

## **The Bounded Embodiment of Fandom in China: Recovering Shifting Media Experiences and Fan Participation Through an Oral History of Animation-Comics-Games Lovers**

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The synchronic patterns and outcomes of relationship building between fans and fan objects have received much attention in fan studies. Instead of taking an overly presentist view, as historical research on fandom often has done, this research treats fan participation—the construction of fan-object relationships—as a sociohistorical practice, highlighting the longitudinal transformations of fandom in specific social contexts. Drawing on oral history and autobiography among animation-comics-games (ACG) lovers, we examine changes in media practices, participation, and identification since the 1990s in a Chinese context. We argue that in the evolution of ACG fandom, the significance of mass media has not resided in forming new fan practices or fan-object relationships. Rather, mass media have played a role in changing the forms and meanings of the embodiment of the imaginary and the affective relationships between fan and object. The shifting embodiments provide fans with hints of situated experiences and priority of meanings regarding being-in-the-fandom.

*Keywords: fan culture, fan participation, media practice, embodiment of object relation, ACG culture, fandom history, Chinese context*

Many studies have investigated the synchronic patterns or outcomes of fan culture in the digital era, but the crucial questions of how, why, and whether fandom has been changed by digitalization have been inadequately answered. The concept of fandom is commonly understood on the basis of where the relationship between fans and fan objects is located on the spectrum of consumption and production (see Booth, 2010; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992, 2006), from idiosyncratic projection to affective sensibility (see Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Grossberg, 1992; Harris, 1998; Jancovich, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005), and from readership to cult fandom (see Hills, 2002). Although existing work has focused mainly on synchronic patterns or outcomes of such fandom relationships (see Gray, Harrington, & Sandvoss, 2007; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005), scholars have rarely explicated how certain fan-like relationships have evolved and shifted in specific contexts or whether they have appeared to be identical with forms of consumption, readership, or affection over time.

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This study aims to understand whether, how, and why fandom has changed with digitalization in the Chinese context, where the acceleration of the process of globalization has led to a sweeping transformation of fan culture (Fung, 2013; Ito, Okabe, & Tsuji; 2012; Iwabuchi, 2010; Kustritz, 2015). Fan culture has emerged from a largely underground development and community-based activity to become a vibrant social platform operating on the Internet. Taking a practical approach, we investigate the longitudinal processes of relationship building between fans and fan objects as a sociohistorical practice. Practices constitute the key elements of social life (Schatzki, 1996) and refer to the “temporal and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki, 1996; in Pantzar, Shove, & Watson, 2012, p. 7). At an analytical level, “practices are composed of elements and people who are usefully understood as the carriers of practice figure” (Pantzar et al., 2012, p. 8). Accordingly, fan practice in our study means a temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings performed by carriers, who are consciously or unconsciously understood as fans within specific fandom.

Drawing on oral history and autobiography among animation-comics-games (ACG) lovers, this study examines the historical changes of media practices and fan practices since the 1990s. We depict the changing media experiences among ACG lovers, from early engagement with TV and manga to exposure to the online ACG fan community. The long-term processes, particularly the early media experiences, influence patterns of fan participation and their self-positioning in contemporary cultural maps of fandom. Yet we argue that the relationship between fan and fan object has been built relatively consistently, whereas the means of fan participation—the engagement of prosumption, emotional engagement, and the embodiment of object-relating in fandom—have not followed the same path.

## Literature Review

### *Fan Participation as a Sociohistorical Practice*

Fandom as a historical phenomenon has been investigated by scholars who highlight that the historical perspective can provide insight into fans’ sustained engagement with media and fan objects as well as the transformations of fandom over time in specific social contexts (e.g., Cavicchi, 2014; De Kosnik, 2016; Hills, 2002, 2014; Lee Harrington & Bielby, 2010; Zheng, 2016). From the perspective of media history, De Kosnik (2016) has emphasized the significance of cultural memory and digital archive in studying fandom. Duits, Zwaan, and Reijnders (2014) have positioned fandom study as a lens through which we can understand the landscape of media history. From the standpoint of fans, Hills (2014) has emphasized the significance of revisiting “becoming-a-fan” stories to understand fan practice and culture as sets of dynamic processes. Lee Harrington and Bielby (2010) have noted that the lives of fans and changing fan objects over time should indicate the longitudinal impact of age-graded transitions of fan identities and practices.

