

Cultural Differences in Fan Behavior: A Case Study of the "227 Incident"

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Abstract. With increasing globalization and the advancement of information technologies, cultural phenomena are no longer confined within national borders. One such phenomenon is fan culture, particularly prominent in China and the West, yet manifesting with significant differences. Among them, the “227 incident” has aroused wide attention from all circles of Chinese and Western society. Chinese people generally believe that Xiao Zhan, as a public figure, did not play a positive role in guiding fans in this incident, which resulted in the public anger of the masses and was criticized by the society. On the contrary, there is no such phenomenon in the West that stars guide their fans and are responsible for their fans. The analysis results found that this phenomenon is influenced by multiple factors. This paper examines the "227 Incident," a major fan-related controversy in China, to highlight the contrasting expectations and social dynamics surrounding celebrity behavior and fan responsibilities in both cultures. Using Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions and theories of interpersonal relationships, this study explores how collectivism and individualism shape public expectations and responses to celebrity-related incidents.

Keywords: Fan culture, 227 Incident, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, Collectivism, Individualism

1. Introduction

The digital age has facilitated widespread information exchange, revolutionizing the way individuals interact—especially in fan-celebrity relationships. Social media platforms have empowered fan communities, giving them unprecedented influence over public discourse and celebrity reputation. In China, fan culture has evolved into a tightly organized and emotionally charged social phenomenon, often leading to both positive actions, such as charitable campaigns, and negative outcomes, like cyberbullying. Chinese fans engage in various behaviors driven by a mix of motivations, seeking emotional fulfillment and identity through supporting their idols, and participating in collective actions to achieve a sense of belonging and social impact. Negative purposes may stem from intense competition and exclusivity among fan groups, emotional venting, and a blind following of idols. In contrast, Western fan behavior typically maintains emotional distance from celebrities and focuses on their artistic or professional achievements rather than personal conduct. This paper explores the root causes behind these divergent fan behaviors, drawing upon Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and Chinese concepts of interpersonal relationships.

2. Relevant studies on fan culture

2.1. Definition of fan culture

Fan culture, or fandom, refers to communities centered around shared interests in popular culture icons such as actors, musicians, or athletes. It is inherently participatory and collective in nature, often involving organized activities and online mobilization. These communities significantly influence public discourse, media consumption, and even policymaking [1,2]. On the degree of fans' activity levels and participation methods, fans may be separated into consumers, Fans, Enthusiasts, Petit Producers .

2.2. Fan behaviors

There are significant differences between fan culture in China and that in the West. In the West, fans are more willing to pay attention to the star's works. However, in China, the word "fans" is often associated with negative impressions such as "irrational" and "crazy." Fans are more willing to focus their energy on stars rather than their works. Fans gain a sense of satisfaction and belonging within the fan community when chasing stars. In recent years, some fans have begun to chase stars without any limit due to the development of fan culture and the emergence of a fan group atmosphere. They vent personal emotions on the internet optionally: phenomena such as provoking conflicts, personal attracts and excessive consumption keep emerging. Actually, some of the irrational star-chasing phenomena have disrupted the social order, these behaviors not only harm the interests of fans but also affect the healthy development of fan culture.

3. Causes of Chinese fan culture

3.1. Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Geert Hofstede's framework includes five primary dimensions for analyzing cultural differences: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation [3]. Particularly relevant to this study is the individualism-collectivism spectrum. Within collectivism, collectivists regard the group as the core of society; collective interests are often prioritized over individual interests. Within individualism, the core of the society is the individual; society exists to promote the interests of individuals. Collectivist societies, like China, typically embed individuals within tightly knit social networks, encompassing family, community, and even fan communities. In fan culture, this collectivist characteristic is particularly prominent. Chinese fan communities (commonly referred to as fanquan, or "fan circles") are often highly organized, with clearly defined internal norms and a strong sense of belonging and community among members. Following a celebrity is not merely a personal expression of admiration but a collective action. Fans demonstrate their loyalty and support through coordinated efforts such as using uniform profile pictures, pooling funds for support merchandise, organizing voting campaigns, managing public opinion, and hosting birthday events for their idols.

By contrast, individualist cultures such as the United States place a higher value on personal freedom, self-expression, and independence. In such a culture, individual autonomy and self-expression are encouraged, and society emphasizes individual rights rather than collective obligations. Fan behavior tends to be more individualized, with people following celebrities primarily based on personal interests or aesthetic preferences. There is less influence from group norms, and participation in collective fan activities is generally not obligatory.

