

The Transnational K-Pop Industry's Influence on Feminist Narratives in China: The Role of Fandom Culture

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Abstract: Although the relationship between feminist discourse and the K-pop industry has gained increasing attention, the role of transnational popular culture in contributing diffusion of feminist narratives in China remains insufficiently explored. Employing Parasocial Interaction Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory, the research highlights how mediated intimacy with idols fosters feminist engagement among fans. Through large-scale digital platforms such as Weibo, fans' emotional bonds with idols translate into active discussion and diffusion of feminist expressions, which are subsequently amplified by Chinese media outlets. This dual mechanism enables feminist discourse to transcend the boundaries of fan communities and enter public consciousness. Findings reveal that K-pop is not merely an entertainment product but a transnational cultural force that can facilitate ideological shifts. In this context, fan-based interactions serve as a catalyst for transforming celebrity actions into public feminist dialogue. The study thus contributes to the broader understanding of how global pop culture intersects with local social movements in digital China.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the intersection of K-pop culture and feminist discourse has gained significant scholarly attention. Since February 2015, the emergence of the first major online feminist movement in South Korea, #Iamfeminist, marks a significant cultural conflict between feminism and pervasive misogyny (Kim, 2021 & Shen, 2023). In response to this societal evolution, the K-pop industry started to seamlessly integrate feminist narratives into massive products and marketing strategies.

The influence of constructions of girl power, a new image of being powerful, fearless and independent, is still a matter of debate. Sun et.al critically assess this trend, highlighting that while some fans and scholars regard girl crush style as female empowerment that successfully challenges traditional representation of femininity, others reject it by arguing it is nothing but a commercialized product rather than a genuine feminist expression (He, 2024 & Sun & Paje et al, 2022). Some still hold the point that girl crush style is still sexy and appealing to the male gaze, which intensifies the existing patriarchal system and reinforces gender norms (Lu, 2023 & Li, 2024). This dichotomy underscores the

complexity of interpreting the feminist message generated by the K-pop industry.

In recent years, the growing engagement of South Korean celebrities with feminist discourse has prompted large-scale discussions across Chinese social media platforms. This development has led to an emerging body of Chinese scholarship that investigates the K-pop industry's role in shaping feminist consciousness among its fans. Zheng highlights how fans of BTS and Blackpink interpret gender performances and social messages. It finds out that BTS's emotional expressiveness and critique of masculinity resonate with progressive male fans, while Blackpink's confident, independent image encourages female fans to engage with feminist ideals (Zheng, 2023). In addition, Jin further narrows down the scope to the role of K-pop in shaping feminist narratives on social media platforms in China, concluding that K-pop influences Chinese fans and audiences through idols' advocacy and lyrics (Jin, 2023). Two studies confirm that K-pop serves as a primary conduit to pass Korean feminist narratives to Chinese audiences.

This study aims to investigate an underexplored relationship between K-pop fandom culture and the evolution of feminist discourse in China within the frame of Parasocial Interaction Theory and Agenda-

Setting Theory. While existing scholarship has primarily examined how K-pop idols and industry influence gender representation and empowerment, relatively little attention has been given to the transformative role of fandom communities as active agents in constructing and disseminating feminist narratives. By analyzing how digital fan practices facilitate the articulation and circulation of feminist ideas, this study seeks to fill a gap in transnational feminist research. It further provides a nuanced understanding of how popular culture--particularly within the context of Chinese media flows--can function as a vehicle for social consciousness and gender-related discourse.

2 THE RISE OF K-POP CULTURE IN CHINA

The term Hallyu, or Korean Wave, was first coined by Chinese media in the 1990s to describe the growing influence of South Korean popular culture, particularly among young women in China (Jin, 2023 & Kim, 2015). China was not only an early adopter but also became one of the largest overseas markets for Korean cultural exports (Sun, 2020). Scholars argue that cultural proximity is a key driving force behind this success, as East Asian societies share similar values and aesthetics shaped by cultural exchange since ancient times (Chen, 2018). Moreover, South Korea effectively localized Western popular culture into a form more compatible with East Asian sensibilities, acting as a cultural intermediary between East and West (Kim, 2021). As a result, K-pop culture has become one of the most culturally acceptable forms of foreign popular culture among Chinese audiences. With its expanding fan base, it has also emerged as an increasingly visible and influential subculture within Chinese society.