In various historical accounts, the interrelations between mass media, fans, and fan culture remain the subjects of debates. The history of fandom and fan participation has been described mainly in two contradictory and problematic ways. On the one hand, many historical accounts of fandom have adopted media-centric narratives, in which the evolution of fandom is treated as a subtype of changes within the history of media technologies or media landscapes (Coppa, 2006a; Deller, 2014; Duits et al.,

2014). For example, Coppa (2006a) has addressed the historical changes of fandom mainly on the basis of television and fiction. Deller (2014), who conducted longitudinal research on fan talk, examined the shift from off-line to online British music communities. In this line of thought, it was the media activities that organized the history of fan culture. The history of fandom and fan culture were classified by media forms and the genre of products. Each specific fandom was usually studied as a case rather than a category. Such narratives were sometimes too specific to cover a series of longitudinal changes of fandom in terms of consumption, circulation, and production. Moreover, fan participation and fans' voices were relatively obscured in the narration. The meaning of being a fan and the individual experiences of fans in writing their own histories have been largely ignored.

On the other hand, some scholars have constructed a history of fandom from a presentist mind-set to understand fan culture that has tended to overemphasize historical continuity in terms of the cultural experiences and connotations of fandom transcending media platforms over time (see Cavicchi, 2007; O'Day, 2013; W. Zhang, 2016; Zheng, 2016). For example, O'Day's (2013, p. 25) work, despite sharing certain similarities with our research, has that argued the "primary goal" and models of fan production have not changed, despite changes in technology. Zhang (2016) has discussed the self-organization of individual Chinese fans to develop into communities and then into publics. She traces the early generation of cinephiles back to the 1980s, considering cinephiles as movie fans. According to Zhang, cinephiles afterward made themselves visible to publics through performance, facilitated only by the logic of the Internet, and became the fans today. Cavicchi (2007, 2014) has suggested that modern mass media fan participation is a sociohistorical construct and that an earlier fandom existed long before the invention of the term *fan*. Revisiting the history of music lovers in the mid-19th century, he has argued that music lovers in that time and modern pop fans might be connected in the sense of embracing commodified participation (Cavicchi, 2014). These studies provide a historical view of how fan-like practices might be embodied in the past. However, they commonly presume that the characterization of consumption and cultural experiences shared certain similarities throughout the evolution of fandom and were articulated with different media practices over time. The question here is to what extent cinephiles and contemporary movie fans, or music lovers in the 19th century and hip-hop fans, can be counted in a single category of fandom? Are there any similarities and differences between different periods?

The underlying disagreements about historical accounts of fandom to some extent connect to understandings of the relationship between mass media in the history of fandom. Like Cavicchi's (2014) archaeology of music lovers, which reminds us that it was eventually the "etymology of fans" that determined who were treated as fans, this research proposes that we need to reexamine our conceptions of mass media and fan participation in the interpretation of the sociohistorical practices of so-called fans. These debates thus guide our research to ask the following questions: In the case of Chinese ACG fandom, to what extent do the mass media play roles in (1) the evolution and change of certain fan-like relationships in specific contexts, (2) the relationship building between fans and fan objects in different periods, and (3) the shaping of the forms of consumption, readership, or affection throughout history?

### ***Fan Participation and the Embodiment of Object-Relating in Fandom***

This research regards fan participation—the construction of the fan–object relationship—as a sociohistorical practice that emphasizes taking into account both the conceptual equivalence of fandom in different periods and diachronic differences of fan participation. Fan participation is arguably always at the forefront of the transformations of technologies and the culture industry (see Booth, 2010; Busse & Gray, 2011; Pearson, 2010; Zhang & Fung, 2013). To unpack the historical change of fan participation as both patterned practice and a form of culture, it seems impossible to ignore the historical development of media and digital technology and how people use them. We thus highlight the indispensable yet dominant roles of media in reshaping fandom diachronically. Meanwhile, taking the shifting media arena as a part of the material and cultural resources of fan practices, we focus firmly on the historical changes of fan culture per se, including changing participation in textual prosumption (production and consumption; see Jenkins, 2002), the affective relationship between fan and fan object, and the embodiment of the object relating in fandom.

Fan participation has so far been discussed on the spectrum of consumption to production that assumes the tradition of active audience and participatory culture (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Pearson, 2010). The relationship between fan and fan object has been examined mainly through a psychological lens focusing on affects, perceptions, and the projection of individual experience (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998; Grossberg, 1992; Hills, 2002; Howard, 2017; Sandvoss, 2005). This study reviews the historical change of fan culture by the nuance of how the relationship between fans and objects has been reshaped and how it eventually reshapes fan participation as an outcome. To illustrate the shifting object relation of fan participation in Chinese ACG fandom, we introduce the concept of embodiment from Csordas (1990, 1999). Csordas proposed a paradigm of embodiment to weld the components of perception (from Merleau-Ponty's idea) and practice (from Bourdieu's idea) as an elaboration of the study of culture and self. He suggests that both perception and practice are parts of embodiment: specifically, multisensory imagery played as embodied cultural process and usually accompanied by some physical manifestation; and cultural practice acted out as embodied experience within a specific cultural system and as cultural operator. Embodiment is thus about culture and experience, which should be understood from the standpoint of bodily being in the world. Such existence concerns "synthesizing the immediacy of embodied experience with the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitably immersed" (Csordas, 1999, p.143). As Csordas (1990) has suggested, for this kind of research, the perspective of embodiment helps us to understand and explicate how cultural objects (including the self) are constituted or objectified in the ongoing cultural lives of fans and fan participation.

