

# The 'Chinese Path' of Niche Culture: The Core Causes of the Formation and Development of Fan Culture and the Differences between China and Foreign Countries

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**Abstract.** As a core subculture of China's internet era, the fan culture has garnered widespread attention for its unique developmental path and its reference value to niche cultures. However, existing subculture studies predominantly focus on Western traditional types, leaving gaps in exploring China's emerging internet-based subcultures and lacking a systematic analysis of their universal developmental logic. This study, grounded in communication and sociology, centers on the "Chinese path" of fan culture, tracing its formation process, analyzing the root causes of differences between Chinese and foreign fan cultures, and dissecting the driving factors. The research reveals that the distinctive form of Chinese fan culture is the result of a four-dimensional interplay of technology, society, industry, and policy. The divergence from Western individualized and Japanese/Korean rationalized fan cultures stems from multifaceted differences in cultural traditions and social structures, while their experiences in emotional connections and online-offline synergy offer valuable lessons for niche cultures. Based on these findings, this essay proposes that niche cultures require coordinated efforts from governments, platforms, and other stakeholders, balancing inclusiveness with regulation to mitigate risks such as excessive commercialization.

**Keywords:** Fan culture, Chinese Path, Niche Culture.

## 1. Introduction

Fan culture, as a core subcultural form in China's internet era, operates through fan groups as its medium. It constructs a cultural ecosystem with both community cohesion and social influence via emotional connections, collective actions, and symbolic production. The evolution from the "star chasers" of the 1990s to organized fan circles not only represents a transformation in entertainment consumption but also reflects the cultural logic and psychological shifts of youth during China's social transition period.

The structural changes during China's social transition and the psychological characteristics of youth form the social foundation for the development of fan circles. With the acceleration of urbanization and intensification of social competition, traditional community bonds gradually weaken, leaving individuals with a strong need for emotional belonging and identity in an atomized society. Fan circles use celebrities as emotional symbols, providing a platform for emotional release and identity construction through shared topics, collective actions, and value resonance. Fans gain group acceptance and self-worth affirmation through activities like voting for rankings and interactive support, a dynamic that precisely aligns with contemporary youth psychological needs, serving as the key driver for fan circles to sustain group participation.

The commercial transformation of China's entertainment industry and the maturation of the fan economy have driven the professionalization of fan circles. Unlike the individual expression-oriented fan culture in the West and the mature industrial models of Japan and South Korea, China's fan circles have evolved along a "Local Reconstruction" path shaped by technological iteration, capital operations, and social context. They both absorb cross-cultural idol industry experiences and deeply embed themselves within China's social structure and cultural traditions, forming distinctive features characterized by scale, organization, and controversy. Currently, fan culture has expanded from niche communities to public discourse, sparking widespread discussion over issues such as its youth

penetration, industry reshaping capabilities, and irrational fan support. Addressing core questions like "Why are Chinese fan circles unique?", "What are their core drivers?", and "Can their development logic serve as a model for other subcultures?" This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach from communication studies and sociology to systematically analyze their formation trajectory, divergence roots, and driving factors. It further explores the universal applicability of the "Chinese path," providing theoretical support and practical insights for understanding contemporary Chinese subculture development patterns.

At the theoretical level, this study fills the gap in domestic research on subcultures, as existing studies primarily focus on Western traditional subcultures and pay insufficient attention to emerging Chinese internet subcultures. By taking fan groups as the research object, this study explores the "Chinese Pathway," providing empirical validation for the cross-cultural applicability of subculture theory. It constructs a four-dimensional analytical framework encompassing "technology--society--industry--policy," and integrates perspectives from multiple disciplines to deepen the understanding of contemporary Chinese subculture dissemination patterns. Through a comparative analysis of fan cultures in China and abroad, reveals the cultural context, social structures, and industrial ecosystem roots behind these differences, enriching the perspective of cross-cultural communication research.

