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Fanwork Communication through Social Media: A Dynamic Practice of Celebrity Fans in China

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Introduction

Contemporary celebrity fans increasingly communicate digital and non-digital fanworks through social media. Within Chinese fan culture in particular, celebrity fans often engage in two prominent types of fanwork communication events: 1) digital relay creation of fan art/fiction and 2) dissemination of fan-made peripheral materials (ticket holders, stickers, badges, etc). While establishing these communications, fans also tend to simultaneously document both their fanworks and these events as they are happening online. This innovative, dynamic practice exceeds traditional fan archiving that emphasizes either preserving existent fan creations (e.g., Gursoy, 2015; Johnson, 2014; Versaphile, 2011) or establishing a tagging/cataloging system for future works (e.g., Bourlai, 2018; Price & Robinson, 2021). Thus, researching these fanwork communications can help understand how contemporary fans actively organize and participate in fanwork activities that comprise several stages of an information communication chain (Robinson, 2009). Such discussions can also support and enrich the notion of online archiving that exceeds traditional “storing” or “recording” and emphasizes creating content in the contemporary digital environment (De Kosnik et al., 2015). Further, exploring fans’ own perceptions of these activities can provide insight into the evolving connections between fanwork communication (records) and broader fandom practices around not only Chinese celebrities but general fandom objects.

On this basis, this research investigates online fanwork communication activities among fans of two popular Chinese actors, Ayanga and Yunlong, who rose to fame together when starring in the 2018 reality show *SuperVocal*. The two actors’ looks, personalities, and talents have brought them over one-million followers on social media. Their long-time friendship, since being college roommates, has also spurred many fans of both actors to fantasize about them as intimate partners. These fantasies about the actors’ relationship have led many passionate fans to produce and post fan art/fiction that position Ayanga and Yunlong in diverse storylines, in various artistic styles (see Figure 1). Fan-made non-digital peripheral materials constitute another major format, often including ticket holders, badges, postcards, stuffed dolls, stickers, rubber stamps, etc., designed and produced with pictures or drawings of the actors (see Figure 2). With these rich creations, Ayanga and Yunlong’s fans frequently conduct both types of fanwork communication events (digital relay and peripheral material dissemination), making their community a fruitful site for this research.



Figure 1. Selected fan art pieces created by Ayanga and Yunlong's fans



Figure 2. Selected peripheral materials created by Ayanga and Yunlong's fans

As a portion of a broader project studying celebrity fan practices, this research is based upon unobtrusive observation on social media and sequential semi-structured interviews with individual fans. Making no direct contact with participants (Ugoretz, 2017), a two-month-long observation (June-July 2021) was conducted on Weibo, a popular Chinese social media platform that allows users to (re)post, comment, tag, etc. while keeping their name, age, gender, and profession anonymous. For this fanwork communication research in particular, I emphasize fans' posts and comments that pertain to the two main types of activities: digital relay creations and non-digital material disseminations. The observation notes and memos were then open coded and grouped following Elo & Kyngäs' (2008) inductive approach. After these preliminary analyses, the broader project moved to semi-structured interviews (via WeChat) with 30 individual fans (ages between 18 and 50). 11 of these 30 participants have joined in or encountered either/both the digital relay and peripheral material dissemination; the conversations of this topic often lasted 10-15 minutes and focused on fans' own perceptions and experiences. Integrating observational results with interview transcriptions, I analyzed the data

following Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis approach. This data analysis process, generating initial codes, summarizing fans' "meanings," and searching/reviewing themes was centered on digital relay creations and non-digital material disseminations.

This paper discusses the findings on 1) how fans create and organize their digital works as a relay on Weibo and 2) how fans showcase their non-digital fan-made peripheral materials online to distribute them both by mail and in person. These findings indicate that fans have formed their (fanwork) information communication chain featuring information creation, organization, dissemination, and preservation stages. During these communications, many fans also intuitively and impulsively archive everything (both fanworks and events) in the moment. My analyses of fans' own understandings further illustrate that many fans actively engage in these "valuable" communication events, while their archived records allow them to develop their practices and indirectly negotiate community hierarchies. To protect fans' privacy, online account names are pixelated in the images and quotations are translated from the original Mandarin Chinese to English in this paper.

Digital Relay on Social Media

Digital relay is an innovative approach that has been adopted by fan artists and writers on the Weibo platform to collaboratively create and share fanworks. These relays are different from traditional creation events where fans successively contribute to a single fictional work by, for instance, each writing a paragraph and following each other's storyline. Instead, many of Ayanga and Yunlong's fans sequentially create and present, together, their own individually complete artistic or fictional works. These fans often choose special occasions (e.g., an actor's birthday, Valentine's Day) as inspirations for their relays and then go through the processes of announcing, organizing, presenting, and archiving their fanworks.