3.2. Chinese interpersonal relationships

Chinese society places high importance on "guanxi"—a concept encapsulating networks of relationships built on mutual trust, emotional exchange, and reciprocity [4]. In fan culture, this concept of guanxi (social relationships) is particularly evident. The relationship between fans and celebrities is not merely one of consumption and being consumed, but rather resembles an asymmetrical form of emotional intimacy. In such relationships, fans often invest their emotions, time, and financial resources—not solely for entertainment or personal enjoyment, but as a form of emotional investment. This mode of interaction easily fosters the psychological expectation among fans that “since I have given so much for you, you ought to respond in return.” As a result, it implicitly increases the moral responsibility placed on the celebrity to reciprocate their fans’ devotion.

3.3. The increase of emotional distance

In China, interpersonal bonds tend to be strong, and the emotional distance between fans and celebrities is relatively short. Fans often regard stars as family members to feel closer to them. The appearance of social media starts a participatory culture, where fans can participate in the creation of content; fans are no longer merely receivers of content. This shift allows individuals to express themselves and build social connections, fostering a sense of belonging [1]. Nowadays, with the emergence of social media and newly developed platforms like Weibo and Bilibili, technological development has broken traditional communication barriers, making interactions among fans more frequent. This also strengthens the connection among fans and stars to some extent and increases the emotional distance between them.

4. Case study: the "227 incident"

4.1. Background

The “227 Incident” refers to a digital conflict in early 2020 involving Chinese actor Zhan XIAO, his fanbase, and the fan fiction platform Archive of Our Own (AO3). The controversy began when fans of Xiao Zhan reported a fan-written novel titled *Falling* that depicted him in a homoerotic context, which led to the blocking of AO3 in China. Then Xiao Zhan posted the link to the novel on Weibo (one social platform in China). In response, his fans launched a campaign to report the novel and AO3 website to Chinese authorities, accusing it of violating Chinese internet regulations. This action sparked widespread backlash from AO3 users and broader internet communities, who criticized both Xiao Zhan and his fans for infringing on creative freedom and initiating online censorship. As a result, the Fan fiction website was officially blocked, and Weibo bans accounts that disrupt social order. Xiao Zhan’s studio eventually issued a statement acknowledging the situation, apologizing for the incident, and calling for fans to exercise restraint and follow their idols rationally.

4.2. Responses in China vs. the West

Xiao Zhan faced heavy criticism in China for his failure to manage his fanbase, with many holding him morally accountable for his actions. The CCTV media outlet "Procuratorial Daily" published three articles about Xiao Zhan to warn public figures to carry out necessary guidance when conflict appears. The collectivist cultural context rendered him a symbolic leader responsible for maintaining order. In contrast, Western responses on Quora largely positioned Xiao Zhan as a victim of cyber

mobs and overzealous fandoms. From an individualist perspective, a celebrity is not expected to police or control fan behavior, as each individual is accountable for their own actions.

4.3. Key messages

- Xiao Zhan's fans launched a collective report campaign, believing they were protecting his image.
 - Creative communities felt their freedom was threatened and directed their anger at Xiao Zhan.
 - Xiao Zhan's studio was compelled to issue a public apology, acknowledging the need for rational fandom and damage control.

5. Cultural analysis

5.1. Social backgrounds and public

Expectations Chinese collectivism promotes societal harmony and interdependence, where the actions of one reflect upon the group. Hence, celebrities are expected to regulate fan behavior and maintain public decorum. In contrast, Western cultures value individual freedom and consider fan actions as separate from the celebrity's identity [5].

5.2. Construction of star identity

Chinese fans often view celebrities as moral leaders and social role models. Misbehavior among fans reflects poorly on the star, prompting public demand for accountability. Western audiences admire celebrities primarily for their craft, viewing them through a professional rather than moral lens [6].

5.3. Interpersonal relationship dynamics

The Chinese concept of reciprocity strengthens fan expectations for emotional returns from celebrities, such as public acknowledgment or personal gestures. This dynamic reinforces a perceived obligation for celebrities to "repay" fan devotion. Conversely, in the West, such expectations are rare, as relationships are more transactional and boundaries are clearly maintained [7].

5.4. Social media and emotional stickiness

Social media has amplified emotional connectivity in both regions, but in China, it often leads to extreme expressions like calling celebrities "husband" or "wife" and demanding direct engagement. A secondary case in 2021 involving Wang Yibo and Zhao Liying highlighted similar tensions, as online fan wars escalated into national conversations about toxic fan behavior, culminating in public apologies from the celebrities themselves [2].

6. Conclusion

The divergent reactions to the "227 Incident" reflect deep-rooted cultural values: collectivism versus individualism and emotional reciprocity versus personal autonomy. Chinese fan culture assigns moral responsibilities to public figures, viewing them as both influencers and caretakers. Western cultures, in contrast, protect creative freedom and individual agency. By studying these differences,

we can foster greater cross-cultural understanding and promote healthier, more rational fan behavior globally.

To maintain societal harmony and guide the evolution of fandom, it is essential to endorse the constructive aspects of fan culture—such as community service and cultural production—while curbing toxic behaviors through education, regulation, and public discourse.

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