On the practical level, this study analyzes the root causes of fandom chaos to provide empirical evidence for governments to improve regulatory policies and platforms to optimize governance mechanisms, thereby contributing to the construction of a healthy online ecosystem. The analysis of fandom operational logic and commercial value offers insights for entertainment capital to refine idol cultivation models and achieve a win-win scenario of commercial and social value. Interpreting the underlying motivations of fan behavior helps various sectors of society comprehensively understand the psychological characteristics and value orientations of youth, providing practical pathways for guiding youth values.

## **2. The Unique Reasons for the Formation of Chinese Fandoms: The Root of Differences from Other Countries**

### **2.1. The Formation Trajectory of Chinese Fandoms**

The formation of Chinese fandoms is the result of multiple factors, including technology, society, and industry, and its development exhibits clear phased characteristics. From 2000 to 2009, it was the nascent stage. The internet was initially widespread, and platforms like Tianya Community and Baidu Tieba became initial platforms for fan gatherings. Core behaviors included information sharing and reposting of works. No systematic organizational structure had yet formed. Development relied on the initial introduction of Japanese and Korean idol culture and the convenience of cross-regional communication via the internet. The scale was small, and its influence was limited to niche circles.

From 2010 to 2016, it was the growth stage. The rise of social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat, along with the explosion of talent shows, propelled fandoms from "spontaneous gatherings" to "organized operations." Weibo's topic function and fan group management tools facilitated the formation of fixed communities. Programs like "Super Boy" stimulated fan organization awareness through "nationwide voting." Fandoms gradually developed divisions of labor, such as copywriting groups and data groups. "Ranking and voting" and "fundraising for support" became core behaviors, and the concept of "fan economy" officially emerged [1].

The period from 2017 to 2022 was the maturity stage. Short video and live streaming technologies, along with algorithmic recommendations, have matured, making fandom operations more precise and efficient. Algorithms enabled accurate content delivery, and short videos strengthened emotional connections. Idol Producer and other talent shows pushed the "fans determine idols' fate" model to its extreme, forming a closed commercial loop. However, at the same time, chaotic phenomena such as "fandom infighting" and "sky-high fundraising" erupted, drawing widespread social criticism.

From 2023 to the present, the period has been a transitional stage. Under the supervision of policies such as the "Clean Internet Action" and the guidance of public opinion, the "data worship" of fandoms

has cooled down. Fan clubs have gradually transformed, and fan behavior has focused more on emotional exchange and content co-creation. Some fandoms have ventured into the field of public welfare, exhibiting a "de-extremification" characteristic of integrating with traditional and mainstream culture.

## 2.2. Differences and Causes of Chinese Fandoms Compared to Other Countries

In terms of organizational structure, the core difference between Chinese fandoms and those in Europe, America, Japan, and South Korea lies in the regularity of their organizational structure, the clarity of their division of labor, their mobilization capabilities, and the boundaries of their intervention in idols' lives. Chinese fandoms are centered around star support groups, forming a pyramid-shaped centralized structure of "president - functional group - ordinary fans," with clear division of labor and strong mobilization capabilities [2]. Western fandoms are individualized, focusing on individual expression and spontaneous interaction, lacking a unified organizational structure. While Japanese and Korean fandoms have professional support systems, they emphasize industry rules and rational boundaries, avoiding excessive interference in idols' lives [3].

In terms of behavioral logic, the core difference lies in the ways fans support idols and their value judgment orientation. Chinese fandoms regard "data manipulation, comment control, and fundraising" as their core responsibilities, and quantitative indicators become key to showcasing idols' commercial value [1]. For example, when brands choose spokespeople, idol traffic data becomes an important indicator for judging the idol. However, Western fans pay more attention to cultural identification with idols' works, expressing emotions through secondary creations and offline meet-and-greets, with individual expression taking precedence over collective action. Japanese fans emphasize "accompaniment-style nurturing," supporting idols' long-term development through purchasing records and participating in handshake events, forming stable emotional connections.