Leading up to a relay, fan organizer(s) post an announcement on Weibo explaining the occasion and how relay participants (fan writers/artists) will be organized and what their involvement in the event would look like. For example, on International Kissing Day 2020, a group of Ayanga and Yunlong's fans created an online poster, suggesting in a few sentences that a kiss can express various human emotions (e.g., love, respect, attachment, joy) and that "there is a story behind every kiss" (see Figure 3, left). This poster also announces the designated relay tag—#onethousandkisses#—for this relay while listing the names of fan writers and artists who planned or agreed to participate. Some announcements may further include specific times at which each fan writer and artist will post their works (alongside their names, see Figure 3, right); some interview participants



Figure 4. Selected fan-relay posts (participation, archiving); English translations in boxes.

Peripheral Material Dissemination

Disseminating non-digital fan-made peripheral materials (e.g., ticket holders, key chains, stickers, bags, etc., Figure 5) has also become a common approach for fans to communicate their works. Many creators design and produce actor-centered materials individually or collaborate with other artists who work for a commission. Either way, what fans often showcase on Weibo are photos of completed peripheral materials with announcement that they are ready to be disseminated within the fan community. Although the vast majority of such creations are handed out for free, creators usually establish some criteria for receivers. For example, fans who have a high identity level on fan pages, who have purchased the actors' show tickets or endorsed products, or who have been long-time devotees of the actors are eligible to receive materials; these criteria are usually included in fan creators' Weibo posts announcing of their works (see Figure 5).

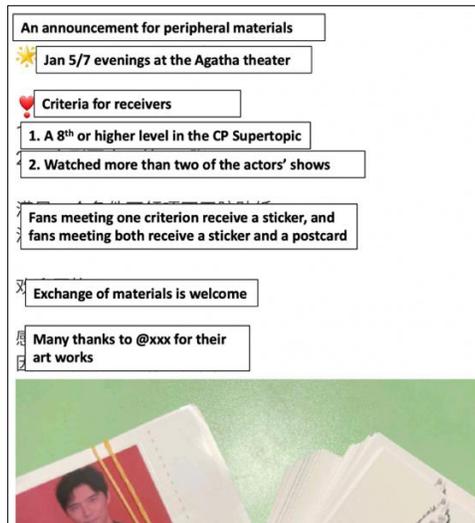


Figure 5. Select announcement of fan-made peripheral materials; English translations in boxes.

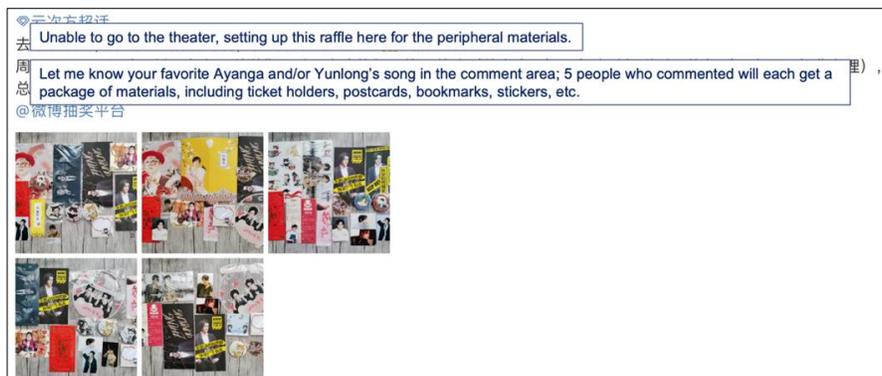


Figure 6. Select post of choosing peripheral material receivers by raffle on Weibo; English translations in boxes.

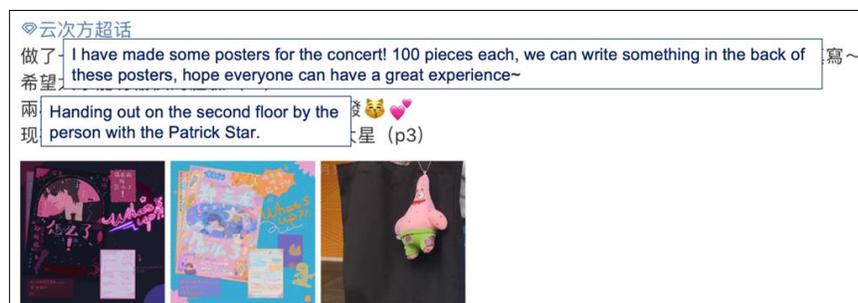


Figure 7. Select post of disseminating peripheral materials in person; English translations in boxes.

