

A Study on the Current Situation of Chinese Native Cultivating Idol Culture

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Abstract: In 2009, the culture of Japanese cultivating idols was introduced to the Chinese mainland. After 16 years of rapid development, cultivating idols and their fan circles have become an indispensable part of the Chinese mainland entertainment industry. The influence brought by the "Cultivating idol" has received extensive attention, but research on the changes in the cultivating idol market in recent years is still insufficient. This essay focuses on the current development status of the Chinese cultivating idol. This research has made some discoveries, such as: changes in the fan circles, problems existing within the fan circles, the positive impact brought by cultivating idols, and the predicament of the cultivating idol market. Based on this, this essay puts forward the following suggestions: protect minor idols and ensure their rights are not violated, establish a supervision mechanism for agencies, and agencies and idols should actively guide fans to chase stars rationally.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Definition and Culture of Cultivating an Idol

Cultivating idols refers to the idol who gradually grows up under the public's attention. Fans will accompany their growth, and their daily lives and training will be presented before the fans' eyes. Different from the Korean idol system, fans will participate in the growth of their idols, and they often invest deeper emotions in their idols.

The concept of "Cultivating" was first applied to simulation games in Japan, where players spent a lot of time and energy nurturing their virtual lovers or pets. Later, this concept was adopted in the Japanese idol industry (Galbraith, 2012).

The Japanese girl group "Onyanko Club" launched by the renowned Japanese director Akimoto Yasushi in 1985, attracted a large number of fans as soon as it emerged. In 2005, AKB48, a large Japanese girl idol group also launched by Akimoto Yasushi, quickly rose to fame (Setiawan, 2023). Fans could support their idols by voting and participating in activities. This novel interactive approach brought fans closer to their idols (Hsun, 2021).

The companies in China to train and cultivate idols were established by drawing on the business model of Japan's Johnny & Associates (Li, 2023). Different from the Japanese training system, the Chinese entertainment more emphasis on the concept of "family", and all its trainees are classified into different "generations".

1.2 Literature Review

At present, in the field of Chinese studies, there is a lot of research on "cultivating idols" and "cultivating idol fans".

In terms of the "cultural difference" theory, the Japanese "cultivating idol system" culture is quite different from that of China. And during the localization process of this culture in China, it will also change due to the cultural differences between the two regions. Regarding such research, for instance, it was mentioned that influenced by the otaku culture, the Japanese idol culture emphasizes the virtual romantic relationship between idols and fans (Aoyagi, 2020). However, the idol groups in China positioned themselves as "student idols" in terms of image, and there were more mother fans and sister fans (Zhao, 2017). But according to the data the author collected in this research, after eight years, the

proportion of girlfriend fans has risen significantly, while the proportion of mother fans is very low.

In another study, it is mentioned that Chinese culture emphasizes "harmony above all"; thus, the cultivating idol selection system in China also lacks a competitive mechanism (Hao, 2019). Not only that, in many other related fields such as consumer culture, the influence of new media, and the moral misconduct of idols, there are also abundant studies on this cultural extension.

The predecessors have conducted very thorough and comprehensive research on the related culture. However, the development of this culture has been extremely rapid, and there has been no survey on the current situation of the fans of the cultivating idol system for a long time. Compared with the fan surveys conducted a few years ago, the current situation of the fan circle has undergone tremendous changes.

There is a considerable amount of research in the English academic circle on Japanese cultivating idols, but little on the culture of cultivating idols in China. However, considering the current development status of this culture in China, the idol market in China is highly worthy of attention as it has brought huge economic benefits to society. Therefore, this research conducts an in-depth study of the current state of the Chinese cultivating idol market and their fan circles.

2 METHODS

This research adopted methods such as in-depth interviews, questionnaires, and literature collection. In the in-depth interviews, different types of research subjects were selected for interviews to obtain relatively objective information, which was then used to edit the questionnaires. In this round of interviews, the interviewees were diverse, including adults and minors, students and workers, group fans and solo fans, etc. A total of five interviewees were interviewed.