At the industry relationship level, the core difference lies in the depth of the binding between fandoms and entertainment capital and platforms, and the core source of their commercial value. Chinese fan circles form a deeply intertwined community of interests with entertainment capital and platforms. Capital guides fan consumption by designing voting mechanisms and creating topics, and fans become the core producers of idol commercial value. In the European and American entertainment industry, fans maintain relative independence from capital and stars. Capital rarely intervenes directly in fan behavior, and the commercial value of stars depends more on the quality of their works. The idol industry in Japan and South Korea has formed a mature "training-debut-operation" system. Fans and industry interact according to established rules, and the commercial logic is relatively restrained. In terms of social projection, the core difference lies in the degree to which idol achievements are bound to social issues and values. Due to China's collectivist concept, Chinese fan circles often bind idol achievements to national honor and group dignity. For example, in sports fan circles, athletes' victories are given the meaning of "national heroes". On the contrary, European and American fan culture emphasizes the expression of individual value and rejects excessive organizational constraints. Fans achieve self-identity and empower marginal groups through idol worship. The Japanese and Korean "rule of etiquette" tradition sets implicit boundaries for fan behavior. Therefore, fan culture is more limited to the entertainment circle and less bound to grand social issues [4].

At the level of social structure, the core difference lies in the degree to which fan circles satisfy and depend on the sense of belonging of young people. In China's urbanization process, traditional community ties have weakened, leading to a strong need for belonging among young people in an atomized society, with fan groups becoming a substitute for traditional communities. Western societies, on the other hand, retain relatively complete community traditions, allowing individuals to gain a sense of belonging through family, community, and interest groups, resulting in lower reliance on fan groups. In Japan and South Korea, the "block structure" allows individuals to form stable community relationships in schools and workplaces, with fan groups serving only as a supplement to entertainment.

In terms of industry logic, the core difference lies in the development orientation of the entertainment industry and the core basis of a star's commercial value. In the early stages of China's entertainment industry development, a mature system for creating quality works was lacking. Capital, seeking rapid monetization, opted for a "traffic logic", stimulating fan consumption through creating idol personas and designing voting mechanisms, forcing fan groups to become data-driven. Western entertainment industries, after long-term development, have formed a mature system centered on the works themselves, where a star's commercial value depends on the reputation of their work, not on fan data hype. The idol industries in Japan and South Korea have adopted a "long-termism" orientation, cultivating long-term fan loyalty through systematic training and stable operation, avoiding short-term hype.

In terms of the policy environment, the core difference lies in the governance model and the intensity of regulation. China adopts a strong regulatory model of "regulating in development" for fan culture, curbing chaos and guiding the culture towards positive development through special campaigns. Europe and the United States mostly adopt an inclusive approach to subcultures, respecting the autonomy of niche cultures and intervening only when illegal or irregular activities occur. Japan and South Korea combine industry self-regulation with legal norms to both protect the development space of fan culture and set clear boundaries for behavior.

### **3. Differentiated Driving Factors of the Development of Chinese Fandoms**

The previous chapter not only traced the complete development path of Chinese fandoms from their inception, growth, maturity, and transformation, but also deeply analyzed their significant differences from European, American, Japanese, and Korean fan cultures in terms of organizational structure and behavioral logic, as well as the underlying cultural, social, and industrial roots. The generation and evolution of these unique characteristics are not accidental, but rather the result of the combined action and dynamic driving force of a set of key forces. This chapter focuses on this process, specifically dissecting the differentiated core factors driving the formation of the "Chinese path" of Chinese fandoms.

#### **3.1. Differences and Causes of Chinese Fandoms Compared to Other Countries**

At the technology-driven level, the "unexpected development" of the Chinese internet and its platform ecosystem provides core support. Unlike the gradual development of the Western internet, China directly entered the mobile social era from portal websites. Platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin quickly formed monopolistic ecosystems, achieving efficient aggregation and behavioral guidance of fan groups through a closed-loop design of "social + content + e-commerce". Algorithms precisely push idol content based on user interests, lowering the barrier to entry for fan gatherings. Platform-provided tools such as voting, fundraising, and support activities simplify the organizational costs of collective actions. E-commerce functions directly connect fans to consumption channels, enabling the rapid conversion of emotional expression into commercial value. This dual empowerment of "technology + platform" has facilitated the rapid scaling and organized development of fandoms [5,6].