According to Sun, the evolution of Hallyu in China can be divided into three phases, each shaped by changes in media technology (Sun, 2020). The first phase (mid-1990s to early 2000s) was dominated by Korean dramas (K-dramas), with titles like *Jewel in the Palace* achieving widespread popularity among middle-aged women (Sun, 2020 & Jang, 2012). The second phase (2005-2013) marked the rise of K-pop idol culture. As internet platforms like Baidu Forums (it used to be the major Chinese forum) expanded, the distribution of Korean content moved beyond traditional TV, and the target demographic shifted to younger audiences (Ahn, 2012). During this time, Hallyu diversified to include not only K-pop idols and

hit dramas like *My Love from the Star* but also Chinese reality shows adapted from Korean formats, such as *Where Are You Going, Dad?*.

Since 2013, the Korean Wave has entered its third phase with the rise of Sina Weibo, or Weibo, among Chinese youth, marked by the mature development of K-pop fandom culture. Fan communities evolved into complex and systematic ecosystems engaging not only with idols but also with politics, fashion trends, and social issues. Given the varying influence and target audiences across the three phases of the Korean Wave, it is necessary to note that this paper specifically focuses on how K-pop culture has shaped feminist narratives in China during the third phase, where K-pop culture mainly gains its development on Weibo.

3 THE STRUCTURE OF K-POP FANDOM CULTURE IN CHINA

The term fan is described as a person who actively engages in supporting or admiring something--such as an object or person--and fandom refers to a group of fans who voluntarily come together to support their admired objects or people (Hellekson, 2015). Chen has argued that fandom culture is a participatory culture that consumes a culture while producing it (Chen, 2018). It is a culture that transforms from media consumption to produce new texts, culture, and community. Accordingly, Chinese K-pop fandom culture has gradually developed into a systematic cultural regime governed by its norms and hierarchies rather than being an entirely free-form (Sun, 2020). Since the rise of Sina Weibo, the major digital space where fans interact, among young Chinese users, K-pop fandom culture has gradually coalesced around three leading components: Official fan clubs, fan leaders, and translation aggregator accounts.

3.1 Official Fan Clubs

After 2013, K-pop fan clubs emerged as the main backbone of the fandom regime on Weibo, originally transplanted from the Baidu Forum. These "official" fan clubs are now run by Chinese fans rather than by Korean entertainment companies' staff (Chen, 2018). Official fan clubs serve as a primary information hub for Chinese fans, and any information as long as it relates to their idols will be uploaded by the fan club. As official fan clubs are carrying out such heavy workload of works, members from official fan club are recruited through formal application process, and

assume specialized roles according to their talents -- translation teams convert Korean-language news and social-media posts into Chinese; design teams produce graphics and subtitled videos; writing teams craft contents for celebrating idols' birthdays or letters; and operations teams schedule and publish posts. Although all members working for the official fan club work voluntarily, their coordination and collaboration resemble that of a formal organization.

Beyond daily operations about information release, the official fan club also plays a crucial role in bulk album purchase--an important indicator of K-pop idols' commercial value. First-week album purchase is specially valued in South Korea, as it contributes to music chart ranking and total performances (Sun, 2020). To facilitate international purchases, official fan clubs work with Korean retailers (e.g., Ktown4u) and are responsible for organizing large-scale buys. To push up sales, the official fan club also produces "fan products" (blanket, budget, photo frame, etc) printed with idols' photos, which are available once a certain threshold is met. Moreover, official fan clubs organize collective actions--organizing a charity donation, sending feedback or complaints to idol agencies, fundraising for supporting events, and collaborating with other official fan clubs. Thereby, fan clubs exercise leadership within the fandom culture, functioning as a surrogate for the entertainment agency within the fandom. It not only serves as the authoritative source of information for fans but also often becomes the first point of contact for non-fans seeking to learn about the idol. In this sense, the fan club effectively represents the public image of the idol in China. Consequently, the fan club has become an indispensable institution within the structure of Chinese fandom.

