The original intention of fans should be for the love of idols because they gather in the name of idols; then they feel that this is a way for fans to self-dissolve social resentment to some extent"(Interview with fan TT).

The inadequate anti-aversion impact

Fans in "Fan circle" A and B have expressed their desire for societal recognition, stating, "Everyone wants to prove themselves. No one wants to belong to a group that is looked down upon... We need society's approval" (Interview with fan XY). However, fans within "Fan circle" A and B or the fandom "itself sometimes engage in behavior that can provoke societal disapproval, making it difficult to consistently adhere to the requirements of social constraint. Three situations, in particular, stand out.

First, there are often intense arguments within and between fandoms. "Fan circle" A support the idol Group E, and there are fans within the fandom who support the group as a whole, as well as fans who specifically support individual idols of the group. It is common for these fans to escalate minor disagreements into serious conflicts. "Fan circle" A often struggles to control these conflicts. For example, H and S were the champion and runner-up of a talent show, and their respective fans have been at odds for a long time. In December 2019, fans of S suspected that H was exaggerating a leg injury, lying, faking the injury, and not taking the group seriously. Fans of H responded aggressively, with both sides sharing unflattering images and negative news about the other idol and engaging in verbal abuse. Fans of H attempted to post a clarification on Group E's "super topic" to explain that H was not faking the injury, but "Fan circle" A's rules stipulate that only posts related to the group can be posted on the "super topic". Therefore, posts specifically about H's clarification were deleted immediately after publication. Fans of H believed that "Fan circle" A was ignoring H and showing favoritism to the other eight members of Group E. As a result, they posted many derogatory comments on Group E's "super topic", attempting to "blow up" the topic. The "super topic" management team

was unable to control the situation and could only delete the quarrelsome posts from both sides, which was ineffective.

Second, sometimes the core and middle layers of the fandom will treat some fans maliciously, or fans within the fandom will mistreat each other. Fandoms usually have the aforementioned explicit regulations, such as entry requirements: (1) only liking one idol; (2) reaching a certain level on the “super topic” and donating a certain amount of money; (3) having a certain number of original Weibo posts related to the idol; (4) actively participating in the fan club and data station activities, posted by their official accounts; (5) clearing out inactive members who have not posted within a certain period. Fandoms deal with problems based on these conditions, seemingly unrelated to right or wrong. However, some unclear rules and practices within the fandom can lead one to be mistreated or even be expelled from the fandom by all members, especially those in the outer circle of fans. This is also the case for fandoms A and B. In April 2019, someone in “Fan circle” B claimed to have witnessed idol Y and a female friend watching a movie premiere together. According to the logic of fans, they help idols succeed through consumption, so idols must remain single and repay fans with hard work. Therefore, many fans heard the news and immediately “unfollowed” and left the fandom. One of the “unfollowed” fans made a “comeback”, which means that after leaving the fan identity, they posted negative evaluation posts about Y, believing that Y’s dating scandal was true and violated the contract that idols cannot date, and therefore, Y was disqualified as an idol. Fans in “Fan circle” B were alerted and swarmed the “comeback” fan with a massive amount of comments and private messages for three days until the attacked fan was mentally and physically exhausted and had to delete his Weibo post and close his account. During this period, “Fan circle” B management only clarified for Y on various websites and had almost no other intervention in the fans’ behavior.

Third, some fans cause trouble in public places without realizing it and feel no shame. In the fandom, there is always a group of “brain-dead fans” who are extremely obsessed with idols to the point of losing their sanity and behaving excessively in public occasion. On May 30, 2010, the South Korean entertainment group Super Junior was invited to perform at the Shanghai World Expo. Due to a sharp decrease in the number of entry passes, many disappointed fans had a physical conflict with security guards and police on the scene. Afterward, tens of thousands of netizens gathered on June 9 to collectively denounce the Korean celebrity group and its fans by “exploding the bar”,¹⁰ calling themselves the “69 Holy War” (Luo and Zhao 2012). The fans who were retaliated against by netizens have shown no remorse for their actions, while public opinion regards fan’s behavior as a disturbance. In recent years, such incidents have decreased but not disappeared, and “Fan circles” A and B have not been spared. After the rumors about Y’s dating spread in “Fan circle” B, the brokerage company, fan club, and Y himself clarified multiple times, but many fans still believed they had been betrayed and left “Fan circle” B. In the same month, Y was surrounded by fans from other fandoms at the airport, attracting a large number of onlookers and even causing the airport’s glass lobby to burst

¹⁰ The term ‘exploding the bar’ refers to the act of continuously flooding or dominating an internet platform with the same words and symbols as a means of venting emotions. This behavior is often used as a retaliatory tactic in online disputes.

due to overcrowding. The news media were surprised and criticized fans for being irrational, and Y also received many criticisms. “Fan circle” B and its fan club were unable to prevent this in advance, and after the incident, except for giving an account of the situation for Y, they did not produce a way to prevent similar incidents from happening again.