While announcing their creations, fans often choose from one of two ways to disseminate peripheral materials—by mail and/or in person. For distribution by mail, fan creators set up a raffle in the repost/comment area of their post to select a few fellow fans (often 5-10) to receive materials. For instance, a creator may ask fans to comment on the announcement and share their favorite songs by the two actors (see Figure 6), after which Weibo's raffle function chooses, at random, a certain number of commenters as winners and the fan creator then mails fanworks to the chosen winners. After much negotiation among fans, it has become common practice for receivers to pay the mailing fees.

When fans choose to disseminate their fanworks in person, they first announce on Weibo a certain time and location—for instance, popular choices include a few hours before the actor(s)' musicals and around the theaters—where a great number of materials (100-200 pieces) will be distributed. Fans may also post additional follow-up images of the fanworks and of their own clothing or other distinctive characteristics before and during the dissemination to make themselves more noticeable to fans coming for the materials, such as including a photo of their dresses or pendants (see Figure 7). Coffee shops and bars have also become increasingly popular places where fans practice this type of dissemination. A few interview participants reported that some fans have negotiated agreements with shop owners, because, while obtaining a place to put down their fanworks and check the eligibility of receivers, these fans also attract more people and in turn bring more business to the shops.

When these fan creators are sometimes not able to disseminate all of their peripheral materials to people who fit their criteria, they may then relax the requirements and give their fanworks to people they perceive as new fans of the actors or common viewers of the show. In such cases, fan creators request simple things in return for materials, for instance that the non-qualified receivers follow the actors on Weibo. Some interview participants consider this a way for fans to advertise their actors to the general public, a perception which is supported by Weibo posts from these “non-qualified receivers,” made after the dissemination event, that express their appreciation for these fanworks and their newfound fandom for the actors. These appreciations are posted on Weibo even more commonly by receivers who met the creators' original requirements; more photos of the fanworks, alongside descriptions of their experiences of getting the fanworks, are often included in such posts.

Fans' Dynamic Communication and Archiving

Both approaches of active and dynamic fanwork communications through social media comprise several stages of an information communication chain (Robinson, 2009). The digital relay first demonstrates information creation and organization,

which sometimes happen simultaneously as fans choose different ways to announce relay participants and time points on Weibo. While announcements comprise the initial dissemination of the relay information, posts from fan writers and artists that include their works, previous/next creators, and event tags further disseminate the information of both fanworks and the relay event. Preserving/archiving these fan creations and events particularly exceeds traditional fan archiving that emphasizes only cataloging existing fanworks and supports the concept of “producing content” in the digital archiving environment (De Kosnik et al., 2015). As Weibo allows fans to easily document each announcement and digital fan art/fiction by simply reposting or screenshotting the original posts, fans not only archive these posted fanworks in the end but also record each step of the relays as they happen.

The dissemination of non-digital peripheral materials also demonstrates how fans create, disseminate, and preserve information. While announcements of these fan-made materials often convey fewer collective but more individual works and decisions, they are actively disseminated among the community as fans repost them on Weibo, either for winning the raffles or for sharing in-person time and locations. Although these fanworks are distributed offline, fan creators often continually create and disseminate follow-up information on Weibo about the mailing, location, distributor, etc. as they are in the process of mailing or handing out their works. As these communication events are thus initially documented in fan creators’ posts, they are further archived in fan receivers’ appreciation posts, often along with photos of the peripheral materials in the receivers’ hands.

These information practices further indicate that Ayanga and Yunlong’s fans show an impulse and/or desire for archiving everything in the moment. While these fans do value preserving and categorizing fanworks—similar to the fan archiving discussed in existing scholarship (e.g., Price, 2019)—announcements of communication events allow fans to anticipate fanworks, as well as the corresponding archiving, before they are even posted or disseminated. In addition to this direct and purposeful archiving of fanworks, fans have also developed the practice of documenting every stage of both relays and material dissemination on Weibo. Instead of archiving the announcements or in-person photos for any practical purpose or foreseeable future usage, many fans tend to consider that it is “just nice to have” these records—as shared by most interview participants. This information archiving has also indirectly influenced fans’ general fandom practices, which will be more discussed in the following section.

