The Impact of Fan Culture on China's Film Industry

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Abstract. This paper discusses the impact of fan culture on the Chinese film industry. The continuous advancement of technology has changed the nature of 'fan' culture, which is now a daily presence in public life and, both directly and indirectly, exerts influence on the mass entertainment industry. A new, distinctive industry that has emerged from this new culture is fan films, or commercial films oriented toward a specific 'fandom' and that seeks to take advantage of a franchise's cultural capital, reaping the benefits of fan attention. The 'fan film' model has even begun to influence the Chinese film industry, with films featuring certain idols gaining automatic support from a large number of fans, regardless of film quality. However, public opinion of these films is often polarised, For the main audiences of commercial and fan films, they will think that these movies that meet their tastes deserve a high rating. But there is also a part of the movie-viewing group that thinks the production and content of these movies are not sophisticated and deep enough to deserve a good rating. To understand this complex phenomenon, a deeper look into fan culture is necessary, specifically its characteristics, impact on the film industry, and how the film industry in turn manipulates fan culture to its benefit. This study will therefore seek to see how movies, stars and fans work together to promote China's film industry using both sociological and communicative analysis.

Keywords: Fan Culture, Chinese Film Industry, Sociology, Communication Science.

1. Introduction

Fan culture is a popular topic in the social sciences, as fandom is an omnipresent phenomenon in society, influencing not only the entertainment industry but people's everyday lives and choice. Technological advancements have shifted the relationship between fans, celebrities and industry capital, giving fans greater initiative and a more active consumer position in the entertainment market. Fans of a franchise can now directly or indirectly influence its future, with a responsive movie industry making products directly catering to fan demands. Over the past decade, while Chinese films have improved their box-office performance, their critical evaluation has declined, a trend that many see as related to the emergence of a fan culture that actively lowers film quality for the sake of pandering to an audience. While several factors, including country policy and market environment, impact decisions over what films get made, this essay explores the influence of fan culture in particular, researching how this culture shapes the Chinese film industry and how this influence may be improved by leading to higher-quality films. This study will draw upon sociology and the communication sciences for its analysis.

2. Fan Culture

To understand how fan culture influences the Chinese film industry, some insight into the logic of fan culture is necessary. Fan culture, or 'fandom', is a socio-cultural phenomenon in which individual fans with the same object of admiration spontaneously gather to form fan groups. Consequently, a fan culture may have several different values systems, developed through the interaction between these individuals and groups. Several actors are at play in fan culture: fans, the media, social software (technology) and cultural capital. Prior to the spread of digital technology, when media communication was primarily conducted through newspapers and television, fans generally emerged as 'textual poachers': like poachers, these fans operated from a position of cultural marginality and social weakness, their lack of direct access to commercial and cultural production giving them the

most limited resources to influence industry decisions [1]. In this context, fans would cultivate their own process of reading, interpreting primary texts and blending it with their own background experiences, thereby producing a fan culture lying within their own interests. This process, therefore, makes fans not only readers but writers, with fandom becoming a participatory culture that transforms the experience of media consumption into one of the production of new texts, cultures and communities [2].

The development of the internet has revolutionised the participatory culture of fans, who now have greater access to information and faster routes to text theft, allowing fans to wander various platforms to collect information and rapidly create new content. Fans' secondary creation not only can attract more like-minded fans on the internet, building online connections, but also has greater potential to build material support for fan objects, creating an entire economy built around fan culture that echoes official industry operations. Today, in the 'web 2.0' era, internet platforms for sharing and communication are advanced enough to uphold diverse fan economies. Fan support of media figures has not only become more diversified, but marketing and communication methods have changed, with implicit or unconscious communication methods used as much as direct communication. While 'direct communication' refers to the traditional, direct dissemination of information to fans (i.e., a new movie or song), the basis for the original fan economies, 'implicit communication' refers to market messages being transmitted in seemingly insignificant information [4]. For example, if a celebrity wears a dress on stage, fans will immediately be able to learn the dress's brand and model, with the dress becoming a part of the broader fan economy. Meanwhile, 'unconscious communication' is a fan-driven process in which the 'fan economy' forms spontaneously through active fan participation and creation [4]. Located around public opinion hot spots that direct the public's attention, unconscious communication is the product of an ecosystem in which everyone is a creator and items that are unconsciously posted may be shared and interpreted within the fan economy. For example, on short video platforms, as long as content attracts viewers it can create value for the fan economy, as well as expanding the existing entertainment industry's reach.

