

# **Fandom, Youth and Western Pop Music in China**

**by**

**Yuanhao Zhang**

B.A., Communication University of China in Nanking, 2011

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**Name:** Yuanhao Zhang  
**Degree:** Master of Arts (Communication)  
**Title:** *Fandom, Youth and Western Pop Music in China*  
**Supervisory Committee:** Program Director: Yuezhi Zhao  
Professor

**Stuart Poyntz**  
Senior Supervisor  
Professor

---

**Zhihui Tian**  
Supervisor  
Professor  
Institute of Communication Studies  
Communication University of China

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**Date Approved:** August, 8th, 2014

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## **Abstract**

In the wake of globalization and social media, fan culture in China has undergone huge transformation. However, in the context of a socialist market economy (Fung, 2009) and state control, Chinese fan culture has shown different characteristics from elsewhere. This article attempts to provide a political and economic background that examines the development of fandom in China and investigates the relationship between young people and fan culture by looking into the practices of fan communities across western pop music.

**Keywords:** fan culture, youth culture, popular music, China

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, I got an email sent from Ticketmaster.com, a ticket sales and distribution website, informing me that Lady Gaga's Vancouver concert on 30<sup>th</sup> was cancelled and postponed to August 8<sup>th</sup>. I went online and Googled for some related news, and the first few links, however, were all fan pages or forum discussions. I clicked one link and it ushered me into Littlemosters.com, an enormous Lady Gaga fan site built to cater to the needs of various kinds of fan activities from around the world. It was a place where you can find all the discussions from fans of different countries about the world-known pop star Lady Gaga, among which I found the comparatively little-noticed post of the concert cancellation in Vancouver. Later when I logged in to Facebook, one of my friends in China asked me if I had heard about the news or not and how I felt about it. The next day when I was waiting for the sky train to come, I saw the news about the cancellation on the big screen hanging in the sky train station and then two Lady Gaga fans started to talk about how surprised they were when they first heard about the incident. As a fan of Lady Gaga's music, it was at that moment when I realized how far fan culture can reach and how deeply fans have become interconnected in this era of social media.

Every fan may come across similar a situation at some point in their life. As a matter of fact, whether you self identify as a fan or not, fan culture will intersect and implicate your day-to-day life in one way or another. Just as Mark Duffett (2013) argues in his book, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to The Study of Media Fan Culture*:

[fan culture] involves less obvious kinds of participation. In our everyday lives we shout TV catchphrases, sing karaoke, hum along to the radio, or recite dramatic monologues from the movies. In that sense, we are always participating in popular culture's realm of meaning in mundane

ways while we use it as a personal and social resource. [...] The same goes, I would argue, for their use of other media forms. (p179)

This is especially true in a society where the communication is empowered by the Internet. Provided with online fandom platforms, now we are more likely to get linked to fan culture.

The fact that fan culture is everywhere in our daily lives renders it a kind of mirror that reflects various types of social issues at the centre of contemporary experience. In fact, fandom studies have provided a powerful lens to examine significant intellectual problems across a wide range of other disciplines, such as education, legal studies, anthropology, philosophy and etc., (Jenkins, 2006). For example, fan communities have nurtured their own mode of production by appropriating materials from texts that they are a fan of, and scholars in the field of legal studies have been using these cases to question the traditional intellectual property law practices.

The aim of this article is to look into the relationship between the development of fan culture and Chinese youth culture in a global context. Using western pop music fandom as a lens, I try to assess the intersection of fandom, youth culture and pop music and address developments in contemporary China where huge transformations have happened and are still happening. I do so by opening with a review of the development of fan culture studies in general, which acts as the basis for later discussions of fandom and youth culture in China. To address developments in China, I briefly summarize the history of pop fan culture by recapping two landmark fandom sensations: the phenomena of Teresa Teng and the 2005 Super Girl Show. I also discuss the characteristics of young Chinese music fans by providing a political and economic background to the Chinese media landscape and a case study of Lady Gaga's fan club on Baidu Post Bar.

## Chapter 2.

### Fan Culture Studies

The origin of fan culture studies dates back to the early history of audience research in the 1940s. The idea of “textual determination”, i.e. the text determines its own meaning and then automatically influences its receivers was raised in such a context (Duffett, 2013, p55). This idea considered readers to be passive receivers of textual communication. The monumental turning point for audience studies occurred in the 1970s, when Michael Gurevitch (see Duffett, 2013, p58) argued that audiences are not just passive receivers and that they don’t just absorb everything offered by the TV producers. Instead, they have their own needs that have to be met. This was a big advance in audience studies and viewers since then have been considered as normal people that turn on the TV on their own will and would change the channel if they want to, because they are simply consumers getting their needs met by the media. Later, British cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1980) presented three types of popular reading, one of which is called “oppositional reading” suggesting that part of the audiences are not just passive readers. Rather, they are active enough to challenge the ideology conveyed through the popular texts.