3.2 Fan Leaders

Popular fan leaders refer to an influential figure that has a large number of fans who function as opinion leaders, cultural intermediaries, and economic agents (Wu, 2021). Wu once argued that a small number of fan leaders exercise disproportionate control over a large number of individual fans (Wu, 2021). They are responsible for decoding messages related to their idols, providing their interpretations and setting a collective agenda, organizing fan activities, and uniting individual fans. In hierarchical fandom culture, fan leaders occupy a superior status, shaping group attitudes and behaviors (Roslan & Nasharuddin et al, 2024). Empirically, fan leaders can be categorized into a) promotional-only leaders who

focus on sharing aesthetic contents, b) aggressive leaders known for in-fandom conflicts and toxic solo stan c) advocacy-oriented leaders who focus on advocating for their idols' rights and expressing their ideas. Different from aggressive leaders, advocacy-oriented figures are not inclined to attack other idols and get involved in fierce fan conflicts, but more likely to focus on expressing their ideas and sharing idol-related content. Although fan leaders can be roughly classified into these three types, most of the leading figures combine elements from multiple types.

Recent scholarship highlights the significant power and authority Chinese fan leaders wield in shaping fan behaviors within Chinese fandom culture. Fan leaders in Chinese fandom culture use empowerment, incentives, and crisis narratives to inspire emotional and economic contributions (Xiao, 2024). These influential fan leaders disseminate strategic directives and direct fans to engage in large-scale coordinated activities--ranging from data boosting and album purchasing to online engagement--to bolster their idol's success. In addition, fan leaders cultivate a sense of duty among followers, leading to a collective conformity over autonomy (Wu, 2021). Their power stems from their high status, digital fluency, and ability to foster collective identity among fans. This top-down influence underscores their pivotal role in China's fandom economy and media ecosystems.

3.3 Translation Accounts

Translation accounts are an indispensable component of Chinese K-pop fandom culture, even though they are different from official fan clubs and fan leaders. Popular in recent years, translation accounts are mostly run by individuals who are fluent in Korean and knowledgeable about Korean popular culture. Unlike official fan clubs and fan leaders who serve only one idol, they don't have a bias one. They usually curate and translate high-interest news for the whole K-pop industry, sometimes even including socio-political, economic, and cultural developments in South Korea. Their broad interests and large followings make them crucial information disseminators for people who are interested in Korean popular culture. Same to fan leaders, translation accounts can also be classified into two categories: a) multi-media accounts--sharing news, videos, and images with minimal personal bias and (b) text-focused accounts--often criticized for preferentially sharing negative news, thereby attracting heterogeneous and sometimes contentious audiences.

Due to their unique nature--characterized by a lack of bias and a consistent focus on trending content related to K-pop idols--translation accounts attract a wide range of K-pop enthusiasts. The most popular of these accounts have amassed millions of followers, with individual posts frequently receiving over thousands of likes. Given the substantial size of their audience, the trending posts often extend beyond the sphere of K-pop fandom, scrambled by Chinese domestic media for reports and capture the broader public's attention. As a result, translation accounts represent one of the most influential types of accounts within the K-pop fandom, distinguished by both the scale of their followership and their capacity to shape discourse across fan and non-fan communities alike.

4 THEORETICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF FAN FUNCTION

4.1 Theoretical Background

This study employs two interconnected theories to explain how online feminist narratives flow from K-pop fandom to the broader public: Parasocial Interaction Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory.

Parasocial Interaction Theory, first introduced by Horton and Wohl, describes how individuals form one-sided, emotionally intimate relationships with media figures. It is often seen as an imaginary relationship experienced by fans and idealized celebrities (Horton & Wohl, 1956 & Perdana, 2019). This relationship is considered one-way because most fans who are in age range of teenagers and young adults develop strong emotions toward and feel close to their idols even though their idols don't know them (Sulianti & Lubis et al, 2018). This theory explains why most fans are passionate about engaging in all discussions related to their idols, defending their idols or supporting their behaviors.

While Parasocial Interaction Theory explains K-pop fans' emotional investment and solid support for their idols, Agenda-setting theory helps to explain how media outlets inspire to expand K-pop idols' controversy to influence broader audiences beyond the fan community regarding feminist narratives. Agenda-setting theory proposed by McCombs and Shaw, argues that media can influence public opinion by pointing out what is considered important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). It seizes public attention on a topic which the media are likely to highlight.