#### **3.2. Industry-Driven Development**

In terms of industry-driven development, the "traffic logic" of China's entertainment industry, along with the deep collaboration between capital and platforms, is the core driving force behind the differentiated development of fandom culture. After 2010, facing the dilemma of "insufficient innovation in works", Chinese entertainment capital turned to "traffic idols" as a breakthrough for rapid monetization, collaborating with platforms to design "idol development" talent shows. Through a mechanism where "fans vote to determine debut spots," fans were incorporated into the idol production chain, stimulating extreme investment. Simultaneously, platforms launched data indicators such as "Star Power Rankings" to create a competitive atmosphere among idols, forcing

fans to engage in data-driven support and consumption, forming a unique "traffic economy" closed loop that deeply binds fandoms to commercial interests [6].

### **3.3. Society-Driven**

From a social driver perspective, the emotional needs and identity anxieties of contemporary Chinese youth provide a continuous impetus for the development of fan culture. Increased social competition places multiple pressures on young people, including academic and employment pressures. The anxiety stemming from traditional value evaluation systems prompts them to seek alternative value outlets. Fan circles, by constructing an emotional connection between "idols and fans" and fostering identity within a "like-minded" group, provide young people with channels for emotional catharsis and value realization. Fans gain alternative achievements by supporting idols, gain a sense of belonging through participation in collective actions, and alleviate real-world pressures and identity anxieties. This "emotional compensation" function continues to attract young people to participate.

### **3.4. Policy-Driven**

From a policy driver perspective, the Chinese government's "strong regulation" and dynamic guidance of fan culture are unique variables shaping its development path. The initial lax regulation provided space for the rapid development of fan circles. After the chaos broke out, the focus shifted to special rectification. Measures such as shutting down the celebrity popularity ranking, regulating fundraising for fan support, and cracking down on online infighting were taken to curb extreme behaviors. Subsequently, positive development was promoted by guiding fan circles to participate in public welfare and promoting integration with traditional culture. This dynamic regulatory model of "laissez-faire-rectification-guidance" has driven the transformation of fan circles from "traffic frenzy" to "rational development" [7].

## **4. From Fan Culture to Subculture as a Whole: The Universality of the Chinese Path**

### **4.1. Lessons from Niche Cultures for Fan Culture Development**

The "Chinese path" of fan culture development in China embodies the common logic of contemporary Chinese niche culture development. Its core experiences and lessons can provide valuable insights for other niche cultures, such as Hanfu (traditional Han clothing) culture, camping culture, and skateboarding culture.

Regarding the construction of emotional connections, the experience of fan cultures in building strong community bonds through emotional symbols is of significant reference value. Niche cultures can refer to this type of emotionally connected community and organize corresponding activities. For example, Hanfu culture can build emotional bonds around "traditional cultural identity", strengthening group identity through themed activities and intangible cultural heritage collaborations. Emerging sports cultures, such as skateboarding, can focus on "skill growth and self-realization", forming a stable participating group through community mutual assistance and competition exchanges. Camping culture can highlight the emotional value of "nature experience and lifestyle," avoiding merely remaining at the level of commercial consumption.

Regarding online-offline collaboration, the fan culture's model of "online topic operation + offline support activities" for expanding its reach is worth learning from. Niche cultures can build a development model of "online community-driven traffic + offline scene experience". Online, they can expand their influence by sharing content and organizing discussions on social platforms, while offline, they can enhance group cohesion through exhibitions, competitions, and experiential activities. Examples include online sharing of Hanfu outfits and offline gatherings for fellow enthusiasts, and online video exchanges and offline competitions for skateboarding culture.

Regarding positive industry interaction, the "cultural IP + industry transformation" approach of fan circles is valuable, but the risk of over-commercialization must be avoided. Niche cultures can form positive interactions with related industries: Hanfu culture can combine intangible cultural heritage techniques with the tourism industry to develop customized products and cultural tourism routes. Camping culture can link outdoor equipment companies with rural tourism resources to create immersive experience products. Skateboarding culture can connect with urban spatial planning and the sports industry to secure dedicated venues and competition resources, achieving a win-win situation for both cultural and commercial value.