Fan culture and films in China have been heavily influenced by Japanese and Korean forerunners. Japan and Korea first created the 'idol' as a celebrity profession, rather than an entertainer's more narrowly focused role as a singer or actor. Through 'direct communication' idols provide fans with performances and other fan benefits such as variety shows and fan meetings. Meanwhile, fans 'unconsciously' communicate the information directly provided by idols by poaching texts and creating secondary texts, such as independently editing videos that fit their favourite idol's persona, and uploading these to the internet, sharing them with other fans. This activity strengthens fan communication and satisfies their sense of participation, with fans reinforcing their bond to the idol and each other through these texts through imagined relationships made real in the virtual space. Moreover, fans are willing to pay for such emotional fulfilment in these relationships, as these secondary texts are a strong driving force for fan consumption behaviours, forming the backbone of an idol's strong album sales, media data and other industry indicators. This flow of popularity through online fan spaces contributes to the expansion of the fan economy; for example, when a celebrity is featured in advertisements for a film or product, fans may spontaneously purchase these goods while commenting and retweeting relevant posts on social media, thereby reflecting how much value this celebrity can create. This not only maintaining a commodity's commercial value but enhancing that value in the fan economy. This model applies to numerous aspects of the fan economy, not only for idols but for actors and singers as well.

3. The Film Industry and Fan Culture

The film industry has slowly taken notice of the fan economy and its roots in fan culture. Xuanyi Zhu writes, "driven by huge market interests, filmmakers intentionally cater to the cultural interests of fans and commodify fan cultural interest words; it is fan culture that is adopted by the cultural industry for the purpose of consuming film star images and film cultural products [5]." The media

ecology made up of stars, fans and movies act interdependently within the film production process, which can be seen throughout a film's production process[5]. Traditionally, a film has had to undergo five steps to enter the Chinese film market: writing and development; organising a shooting team; locating investments; shooting the film; and distribution and promotion. Previously, only straightforward publicity efforts were needed following a film's completion, such as sending advertisements to the media and holding press conferences; today, however, publicity is a critical step in film distribution and fans have a central role to play in publicity efforts. Not only do fans and their friends comprise a major part of a film's offline audience, they also cooperate with industry personnel on social media to help in a film's secondary editing, providing feedback and writing reviews for films. Fans' spontaneous 'unconscious communication' marketing reflect the state of the fan economy to individuals in the film industry. Consequently, fan-oriented commercial films have increased in recent years, boosting the public presence of stars with large fan bases.

The impact of the fan economy on major films has raised contention, however. First, as more fan-inspired films are made, actors tend to be cast according to their potential economic benefits rather than acting abilities, meaning that many films have poor presentation. Second, movie content is now more oriented toward pleasing fans and audiences rather than critics and professionals, and while this approach may have box-office rewards, much of this may be due to fans supporting their favourite stars rather than responding to the film itself. These factors may polarise public opinion around films and the film industry at large, with films gaining high praise from fans but mediocre or negative responses from average viewers or critics.

4. Fan Films

Today's Chinese film market features more 'fan films', or commercial films oriented toward a franchise's fans. These films have energised the Chinese film market as a whole, reinvigorating the public's habit of going to the cinema to watch movies. Moreover, fan films have enriched Chinese movie genres, especially romantic and cosmetic movies [6]. With the emergence of 'idols + movies', film producers have invited emerging film 'idols' with strong fan appeal to act in films, allowing more idols who debuted as singers and dancers to also have a chance to act. For the film capitalists, the fan audience brought by these idols themselves can guarantee that their films will have a certain amount of box office revenue. So they cater to their fans by making largely a collective creation to satisfy fans desires. The focus is on showcasing the charisma of idols, ignoring the nature of the film itself as an artistic medium to disseminate information to the masses. Most fan films have lost their artistry and fail to tell a good story to the audience. This has led to two levels of fan film reviews, one with high scores from fans who want to show their support for their idols, and one with poor reviews from movie lovers who are mainly artistic connoisseurs. But fan films have been continuously launched in the Chinese film market since their emergence, which reflects the mass demand for spirituality. Because "Films can directly reflect the dominant psychological and spiritual condition of a people in a particular era because they are both a product of collective creation and produced to satisfy the wishes of the masses" [7].