Fans’ Own Understandings of Their Practices

Both fan posts on Weibo and responses from interview participants illustrate that fans’ engagement in these fanwork communications has increased, as they consider these events “valuable” to their broader fandom practices. One prominent fan

perception is that, in addition to the joy brought by creating/consuming fanworks, frequent relays and material dissemination demonstrate a fan community's prosperity. As one interview participant shared: "you must know, fanwork creations are very important for maintaining a fan community...so, more and better fan art/fiction/materials production and communication can indicate fans' active affections and the thriving growth of this community." On this basis, many fans follow the announcements energetically, chasing each leg of the relay, reposting raffles, and going to in-person material dissemination locations not only for their own enjoyment but also to intentionally support fan writers and artists. These positive responses have indeed encouraged fan creators to further organize and participate in communication events, which, as some fans have directly expressed in both posts and interviews, can provide them a strong sense of accomplishment.

Many fans are also eager to improve their fanwork communications by borrowing ideas from other celebrities' fans based on their massive event records. Paying attention to the archives of other fans' communication activities on Weibo, for instance, fans may take inspiration from a relay that was organized and archived by another fan community on a special date last year (e.g., The International Kissing Day). Fans often learn from each other how to make themselves more noticeable when handing out peripheral materials, such as painting their clothes or cars with the actors' names or images, which they have learned from extensively Weibo posts created by other fan communities. Although fans do not attend to allow other communities to replicate their ideas when archiving their events, many fans actually accept this "copycat" behavior, instead of criticizing each other's "non-originality," as they consider it general communication and development of fanwork activities within broader contemporary fan culture.

Further, fans intuitively develop more trust toward others who often participate in and document these fanwork communication events, which indirectly results in negotiation of community hierarchies. Since current Chinese celebrity fan culture has been highly capitalized (e.g., producers infiltrate fan communities to manipulate and then benefit from fan participation), traditional fan hierarchies have become quite vague and fluid (Liang and Shen 2016; Zhang and Negus 2020). Under these circumstances, many fans often rely on these fanwork activities and records to develop more legitimate trust among themselves. As one fan explained:

Fan club organizers and some elite fans can easily be bought by some people in the industry and then promote their own agendas, because you can't really see what they are doing...but fans who create a lot of fanworks, start the relay or raffle, hand out their creations for free, or even only repost or go out to get these materials can be more trusted, because at least they put in more effort and devotion and often communicate with other fans.

This statement represents the opinion of many fans that fanwork communications and records offer a more transparent way to identify fan

devotedness and trustworthiness. Meanwhile, fan creators' criteria for receiving peripheral materials (e.g., long-term fandom, ticket purchases) are pursued by fans as general goals; the achievements thus form, indirectly, fans' different levels of "identities" with their community. Together, with fans' archived records as "evidence," these fanwork communications have indirectly and gradually influenced fan beliefs and established fans' own trusted hierarchical roles in contemporary fan culture.

These communications sometimes also cause conflicts among fans. For instance, some fans who exclusively like one of the two actors may despise, in general, communications organized by CP fans. They may become especially angry when a digital relay includes works that they feel are "disrespectful" to their beloved actor or when CP-related peripheral materials are disseminated around one single actor's shows. Intense online arguments and "wars" then occur between "exclusive" fans who criticize these fanwork activities and CP fans who support their "righteous" communications. Conflicts may also happen within the CP fan community based on differing aesthetic views, understandings of how the actors should be portrayed in fiction, locations for peripheral material dissemination, etc. However, as multiple interview participants stated, although these fanwork communications may seemingly intensify certain conflicts, they are often used as excuses by fans who "just want to fight with each other" on account of already existing tensions between fan groups.

Conclusion

This paper explores two innovative types of fanwork communicated through social media—digital relay and peripheral material disseminations—that have been increasingly prominent and popular among Chinese celebrity fans. The findings are based on unobtrusive observation and semi-structured interviews of fans of two Chinese musical actors Ayanga and Yunlong on the Weibo platform. A digital relay features fans sequentially creating and presenting their own complete fan art/fiction on Weibo, through the announcing, organizing, presenting, and archiving process. To disseminate peripheral materials, fan creators post photos of their materials (e.g., ticket holders, stickers, stamps, etc.) that will then be distributed either by mail after a Weibo raffle or in person at a designated time and location.

Both types of communications demonstrate how contemporary fan practices comprise the information creation (organization), dissemination, and preservation stages of an information communication chain. Further enriching online archiving, fans also demonstrate an impulse to archive every step of these communications in real-time by (re)posting screenshots/photos of announcements, progress, and fanworks. While these dynamic fanwork communications and archiving go beyond fans' traditional sole emphasis on cataloguing their creations, Ayanga and

Yunlong's fans rarely show any practical purposes of their practices other than enjoying the fanworks and supporting fan creators. Nevertheless, fans' archival records of fanwork activities allow them to negotiate their own hierarchies in what they believe to be transparent ways. As these practices facilitate general communication between fans and development of contemporary fan culture, they also provide inspiration to fandom activities beyond those centering on Chinese celebrities.

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