This questionnaire survey comprehensively investigated the current situation of the fan circle. This questionnaire mainly consists of questions from four aspects: the basic information of the fans themselves, their experiences of chasing stars, their views on the current situation of fan circles, and their opinions on the market of cultivating idols. This research collected a total of 212 questionnaires on social platforms. Due to the significant gender disparity in this fan circle, male fans accounted for

9.43%, while female fans made up 90.57%.

3 RESULT & REASON ANALYSIS

3.1 The Positive Influence Brought by Cultivating Idols

First of all, for the fans, cultivating idols is different from traditional idols. The sense of companionship they provide is much stronger. Therefore, fans will gain a greater sense of participation and companionship, providing them with effective psychological comfort. And many fans will place their own inner needs onto their idols, generating an "identification fantasy", and learn from and imitate their idols (Liu & Zang, 2021). Because the fans of the Chinese cultivating idols are generally young and in the period of shaping their values, and the positioning of Chinese cultivating idols is usually "young role models", and they will promote "idol power", presenting to the public "a teenager striving for his dream", such a positive attitude will have a positive impact on the fans. Just as the interviewee mentioned, "by promoting the culture of cultivating idols through publicity, the younger generation can learn the importance of persistently pursuing their dreams, and it also emphasizes a positive and healthy entertainment orientation which has a positive impact on the growth of teenagers."

For society, the training and operation model of cultivating idols has driven the development of related cultural industries, such as peripheral products, concerts, variety shows, films, and television programs. As part of cultural output, they can further enhance the soft power of the country and promote cultural exchanges. Besides these, according to the current situation of the Chinese market, the social economic benefits brought by cultivating idols are also huge. According to the official data, the anniversary concert held by a cultivating idol group in China in 2023 brought 416 million yuan in tourism revenue to the concert venue. The total number of travel orders in the local area increased by 738% year-on-year before and after the performance, promoting the development of local tourism and stimulating the new development of the cultural and tourism consumption market (China Newsweek, 2023).

3.2 The Change of the Proportion of Various Types of Fans

In this survey, the proportion of girlfriend fans and CP fans is relatively high, which is different from the results of previous studies where mom fans were more numerous. In the questionnaire survey, the proportion of girlfriend fans was 46.7%, CP fans was 33.96%, and mom fans was 1.89%. (Since this question was a multiple-choice question, the total percentage does not add up to 100%.)

In comparison with before, the phenomenon of younger fans is more obvious, which leads to a certain degree that more fans are close in age to their idols and regard them as their fantasy objects, thus increasing the proportion of girlfriend fans. In addition, the current company marketing has shifted from shaping idols as "neighborhood brothers" to "love objects".

As for the increase in CP fans, the creation of "idol boy groups through cultivating" has been in line with the psychology of "fujoshi" since entering the Chinese market. "Fujoshi" refers to a group of women who like male homosexual love culture. The close relationship between the cultivating idols since childhood has given this group of people a space for imagination. Therefore, since the cultivating idol came into the market, the number of CP fans of many idol groups has increased significantly. And for economic benefits, the agencies usually secretly guide the atmosphere between the idols, which is called "selling fujoshi", thus attracting more CP fans.

According to the results of the questionnaire survey, the proportion of fans who support the entire group is 47.17%, while the proportion of fans who support only one member is 20.28%, and the proportion of fans who support many members is 16.51%. (Since this question was a multiple-choice question, the total percentage does not add up to 100%.) As one interviewee put it, "The core of idol groups developed through the cultivating system lies in the sense of being a family, which is different from other idol groups. It is this feeling that attracts fans. Even though fans may have different favorite idols in this group, their fans still hope the idols in this group will stay together forever." Compared with other idol groups, the cultivating system is more likely to create the concept of "growing up together as childhood friends", and thus in people's minds, they are like family to each other. This perfectly aligns with the concept of ensemble culture. Nowadays, the term "ensemble" is frequently mentioned online.

3.3 The Problems of Cultivating an Idol's Fan Circle

According to the research findings, there are numerous disputes within the fan circles of cultivating idols. Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, when asked "What do you think of the current situation of the fan circles of cultivating idols?", 14.62% of the fans believed that the atmosphere within the fan circles was harmonious, while a staggering 85.38% of the fans thought that disputes occurred frequently within the fan circles.