Discussions of embodiment or disembodiment and embodied experiences—as ongoing questions of "the body"—have attracted considerable academic attention, and these concepts have been attributed explanatory value in contemporary studies of digital cultures, virtual and material practices, and new media technologies (e.g., Featherstone & Burrows, 1995; Munster, 2011; Van Doorn, 2011; Van Doorn & Van Zoonen, 2008). Van Doorn (2011) has suggested that in the digital environment, various events, affects, ideals, and regulatory norms could be repeatedly actualized in material-discursive practices. Seen through this lens, embodiment in a sense should "be understood to include a vital virtual component, since the experience of one's material body depends on a multitude of incorporeal (e.g., psychological, cultural,

artistic and spiritual) practices” (p. 534). In a case study, Van Doorn and Van Zoonen (2008) have shown how participants employed the text-based digital environments of Internet Relay Chat to invoke various textual incarnations of their gendered and sexualized bodies.

Despite having not been explored adequately, the embodiment of fan affection and object relation in fandom are not novel ideas. Although not necessarily using the term, related literature has shared similar understandings. For example, Coppa (2006b) has argued that bodies in space are embodied based on extra textual knowledge and the imagination of fiction fans. Considering writing fan fiction to be performance, several scholars have emphasized the embodiment of imagination and feelings (Coppa, 2006b; Lancaster & Mikotowicz, 2001). Hills (2002) has also identified the “performative consumption” that explains fans’ self-reflexivity. He suggests interpreting fan practice as a performative and embodied process that nuances the relationship between fan participation and fan subjectivity.

Overall, we propose the embodiment of object relation in fandom to illustrate embodied imagination, performances, and experiences constituting intimacy between fans and their imaginative and corporeal fan objects in the increasingly digitized history of fan practice. The embodiment of object relating in fandom, along with engagement in textual prosumption and emotional engagement, constitute our understanding of how individuals establish cultural, emotional, and economic intimacy with fan objects.

### **Context and Method**

The popularity of fan culture as a typical “tag” of subcultures and youth culture in China can be easily observed on Chinese social media and in the sheer rise in volume of the cultural economy of fans (Yin & Fung, 2017). An increasing number of youths have devoted themselves to such subcultural consumption in the domestic market. For instance, an ACG website called Bilibili accumulated more than 50 million users from 2011 to 2015 (Yin & Fung, 2017). ACG fandom, among other categories of Chinese fan culture, dates back to the early consumption of the imported Japanese animations in the 1980s and 1990s. The Chinese fan culture developed as a cultural reappropriation of foreign media products such as Japanese fiction, animation, manga, and films. These foreign sources influenced the first generation of Chinese fans in terms of their consumption, cultural identity, and production (Zheng, 2016).

This study focuses on the early generation of fans—ACG fans born in the 1980s and 1990s—to explore how their previous consumption of ACG products echoes with and responds to contemporary fan culture.<sup>1</sup> Emphasizing fans’ voices in writing history, we follow an oral history approach and have collected the individual life histories of ACG lovers. With a multidisciplinary methodology, oral history has been widely applied to media studies to present outstanding possibilities for the exploration of individual consciousness of popular culture (Tamke, 1977; Thompson, 2000). We focus on the historical experience of ordinary individuals, collecting memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews (Ritchie, 2014). This methodology makes possible the discovery of ignored historical moments

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the interviewees calculated their “ACG life” from their earliest memory of watching Japanese animations on TV. We therefore calculated their “fan age” as the same period of time. Please see the Appendix, available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/2vno5j2innf9ced/appendix.pdf?dl=0>

and accounts alternative to the dominant historical narratives. In this study, the oral histories of ACG lovers endeavor to describe the historical changes of their media practices, fan participation, and fan identification.

We have conducted semistructured interviews based on the standard of theoretical sampling—including the time span, active degree, and affection of one's engagement in ACG fandom, as Abercrombie and Longhurst's (1998) typology of fans suggested. The 13 interviewees recruited for the study are active consumers, connected in fan networks, and textually productive. Their fan participation convinces us that they should be counted as fans and even enthusiasts (Sandvoss & Kearns, 2014). Conducted mostly online through instant messaging, our interviews probe their narratives of media experiences, cultural consumption, fan participation, and fan identification as ACG lovers. We also held two telephone interviews and one face-to-face interview at the convenience of the interviewees. These interviewees were of an early generation of fans born between the late 1980s and early 1990s (Zheng, 2016). They have been engaging with ACG cultures for 20 years or more, and they still consume ACG products today.