In terms of mainstream cultural integration, the experience of fan circles in integrating with traditional and mainstream culture during their transformation period is particularly important. Niche cultures need to proactively break down barriers between their respective circles and explore points of convergence between their cultural connotations and mainstream values, such as the cultural confidence of Hanfu culture and the fighting spirit of skateboarding culture. They should integrate into public life through public welfare activities and cultural dissemination to enhance social acceptance. At the same time, they must be wary of potential risks such as excessive commercialization, extremism, and exclusivity, and "data worship", and focus on the accumulation of cultural connotations [8].

#### **4.2. Strategies for Addressing the Growth of Niche Cultures**

The continued growth of niche cultures is an inevitable result of the diversified development of Chinese society and has significant positive value: at the individual level, it provides identity and emotional support for different groups, enriching the lifestyles and value choices of young people. At the societal level, it promotes cultural innovation and industrial upgrading, such as Hanfu culture driving the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage and camping culture revitalizing rural tourism. At the national level, it contributes to enhancing cultural confidence and soft power [9]. Therefore, the social value of niche cultures should be recognized, and their development patterns and group demands should be respected.

Addressing the challenges brought about by the growth of niche cultures requires collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders. At the government level, the principle of "inclusive and prudent" governance is upheld, providing development space while establishing behavioral boundaries to avoid "chaos when left alone and stagnation when controlled" [10]. At the platform level, governance and guidance mechanisms are optimized, differentiated governance rules are established, algorithms take into account both circle-based dissemination and public interests, and provide positive guidance tools. At the circle level, self-adjustment and responsibility are strengthened, internal norms are established, cultural leaders are cultivated to guide rational development, and social responsibility is actively undertaken. At the social level, understanding and positive interaction are enhanced, stereotypes are abandoned, and cognition is enhanced through media reports and public discussions, and educational institutions guide young people to participate rationally, forming a social co-governance atmosphere [11].

### **5. Conclusion**

This paper focuses on the "Chinese path" of fan culture, and responds to the two core questions of "why is the Chinese fan culture unique" and "can its development logic be used as a reference for other niche cultures". Based on the cross-disciplinary perspective of communication studies and sociology, this paper systematically explores the formation and development of fan culture, the root causes of differences with similar cultures at home and abroad, the driving factors of differentiation, and the universality of the "Chinese path" in the overall subculture field, providing a multi-dimensional perspective for understanding the development law of contemporary Chinese subculture. Research reveals that the "Chinese path" of Chinese fandom is the result of a dynamic interplay of four major factors: technology, society, industry, and policy. Localized internet platform ecosystems

provide technological support, the emotional belonging needs of young people form the social foundation, the traffic-driven logic of entertainment capital injects industrial momentum, and strong regulatory policies play a guiding and adjusting role. These four factors intertwine to create the unique characteristics of Chinese fandom: large-scale, organized, and controversial.

This "Chinese path" has limited universality for other niche cultures: the four key experiences of emotional connection, online-offline collaboration, positive industrial interaction, and integration with mainstream culture can be directly learned from, but potential risks such as excessive commercialization and extremism must be guarded against. The healthy development of niche cultures requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders—government, platforms, fandoms, and society—and adherence to a governance logic that balances inclusiveness and regulation.

Future research can be further expanded in three main directions: conducting interdisciplinary research, combining perspectives from psychology, anthropology, and other fields to deepen the understanding of the psychological and behavioral mechanisms of niche cultural groups; conducting long-term follow-up studies, focusing on the dynamic evolution of fan circles and other niche cultures, and examining the sustainability of the "Chinese path"; and expanding the scope of research subjects, by comparing the development practices of different types of niche cultures, to extract more universal development patterns and governance strategies, and provide more comprehensive theoretical support for the diversified and healthy development of Chinese subcultures.

## Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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