4.2 From Fandom Intimacy to Public Discourse: Parasocial Interaction and Agenda-Setting Effects on Feminist Narratives

To understand how feminist narratives circulate from K-pop fan communities to the broader Chinese public, this study applies Parasocial Interaction Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory as complementary frameworks that trace the trajectory from affective fan engagement to media-driven public attention.

As the effect explained by Parasocial Interaction Theory, in the context of K-pop fandom, idols are meticulously mediated to encourage this form of attachment. Fans--especially young women--frequently perceive idols not only as entertainers but as aspirational figures whose attitudes and values resonate with their own lived experiences. When idols are seen engaging with content or causes associated with gender issues or feminist thought, these actions--actions usually portrayed by fan leaders and official fan clubs as positive or righteous, promoting gender equality and striving for women's rights and interests--are often firstly disseminated, interpreted and encouraged by official fan clubs and fan leaders as sincere endorsements. This perceived alignment can activate strong emotional responses and catalyze discussion within fan spaces, as fans feel compelled to defend, amplify, or embody the values they associate with their idols. When a large-scale fan discussion is observed by translation accounts, they intend to participate in the discussion by tracking and uploading news and posts related to this event from South Korea, extending the discussion beyond a certain fan community, but to the whole K-pop fandom.

Such fan-driven discussions often originate within digital platforms like Weibo, where K-pop communities are highly active and tightly networked. These online spaces serve as echo chambers in which feminist interpretations--whether explicit or implicit--are repeatedly circulated, reinterpreted, and politicized by official fan clubs and fan leaders. These early discussions constitute a subcultural phase of feminist discourse, wherein meaning-making is grounded in shared parasocial identification and collective fan solidarity.

However, as the volume and visibility of fan discourse increases, Agenda-Setting Theory becomes relevant. When discussions within fan communities gain sufficient momentum--especially those related to gender politics--they often attract the attention of Chinese media outlets. These outlets, driven by

audience interest and social or political relevance, may choose to amplify these controversies or conversations, thereby reframing them within a wider sociopolitical context. Through this process, narratives that were once confined to fan subcultures are elevated into broader public discourse.

This transition reflects a two-step diffusion model: first, feminist interpretations emerge and circulate within fan communities through parasocial engagement by official fan clubs, fan leaders and translation accounts; second, media institutions adopt and recast these narratives, shaping their public resonance and political significance. As a result, feminist ideas originally mediated through idol-fan relationships gain legitimacy and visibility beyond the fandom, reaching more diverse and less ideologically aligned audiences.

Together, Parasocial Interaction Theory and Agenda-Setting Theory offer a robust analytical lens for tracing how feminist narratives migrate from emotionally charged fan spaces into mainstream public discourse. This layered process illustrates how fandom cultures, often dismissed as merely recreational or apolitical, can serve as generative sites for gender-conscious political communication in the digital age.

5 CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex relationship between K-pop fandom culture and the evolution of feminist narratives on Chinese digital platforms. By analyzing how parasocial relationships and media framing contribute to the flow of feminist discourse from fandom subcultures to the broader public, this research underscores the sociopolitical power embedded in popular culture. K-pop idols, through curated intimacy and symbolic actions, become focal points around which fans organize not only emotional support but also ideological engagement.

The application of Parasocial Interaction Theory explains why fans are motivated to defend and strive to amplify idols' perceived feminist expressions. Meanwhile, Agenda-Setting Theory clarifies how Chinese local media outlets' selective coverage can elevate these discussions to a societal level. These interlocking mechanisms help illustrate the transnational nature of feminist discourse in the digital age, where Korean pop culture interacts with Chinese sociopolitical realities.

As shown through this framework, the K-pop fandom space functions as more than a site of consumption and entertainment--it becomes a space

of political participation and a transnational channel of expressing feminist ideas. This study suggests that mediated celebrity culture plays a significant role in shaping collective consciousness around gender issues in China. The findings invite further research into the role of transnational popular culture in advancing feminist agendas and highlight the importance of digital fandoms as emerging political publics.

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