We acknowledge the disproportionate gender ratio among the interviewees, though the proportion accords with the status quo of ACG fans in China (Zheng, 2016) and in other countries (see Bacon-Smith, 1991; De Kosnik, 2016). Women media fans remain a majority particularly in slash and Boys' Love fandoms. We attempted to compensate for the potential limitation of this unbalanced gender distribution in our online observations. We also note that, even though half of the interviewees rejected being labeled "a fan of ACG"—which implies the narrowed connotations and significations of the term *fan* in the context of contemporary Chinese fandom—their active fan practices justify our rationale for the recruitment of interviewees: their performances and activities show them to be avid fans (in the academic sense) of ACG.

This research also draws on autobiography (Hills, 2002) from one of the authors, Roca, who identifies as an aca-fan, which means she performs dual roles of fan and researcher in her study of fandom.<sup>2</sup> Roca has been involved in ACG fandom since she was 12 years old. She is still active in several online communities for ACG, movies, and e-sports. Since 2014, Roca's research has focused on fan identity and the relationship between fans and media. Sharing similar experiences with our research subjects, she is able to investigate this experience from both a critical perspective and an insider's point of view.

### **"I Am Not a *Fensi* (粉丝)": Fan as Other**

An early aim of our interviews was to explore how individual experience with fan objects and media affect fan-object relationships over time among active ACG lovers. The first unexpected insight gleaned from the conversations was that more than half of the interviewees were unwilling to admit they were "fans" (*fensi* 粉丝 in Chinese). Their claims about themselves seem to contrast with the typically imagined active fan (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998); the interviewees are active media users and ACG consumers. They are also active online, since we reached most of them through online fan networks. More importantly, nearly half of the interviewees were engaged in various forms of fan-related participation, including various types of fannish textual productions.

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<sup>2</sup> To ensure the blind review process, we used the author's alias.

Many of the interviewees were wary of accepting the label due to the specific signification of the term *fensi* in China. For example, Shan Zhi was quite fond of *The King's Avatar*, joining discussions on Weibo (a social media platform similar to Twitter), forums, and several QQ chat groups (an online chatting software similar to MSN). She purchased the entire *King's Avatar* series and related products and fan products. She even wrote fan fiction and attended comic-cons, or off-line gatherings of fans. Although she was involved in all these practices, she considered herself "an individual *King's Avatar* lover" rather than a *fensi*: "I won't say that I'm a *fensi*," said Shan Zhi:

I do agree that I like *The King's Avatar* very much, but I'm not a *fensi* of it. When you say you like a piece of work, you are the subject who holds the initiative. While if you are a *fensi*, you would probably be manipulated by something else because the work itself becomes the subject. You would even be categorized and tagged into a community of *fensi* and thus be judged by others, despite who you really are.

Similar claims, such as "I'm not willing to call myself a *fensi*" and "I think I'm just an ACG lover," appeared frequently in our interviews.

For many of the interviewees, the term *fensi* was linked to specific acts, such as quarrels, irrational insults toward others, or forcing other *fensi* to "choose a camp." Other interviewees who were relatively willing to agree with fan identity, tended to emphasize their attention and affect. "I am a fan," said Moria, a loyal consumer of comics and PC games. "My love spreads broadly [followed by an 'lol' emoticon]." In Shan Zhi's words, "Admitting oneself as a *fensi* means to give your brain out." That is to say, the *fensi* identity indicates a pattern or mode of action encompassing modes of consumption, communication, thought, and even lifestyle.

The narratives of these ACG lovers highlight the changes in and persistence of the meaning and practices of *fensi*. The image of *fensi* is not always a fixed stereotype that has emerged "in the past three or four years" (Shan Zhi, Xiao Qi, and Zack). Rather, their understanding of *fensi* identity and relevant fan participation is a relatively "new thing," which has turned the term *fensi* "from a neuter into a derogatory noun" (Ivy). The interviewees' claims not to be *fensi* therefore raised several questions: Does this shift of identity parallel the shift of the fan-object relationship? When ACG lovers deny the *fensi* identity, what, exactly, are they rejecting? What role, if any, has the media played in this change?

### **Being ACG Lovers: Shifting Media Practices and Experiences**

To answer the above questions, this section brings the shared feelings and experiences of being ACG lovers back to the trajectory of shifting mass media landscapes and technological forms in China since the 1990s. This discussion explains how media play a role in what kinds of changes from the subjective experiences of the ACG lovers. Our focus is not to follow media-centric narratives. Rather, we refuse the technology-determinist perspective by dialectically examining fan activity, media practice, and fan practice by exploring what has changed in this history and what its relation is to the changes in media.