During the interviews, all three interviewees mentioned that they felt disputes among fans were very frequent, the current situation was chaotic and out of control, and it was prone to lead to many dangerous behaviors. They all pointed out that "fans being too young" was the main reason for this phenomenon. According to the results of the questionnaire survey, in the age distribution section, 22.64% of the fans were under 15 years old, 43.4% were between 15 and 20 years old, 25% were between 21 and 25 years old, and 8.96% were over 26 years old. From this result, it can be seen that the fans are indeed relatively young.

Regarding the correlation between the low age of fans and the disputes within the fan circles, where 0 indicates no correlation and 5 indicates extremely high correlation, the average score for this question was 3.74, which means 85.38% of the people think there is a relatively high correlation.

As for the phenomenon of fans being too young, the young age of the fans themselves makes it easy for them to post immature comments on the Internet today, which may lead to conflicts with other fans. Moreover, the factor of "big fans inciting disputes" mentioned by two of the interviewees is also closely related to the low age of fans. The minds of underage fans are not yet mature, making them easily influenced by the so-called "big fans" within the fan circle, thus leading to disputes. Among the interviewees, there was also a 12-year-old fan who said that she would read the comments of some big fans, and most of the time she agreed with them. When I asked her if she felt that the big fans were deliberate acts that aim to stir up controversy or something like that, she said she didn't think so. Additionally, many idol groups have ranking systems. Therefore, the solo fans of each idol may incite disputes with fans of other groups or the company for reasons such as dissatisfaction with the resources given to their idols by the company, or to

gain more attention from the company for their idols.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 The Predicament of the Cultivating Idol Market

According to the survey results, in the question "How do you think the Chinese cultivating idol market will develop in the next few years?", 51.42% of the fans believe it will face a decline, 27.36% think it will remain the same, and 21.23% believe it will continue to expand rapidly.

At present, the development of the Chinese cultivating system market is still not perfect. People tend to trust the agencies with a longer history, which hinders the development of new agencies.

Apart from these, for the cultivating idols themselves, the resources that the current Chinese entertainment market can offer to idols are very limited. Moreover, the positioning of cultivating idols is all the same, which inevitably makes them competitors, thus leading to the cultivating idols getting into a predicament.

4.2 Pay More Attention to the Cultivating Idols

With the continuous development of entertainment culture, cultivating idols has become an extremely important part in promoting the economic development of the entertainment industry. Therefore, society needs to pay attention to it.

First, since cultivating idols are usually exposed to the public at an early age, in China, cultivating idols typically come into the public eye between the ages of 10 and 15. Society should provide necessary protection for minors. Entertainment companies should reasonably arrange the training and study time for underage idols, and pay attention to their mental health. They should also ensure that underage idols have the right to receive education and try to avoid wasting their studies due to an early debut. For the entire industry, the age limit for cultivating idols should be appropriately raised to avoid excessive youthfulness. In addition to these, supervision over agencies should also be strengthened to ensure that they abide by laws and regulations when signing and training underage idols.

Second, for the fan circle, both entertainment companies and the idols themselves should rationally

guide their fans, advocate a healthy star-chasing culture, and encourage rational consumption to avoid excessive crazy and blind following. Entertainment companies should also explicitly prohibit saesang from following the artists to prevent accidents. Saesang refers to some overly enthusiastic fans who usually follow the idols around, take photos of their private lives without permission, illegally obtain their private information, frequently call them, and even break into their private residences, etc (Zhu, 2024). These behaviors may cause harm to the idols and others, and entertainment companies should take certain measures.

5 CONCLUSION

This essay investigates the current status of the fan groups of cultivating idols, explores the development of the current cultivating idol market, and presents four new findings, such as: changes in the fan circles, problems existing within the fan circles, the positive impact brought by cultivating idols and the predicament of the cultivating idol market.

This research, based on the survey results, has put forward four findings that are different from previous studies and revealed the current development status of the cultivating idol culture in China. Regarding the problems presented in the above findings, the joint efforts of the agencies, idols, fans, and relevant departments are still needed to create a better environment.

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