At the same time, however, fan films are indelibly tied to consumerism, with fans buying film tickets in large quantities and occasionally causing false booms at the box office. Moreover, while industry films tend to comment on social politics, the economy, culture and science and technology, fan films are made with the straightforward intention of serving fame to a star's fanbase. Additionally, fan films are not as lucrative as they once were: initially these films could make use of a large fan base to make considerable box-office draws, but today they face competition from amateur fan products and even foreign fan films, which "pay more attention to the genre, subject matter and characters rather than the actors [8]." Foreign films continued to be plot-centred rather than domestic, actor-centred dramas that minimise a film's content in favour of star power.

The roots of both the benefits and drawbacks of fan films ultimately lie in their origin in fan culture, where these films were just one way for fans to interact with the mainstream. "In the Birmingham

School (cultural studies), fan cultures belong to a subculture. Unfortunately, such subcultures have difficulties resisting adoption by the mainstream, and this 'incorporation' process may be ambiguous and complex, with subcultures showing different levels of resistance and compromise [9]." Fan films may be seen as a product of such incorporation, with the notable difference of their having a stable, essential core originating in the support for popular idols. Such a stable internal structure may solidify fan bonds, but fan groups are also subject to irrational influences; as the German sociologist Max Weber noted in his Theory of Social Action, "social action is such an action which incorporates into the actor the purpose of how others will act according to its subjective meaning and adapts itself to the course of action of others" [10]. Even after joining a fan community fans may constantly change their perceptions and behaviours to fit in with a fan group and reaffirm their fan identity. Although fan culture is treated as a subculture, it cannot be completely separated from the mainstream culture; some level of interaction with mainstream fans is necessary for celebrities to gain public recognition. Because they want to help their favorite celebrities expand their influences to the general public so that they have more chances to get more resources in the entertainment industry. Fan films are a good meeting ground for gaining recognition: while idols participate in movies, especially in Chinese melodramas, fans conform to mainstream tastes and consolidate positive images of idols during a film's promotion [9]. Consequently, mainstream culture can adopt fan culture as a subculture while also expanding its publicity through incorporation.

The incorporation of the fan economy with the film industry enhances a film's value in several ways. First, in terms of the film itself, fan input can improve film quality. Despite confirms over product quality, plenty of fan films have achieved a high reputation due to their film content, including well-thought-out movie scripts, professional post-production and high-calibre performances. A good movie requires directors and writers to focus on quality creation, optimising a production chain of producers, directors, actors, writers, post-production and marketing, all while having a fan orientation in terms of artistic quality. Taking these steps is the only way the film industry can ensure their fan-oriented productions do not lapse into stereotypical low-quality fan fodder. Stars, meanwhile, must choose their scripts carefully and commit to serious portrayals, regardless of film content. Finally, fans must have greater self-awareness of how fan culture has impacted the public film market. With greater integration into mainstream culture: fans must demonstrate positive cultural capital, establishing pro-social values and a seriousness toward the film art form, rejecting efforts to pander to or lower their tastes.

5. Conclusions

Fan culture is an increasingly important part of Chinese culture, and has already endured for a long period of time, reflecting the contemporary public's pursuit of entertainment at the spiritual level. Fans are constantly enhance entertainment industry discourse through their interactions with the mainstream, either through poaching texts, making secondary creations or unconsciously spreading new information. These activities show a strong sense of initiative, rebelling and incorporating cultural capital that is frequently inaccessible to them, and fans have found a way to express themselves through star-following. Organised behaviour on the part of fans has had a huge impact on the entertainment industry, as seen in the popularity of fan films.

Still, fan films have contributed to a film landscape in which films are produced simply to generate traffic and take advantage of the economy, neglecting film content and aspects such as plot. While this approach has considerable economic benefits and an automatic source of film promotion through the fanbase, the film industry cannot abandon its broader artistic and social functions for the sake of transient profits. Instead, the film industry must consider how to balance commercialisation and artistry, providing truly good works to the public. Fans must also improve their own aesthetic and independent consciousness, showing responsible support toward their favourite idols. In this way, fan culture and the film industry can truly help each other and move towards a better path.

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