In many ACG lovers' accounts, their stories started from watching animations on TV. Xiao Qi recalled her primary school days: "There was little pressure of study at that time. I had more free time. I

usually came back from school at five p.m. and watched *Da Fengche* and *Donghua Cheng* on TV." The two programs were broadcasted by China Central Television in the early 1990s, playing domestic animations and foreign animations from the United States and Japan. Xiao Qi continued: "At that time there were many TV channels that had the service of video on demand. I watched quite a lot of Japanese animations there, like *Saint Seiya* and *Sailor Moon*."

None of the interviewees noticed that they were consuming "ACG" or even foreign products in their childhood. The animations were just popular and common TV shows in their daily life. The first media resource they actively "hunted for" was manga (comic books). As a supplement to TV animations, manga raised the idea of "exoticness" and even the identity of "lover." "I wanted to review the stories that I watched on TV, but TV broadcast was linear. I couldn't freely replay the episode then. So I bought manga," said Xiao Qi. To more fully enjoy the animations, many interviewees started to read manga. This shift in practice precipitated the most important shift in the world of ACG lovers. From manga, their distinctive identity as lovers emerged and differentiated them from other teenagers with whom they had watched TV animations together.

The initial identity as a manga lover was based on a sense of satisfaction and superiority. "When you discussed with your friends at school, you'd feel you're advanced than them because you read manga while they watched television only," said Ivy. Reading pirated manga thus became an activity that was more private and somehow more elite. Gaining more resources to understand the stories was the primary motivation for them in an era when television was the center of the media world. Renting manga from street stalls or book shops and buying video CDs of animations from comic stalls were the two main ways to obtain these resources. Due to limited purchasing power and the scarcity of sources of ACG material, early ACG consumption was resource-oriented. "I didn't have many choices," said Da Hei recalling her experience in middle school: "Basically I bought or rented any manga that I could reach." The emergence of several ACG magazines in the late 1990s and early 2000s provided a slightly wider selection. The magazines further affected the construction of the "comic lover" identity fan community and guided comic lovers by offering information on manga. Although reading manga and watching television were still mostly private leisure activities, a community was being formed by these magazines. "For the first time, I realized there were many people who read the same manga and watched the same animations," recounted An Mianmian.

The Internet, as many have discussed, further developed this imagined community of pals. The convenience brought by the Internet is obvious, as Ivy recalled: "In the past I had to find resources from comic shops or DVD shops only on weekends, while now I just log on to Bilibili every day and see whatever I want." This convenience gradually turned the resource-oriented media practice into a more relationship-oriented one. The relationship-oriented viewership via the Internet created and enforced the sense of community: "It's like the feeling of 'discovering your organization (组织)' suddenly," said Da Hei. *Organization* is a special term in the Chinese context, differing from concepts such as community and group; it always relates to the recognition of the party. The term implies strong connection, even affection or loyalty. The rise of sharing technology, such as the real-time commenting technology on Bilibili, has also addressed the notion of collectivity by turning mere video viewing into a forum for discussion (Yin & Fung, 2017).



Throughout the narratives of the shifting media, most of the interviewees expressed consistent intimate affection toward their ACG fan objects. This consistency is demonstrated by the time span of ACG spectatorship and the interviewees' economic and cultural consumption transcending different mass media eras. In brief, we find that the shifting mass media landscapes and technological forms in China may alter certain subjective experiences in the processes of ACG fan participation, as shown by the general timeline of their media practices. Meanwhile, the sustainable affective connections of ACG fan objects partially make sense of the academic construction of the figures of ACG fans as a seemingly consistent fan category over time, despite the admittedly presentist tendency as we review the works of Cavicchi (2014), W. Zhang (2016), Zheng (2016), and others.

### **Positioning in Fan Circles (饭圈): The Transition of the ACG Realm in China**

The changing boundaries within and beyond the ACG realm in China is another difference that was emphasized in the ACG lovers' accounts and awareness of fan participation. This section discusses how the ACG lovers' media experience influences their subjective understanding of their imagined selves and of others. In examining the process in which an individual felt, elaborated, and expressed fan culture in the past and present, we find that their recognition of boundaries has also changed over time. The shifting patterns from individual fan practices to collective fan practices may account for the transition of ACG fandom.