If fan groups can adopt constraints on fan behavior in accordance with public order and good morals and reduce social resentment, it is possible to shape a positive fan image by those who have some money and leisure time and strive to contribute to public welfare. However, based on the situation of “fan circles” A and B, the efforts and effects of fandoms in this regard have not been satisfactory. Instead, they have shown two major problems in self-restraint. One is that the perception of social constraints is generally weaker than that of social openness among fans in the fandom. Some fans can be classified into types with impaired or undeveloped social awareness, thinking that star chasing is just a daily entertainment activity of individuals and a group of comrade enthusiasts, which is not related to national politics or the livelihood of the people and can be completely talking and acting for oneself. When facing social criticism, they dismiss it as another group of people who cannot tolerate this group of people. Fans in the core circle or management layer do not have a more thorough understanding of structural opportunities and their societal characteristics than ordinary fans.

Another critical issue is that a fandom is just a quasi-organization, which differs from any organization. “Fan circles” have a hierarchy, but this mainly identifies the level of status and influence within the circle rather than the arrangement of dominant power; various internal groups are established, but mainly out of the functional division of labor rather than the arrangement of hierarchical relationships. Fandoms have some institutional rules, but the backbone is the general rules of the platform’s website. The rules rely more on the sensibility and emotional ties and scales of the fans in the fandom. Therefore, fandoms are good at gathering fans at the first call of duty but not good at restraining their members with the organizational rules; they are good at stimulating fans’ emotions but powerless in group emotional management before, during, and after events. In the situation where fandoms are attached to the major internet platforms and fans have relatively free access to join or leave, if the major internet platforms neglect the necessary meticulous organizational management, “fan circles” as quasi-organizations will have difficulty preventing fans from entering a “semi herd mentality” state en masse.

Conclusion and brief discussion

This article situates the Chinese “fan circle” within the context of the Adjustment of the relationship between the state and society and the social transformation of China, examining the contradictory image and underlying causes of the “fan circle” as it sometimes receives social praise for its public welfare actions and at other times faces social criticism for its fanatic behavior. Based on historical literature research and field observations of two “fan circles” A and B, this study proposes and demonstrates that as a quasi-organizational group, the social acceptance of the “fan circle” depends not only on the group’s grasp of the structural opportunities provided by social transformation but also on its understanding of policy constraints and its ability to organize and coordinate internal and external relationships in accordance with public order and good customs. During the process of social transformation, the Chinese “fan circle” has

obtained unprecedented development space by receiving important structural opportunities, including state concessions, commercial capital investment, and the diversification of social interests. At the same time, as a quasi-organizational group, the “fan circle” has made full use of these structural opportunities, consciously transforming external legitimacy requirements into internal rules and adopting strategies and actions to increase social acceptance when facing social pressure. However, it is difficult for such quasi-organizational groups to avoid chaos and attract social exclusion when it comes to understanding the Chinese Communist Party and government policy constraints to organizing internal relationships and coordinating external relationships according to public order and good customs standards.

It is worth noting that, in contrast to the traditional perspectives of consumer sociology, cultural sociology, and emotional sociology in “fan circle” research, this study proposes a new perspective on social transformation and new social groups. It emphasizes the intricate interrelationships among Chinese social transformation, national policies, commercial capital, and fan group practices, which have not been thoroughly explored in previous literature.

Chinese “fan circles” are both sociological study subjects and current public affairs at the same time. Three aspects of this subject are covered in this article.