The claim that fandom is a place with boundaries is not a novel one. In the case of fandom, labels and categories of fannish varieties can be seen everywhere. Fans use these boundaries to locate and position their relationships with the fan object. For example, ACG fans today always label themselves as citizens of *Nijigen* (二次元; i.e., the two-dimensional and virtual world) in contrast to "common people" in the *Sanjigen* (三次元, i.e., the three-dimensional, materialized, and real world). However, the meaning of boundaries such as *Nijigen* cannot be simply understood as fixed and preexisting. Rather, as we discuss below, these boundaries are not based on fact or category. As our interviewees mentioned, at the time of its inception, the term *Nijigen* was, indeed, a description applied only to ACG, but it was later constructed as an opposite of "real world" without participants' recognition. *Nijigen* is a dynamic boundary, not only to classify one group in relation to another but also to position one's imagined relationship with the fan text, other fans, and even the objective world. Such boundaries are thus shaped, negotiated, and constantly changed by the embodied experience and participatory performance of fans as both individuals and communities.

The notion of a circle (圈/饭圈) may be more informative in describing how boundaries can be shaped and reshaped over time. In English, we usually classify fans by *fandom*, referring to the territory in which a self-selected fraction of fans with similar interests consume or produce around the same fan objects (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Under such a definition, a fandom could be both an interrelated social community and a bounded cultural space. As Hills (2014) has argued, fans have been mobile and self-reflexive as they move between fandoms. It is thus necessary to examine how they make sense of such cross-fandom practice when studying the change of fan experience over time. When we asked our interviewees about how they interpret and differentiate fandoms, they reported a pair of significant concepts: the fan pit (饭坑) and the fan circle (饭圈), which echo our previous discussions on the shift of individual fan practices.

As many interviewees pointed out, fandoms in China were divided by “pits” in the past. A pit, of course, denotes a hole in the ground. In the language of fans, however, it stands for specific fan objects—from media text to characters or slash couples. *Saint Seiya* could be a pit, and *Sherlock/Watson* could be another. Thus, if one moves between pits, one simply becomes interested in another thing. The nuance lies, however, in the fan object of a pit. The pit is eventually something out there, a space one could simply enter by contrasting an affective relationship with the work, character, couple, and so on. In other words, for a fan, entering a pit means building an affective bond with a fan object. As one of the interviewees reported, “previously, when we liked a new piece of work, we’d say ‘I dropped down to a new pit’ (我掉进一个新坑). It was just like a landmark, meaning that you fell in love with something new” (Xiao Qi). In this sense, dropping into a pit is a private or individual practice, which relates only to one’s own interests and media use.

Lovers of ACG now use another way to interpret the boundaries between fandoms, and it is the key that influences their current definitions and even rejections of being “fans.” “There is a huge change, I think,” said Xiao Qi: “Now they would say, ‘I entered a new circle’ (我进入一个新圈子).” The buzzword “fan circle” appeared in the early 2000s, and it implies new fan-like relationships forming with the emergence of the Internet. If a pit was simply a work, then a circle, which exists only once surrounded by other things, stands for a much more networked subject that is shaped by social ties, complex relationships, and cultural norms. Entering a pit means establishing connections between individuals and fan objects, while entering a circle means connecting not only with an object but also other with fans and the inevitable hierarchy associated any social group. As Xiao Qi stated,

Today, entering a fan circle is like entering some kind of institution. You are forced to be loyal to your idol, spend money for it, and fight with others if needed. If you don’t want to take part in these things, you must claim clearly that “I don’t deal with the circle.”(我不混圈)

From fan pit to fan circle, the increasingly networked community sets relational boundaries in various areas of fan participation. In the flourishing boundary awareness of ACG fandom, patterns shift from individual fan practices in relatively private lives to the collective fan practices across the social life of fans. In a fan pit, fans relate more directly to fan objects, fostering more individual fan practices such as directly shopping for, watching, and otherwise pursuing specific ACG objects. Fan circles, by contrast, form a fan’s interpersonal network with specific rules and restrictions, which has changed both the forms of certain fan practices and what it means to be a fan.

### **Bounded Imaginative Community: The Embodiment of Object Relating in Fandom**

Examining the changed and unchanged media practices and fan practices, we emphasize how the interrelationship of the two practices contributes to the shifting embodiment of fan-object relationships in fan participation. The embodiment of object relation in fandom refers to the embodied imagination, performances, and experiences of participants that constitute intimacy between fans and their imaginative and corporeal fan objects. We find that the changes of embodiment mean not changes of fan-object relationships per se, but the ways fans make sense of such relationships in practice. We propose two aspects of changing embodiment. The first lies in the embodiment of fascination and the imagination of fan figures,

which creates disputes among fans regarding “the proper” incarnation of virtual or real fan objects. The second aspect comprises the embodiment of fans’ love through comparing and competing with other fans, which changes the ways in which community members abide by internal rules, customs, and boundaries in fandom.

Throughout the interviews, we asked participants about their perceptions of ACG fandom over time. One notable change that was mentioned is the invasion of ACG fandom by so-called idol-fan culture. Zack describes the invasion as the phenomenon whereby “the ‘logic’ of ‘idol fan’ is now ruling the ACG fandom. People now like the characters in the same way as idol fans loving their idols.” The invasion of idol-fan culture has impacted ACG fan culture in creating different understandings of the embodiment of fascination and imagination of fan figures. Fans are depicted as pathological fanatics who are devoted and obsessed with fan objects because of fantasies of intimacy (see Caughey, 1978; Schickel, 1985). Many studies of celebrity fandom presume that the imagination of intimacy relates to real people (i.e., celebrities and idols; see Duffett, 2014; Yang, 2012). The affective relationship between fans and fan objects has been explained by fans’ support of idols’ careers, both economically and socioculturally.

For ACG lovers, the imaginary relationship between fans and virtual objects can be embodied by consumption or textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992). Such a relationship, relatively free because the fan objects were virtual, could be shaped based on the scripts in fans’ minds (Hellekson & Busse, 2006; Jenkins, 1992; Zheng, 2016). Lovers of ACG normally maintain an affective connection with a fan object for a limited time. They fall in love easily with new characters without the guilt of betrayal, because these are not real figures. In this sense, ACG lovers construct fan identification in more individualistic and self-fulfilling ways. When we asked, “Do you think your identification [as an ACG lover] is different from others in your own experience?” a typical answer was as follows: “I don’t think so. Previously in underground I did not have extra energy to bother with that. . . . I do not interact with others, I read my own beloved things” (Sarna).

The logic of idol fan, based on the relationship between fans and real or almost-real figures, therefore, creates the following experience for idol fans: “I think an idol should have achievement. He will make his fans feel proud of him . . . the sense of achieving in progress with the idol is very important” (Hua Juan, who self-identifies as an idol fan and partial ACG lover). The change of ACG fandom today seems to echo the idol-fan culture. As interviewees such as Zack, Sarna, and Xiao Qi all reported, ACG fans started to fight with others online to “protect the characters’ honor” or to complain that the characters were treated unfairly by the authors. Such a change, we find, could be explained by the different meanings associated with different incarnations of fan objects within different fan cultures.

The incarnation, creating different embodied imagination, feeling, and real-life connections between fans and fan objects not only distinguishes real people from fictional figures but also sets boundaries of imagination, feeling, and perceived outcomes of prosumption. In ACG fandom today, it is quite difficult for many participants to balance the boundary between virtual and real object relating. For example, coupling would be forbidden by some idol fans, while we may expect a relatively flexible treatment of characters in the ACG fandom. However, recent ACG lovers have started to dispute character pairs and character treatment in their circles. It is increasingly common to see fans of *Yuri on Ice* fight with each other only because of the different couples they ship (a term stands for “supporting a couple” in fan language).

The embodiment of affect, in some senses, rules the fan circle today. Likewise, consumption activities manifest the boundaries presumed by the relationship between fans and fan objects. For ACG lovers like Shan Zhi, "consumption was just consumption in the past . . . but now it has changed. . . . I spent money on *The King's Avatar* because I like it. But now they buy things to give money to the author." In their narrative, this subjectivity—the priority of contribution and devotion—is the substantive hallmark of the "dedicated" fan in contrast with the "selfish" lover.

Another distinctive perception of fandom stressed by ACG lovers relates to the community-oriented embodiment of object relating in fan circles. Busse (2013), Harris (1998), Jancovich (2002), Thornton (1995), and other Bourdieuan scholars of fan studies tend to elaborate the boundary in fandom as an entity shaped by sociocultural structures. However, we consider the shape of the boundary not only as a division of social or cultural capitals but also as a complex outcome of the changing imaginative relationship between the self and fan objects. In this sense, a fan circle embodies differentiated meanings of fan practices and turns into relationships among practitioners. It is mainly organized as a network of participants in prosuming fan products and presenting a fan ethos within the community. The narratives of ACG lovers have revealed contradictory aspects of transition raised by the reproduction of fan circles.

Fan circles facilitate individuals in expanding their readership with fan objects as barriers to entry to fan circles are lowered by social media. Meanwhile, fan circles formalize input and output within the networks, which makes the ties between fans and the fan community more obvious. As mentioned earlier, ACG lovers have adopted different ways to share common interests in fan objects in the ever-changing media practices. Rather than relying on previous source-oriented prosumption, many of them engaged with a fan circle. Some studies have pointed out fans' looser distance to media life due to their need for resources and "poaching elements" (Duits et al., 2014; Jenkins, 1992, 2006). In the era of digital and social media, individual fans may inevitably engage with fan circles in various ways. To access more resources, fans today clearly identify their followers or whom they follow, even when entering a new circle: "On Weibo, you can't always use the searching bar. You have to locate the fans within the community and follow them to know more" (Roca).