- (1) A “Fan circle” is a collection of individuals who are largely organized online and sporadically offline. They can avoid provoking resistance or friction with other groups, improve their social standing, and handle connections with other groups in society by employing their internal cohesion in accordance with social standards. They cannot exert the same level of restraint on their members as an organization and have a comparatively limited capacity to comply with social norms as a class of quasi-organized organizations. Therefore, although the fandom management clearly understands social standards, there may be irregularities from time to time. Whenever a “Fan circle” exhibits excessive behavior or a cultural deviation from morality and public order, it eventually alienates the fans from the general public and draws criticism from the general public and the state administration. This circumstance shows that there is still some doubt regarding the social standing of fandoms in the future. “Fan circles” must properly comprehend societal requirements and their characteristics to improve social acceptance. They need to develop positive regulation and coordinative capacity for their followers under the category of quasi-organized organizations.
- (2) China still has a basic framework that includes a well-defined communist political system, a flexible socialist market economy, and an entertainment and consumption culture that is open and constrained by socialist principles. “fan circles” must stay inside this fundamental structure to have enough room for its actions. Since 2019, the tone of relevant commentary from the People’s Daily has generally been to “increase tolerance for society, accept and regulate the development of fan culture, and guide young people to pursue positive, uplifting, and meaningful stars. For fan groups, cultivating a healthy fan culture depends on each person’s rational behavior, polite conduct, and civilized language requirements for themselves”; “Whether willing to admit it or not, the chaos and positive energy exhibited by fandoms coex-

ist...how to guide these energies toward promoting social development is a question of the times. The specific approach can be continuously explored, but accurate recognition and understanding of this group is a necessary prerequisite"; and "civilized and rational pursuit of stars can stimulate the positive energy of fan groups" (People's Daily commentary 2019; People's Daily commentary/client 2020; People's Daily commentary 2020). Recently, some fans have sparked social criticism with their extreme words and actions, prompting regulatory authorities to once again emphasize the need to govern "fan circle chaos" and "guide fan groups to rationally follow stars," emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts in guiding young people to follow stars rationally (Xinhua News Agency 2021a). Xinhua News Agency commented that "there is nothing wrong with chasing stars. However, without a bottom line, it becomes a problem. If fans follow stars for their professional ability and personal charm, it will help the young people who make up the main body of the 'fan circles' to be motivated by positive energy and achieve self-development and identity". Therefore, "precise strikes on the problem are needed" to "keep the fandoms clean" (Xinhua News Agency 2021b). According to some researchers' explanations, the irrational chase of stars violates public order and morals, while the "rational chase of stars can bring joy, new social relationships, and motivation from idols as role models, and has positive effects" and so on (People's Daily commentary 2021). These new developments indicate that regulatory authorities and mainstream media are quite critical of the excessive chaos of fandoms, while still maintaining a certain degree of acceptance of "fan circles," hoping that stars can improve their own literacy and set a good example for fans; requiring online platforms to proactively improve fandom management and eliminate the immoral lure of internet traffic; calling on fans, especially young fans, to rationally follow stars and behave civilly online; and reminding all fan groups to consciously avoid paranoid abnormalities (People's Daily commentary 2021; People's Daily commentary/client 2021). The ability of the "Fan circle" to maintain and enhance their social acceptance in the future depends on whether the fandoms comply with the above-mentioned guidelines in dealing with relationships within and outside the circle.

- (3) In the past, Chinese "fan circles" did not entirely disregard social norms, but there was a much greater awareness of keeping supporters within the fandom based on good manners and public order than taking advantage of social chances. Additionally, the issue of the weak constraints on members of quasi-organizational discipline was not promptly rectified. From this point of view, the government administration should consider the adaptivity and applicability of the policies for regulating quasi-organizations. Under the direction of enriching the cultural life of the people and maintaining socialist cultural principles, as well as public order and good customs since the reform and opening up, it is necessary to correspond to the fact that "fan circles" as a type of quasi-organization are affiliated with the organization of the internet platform. More responsibility should be added to the internet platform, and social legitimacy requirements should be transmitted to the fandom by improving the organization of the platform and its management system. The national management department recently proposed ten measures to rectify the fandom chaos, namely, canceling celebrity rankings, optimizing and adjusting ranking rules,

strictly regulating celebrity agencies, standardizing fan group accounts, prohibiting the presentation of conflict-arousing information, cleaning up the offending groups' section, prohibiting inducement for fans to consume, strengthening program setting management, strictly controlling the participation of minors, and regulating the behavior of supporting fundraising (Xinhua News Agency 2021c). These measures already include considerations to hold the platform accountable. In the future, the social responsibility of the platform should be more explicitly highlighted to manage the "fan circles as quasi-organizations through the platform organization and to help solve the problem of the lack of constraints on members in the fandom.

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Author contributions

MD designed the study, WJ contributed in collecting data through field surveys and interviews, and CJ contributed to the policy and literature section.

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Availability of data and materials

The data are collected through semi-structured interviews which are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

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