The fan circle also shifts the focus of embodiment from embodying fascination with fan objects to showing off fans' love and fan-like relationships with others concerning the increasingly prominent roles of fan networks (Morrissey, 2008). Nevertheless, the significance of networks in fan practice is not a fixed or preexisting one but rather a dynamic and increasingly important one. In the past, fan practices concentrated mostly on official or self-made products. Fan circles now turn the networks into focal points of fan-object relationships. Aurore compares fan participation in the ACG forum with fan participation in Weibo:

In a forum you just communicate with fans who share same interests with you. When any of them don't like this animation, they just disappear and you'd never see them again. While on Weibo, when you follow an author because he/she draws fan-pics of an animation, you may also encounter his/her creation of fan-art of another animation, and then you might pay attention to this new thing.

The sustainability of a discussion of fan objects, whether in a media feed or in fan-object encounters, relies on the networking individuals located in various fan circles. As Aurore and Xiao Qi both mentioned, "You're now the follower of other fans, not the follower of the thing you like."

Increasingly, fan circles have established internal rules and customs to regulate fan practices, which sometimes imposes the forms and meanings of fan participation. Interactions in the networks become important embodiments of fan-object engagement. Prosumption, personal relationships with fans, and even debates with other fans are now considered fan participation in fan circles. The quarrel, in many cases, is not about the fan object itself; it is sometimes caused by disagreement with others' fan practices. For example, some fans of *The King's Avatar* fought with other fans, believing that these others defamed the work's main character: to some, the main character must be considered handsome, but others describe him as puffy in their fan works. Central here are the "proper" ways of embodying fan love in textual prosumption and emotional engagement in fandom. The disagreement with this community-oriented embodiment of relating to objects may have existed before, but it is evident that social media has intensified and popularized such embodied practices. Consequently, the community-oriented embodiment of object relating creates possibilities of strong social ties and tenser interactions and differentiation in a fandom.

The ethos of ACG lovers and the bounded imaginative community in fandom have been shown in a dynamic and dialectical embodiment of one's personal experience and relationships with other people. Fan participation is increasingly bounded in the sense of fan circle structures. In networking interaction and differentiation in social media, the embodiment of object relating creates both potential and tensional interaction and differentiation in fandom. The embodied experiences both exceed and limit the multisensory imagery in the relationship between fan and fan object. The incarnation potentially changes the embodied imaginations, feelings, and real-life connections between fans and fan objects. Cultural practices act as an embodiment of a fan's love in textual prosumption and emotional engagement in fandom. A fan circle embodies the structuring practices of the fandom, turning them into relationships among practitioners.

### Conclusion

This article introduces disagreements and disputes concerning *fensi* identity among ACG lovers on the basis of their narratives of feelings and experiences in ACG fandom. Taking longitudinal fan participation as an entry point, we depict the ever-changing media experiences of ACG lovers from early engagement with TV and manga to exposure to online ACG fan communities. Obviously, advanced forms of media have provided fruitful resources for participation. In the transition of the ACG realm, a shift occurred from resource-oriented consumption to relationship- or communal-oriented interaction and differentiation in terms of fan participation. The relationship between fan and fan object has been built relatively consistently, while the means of fan participation—engagement of prosumption, emotional engagement, and the embodiment of object relating in fandom—has followed a different path. Lovers of ACG have experienced a positioning shift in ACG fandom, which can be partly ascribed to different embodiments of object relating.

In the evolution of ACG fandom in the Chinese context, the significance of mass media lies not in creating a certain kind of fan category or fan-like relationship. Rather, it has played a role mainly in changing the forms and meanings of the embodiment of object relating. The shifting embodiments provide ACG fans

with hints of situated experiences and priority of meaning regarding being-in-the-fandom. In different periods of being ACG lovers, the immediacy of embodied experience varied with the multiplicity of cultural meaning, while, as many interviewees pointed out, their affections for the ACG products are mostly unchanged. In this sense, our study complicates the sociohistorical account of the discussions of the roles of mass media in the evolution of fan culture in a Chinese context.

Our conceptualization of fan participation and the embodiment of the fan-object relationship theoretically contributes to future studies of fans and subculture. Resonating with previous discussions on the linkage between fan practice and fan subjectivity (Coppa, 2006b; Hills, 2002; Sandvoss, 2005), our theorization of the embodiment of fan relating could be a starting point for a more nuanced and complex examination of the connection between fans' affections and their changing practices. Regarding the multimodule embodiment in the context of digitization (e.g., Featherstone & Burrows, 1995; Munster, 2011; Van Doorn, 2011; Van Doorn & Van Zoonen, 2008), the perspective of the embodiment may gain theoretical value and could expand theory regarding the constitution or objectification of cultural objects (including selves) in the ongoing cultural life of fans and fan participation.

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