Gurevitch and Hall’s early insights are extended in the work of Henry Jenkins whose seminal text, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, would come to shape the field of fan studies from the 1990s onward (Duffett, 2014, p5). *Textual Poachers* is an ethnographic study inspired by the works of John Fiske and Michel de Certeau. The focus of the book is film and TV appreciation. Different from most other scholars in the fan studies field, Jenkins positioned himself in this work as a researcher who at the same time is also a fan. As a consequence, Jenkins tries to combine an ethnographic approach to his study. He explains,



I have found approaching popular culture as a fan gives me new insights into the media by releasing me from the narrowly circumscribed categories and assumptions of academic criticism and allowing me to play with textual materials. My exposure to fan culture challenged much of what I was being taught about the “ideological positioning of viewing subjects.” (Jenkins, 1992)

He points out that ethnographic authority had been a problematic approach for contemporary social science study. Along with other writers like James Clifford, he questioned the tradition of disinterested ethnography and argued that there was no privileged approach for a scholar to look into a culture. Rather, there is only “partial, particularized and contingent accounts of specific encounters within and between cultures.” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 4)

Jenkins’ work is now considered a seminal point of departure for various positions in fan culture studies (Duffett, 2013, p66). Fandom studies have grown into a broader and more sophisticated field as the media world itself has become increasingly diversified and complicated. The truth is, argues Duffett (2014), that fandom nowadays can not be easily generalized any more. Every type of fandom, be it a fandom of popular music, television drama or any other media type, encompasses a wide range of individual tastes, different identities and various kinds of related practices. Take popular music fandom, for example. The fan base of a singer consists of fans with different genders, ages and nationalities, etc. Sharing the same music idol, they can still have different music tastes. The love for the singer might be all they have in common in terms of music appreciation, beyond which any other generalizations are harder to be made. In all, different forms of fandom can be used to look into different social phenomena, so the boundary of fan culture studies is fluid and can’t be easily defined.

## **2.1. Fandom and Fans**

Fandom is a particular type of consumer activism defined by its distinctive style of consumption and cultural performances. It also refers to the community that fans build on the basis of the shared interest and passion. It is a specific type of subculture, which differentiates itself from the larger mainstream culture that it belongs to. It used to be referred to as the “other” by the mainstream society and was marginalized by the

mainstream media in terms of social status and cultural acceptance (Jenkins, 1992). But fan culture doesn't necessarily have to be in conflict with the larger cultural landscape. On the contrary, due to the fluidity of media consumers between different cultures, fan culture constantly influenced and reshaped by other cultures (Jenkins, 2006). Fandom welcomes people from different backgrounds and classes as long as they share the same taste. As a result, it can be a very large community with various kinds of nationalities, political ideologies, sexualities and etc.

But how can someone be considered a fan? What does becoming a fan entail? Henry Jenkins (2006) argues that there is no sharp division between fans and other "readers" and the boundary of fandom is constantly changing due to the changing media landscape. Fan activities, such as Karaoke and online discussion, can be experienced in our daily lives, and those who don't identify themselves as fans are also capable of carrying out these practices. However, although it is not practical to classify part of the audiences as fans according to the extent of their passion towards a media text (Duffett, 2013), there are still some typical characteristics of fans that can be summarized from common fan activities. In fact, fans' emotional involvement with a media text is significantly strong. Fandom consists of a large group of very devoted viewers that tend to make meaning from the original texts that others may find trivial and even worthless (Jenkins, 1992). For instance, while ordinary viewers may watch it on and off for a long time, fans can't stand missing a single episode or even a single minute of the show. They are fully devoted to the program emotionally and intellectually.

It is not predictable when and how a by-stander transforms from an indifferent reader to a passionate fan. Duffett (2013, p125) addresses the tricky question of how a normal person becomes a fan in his book *Understanding Fandom*. He argues that the process of becoming a fan is to some extent mysterious and too complicated to get a standard answer. Even though there have been a few popular explanations, such as the idea that indicate fandom is contagious (p125) and the approach comparing fan activism to religiosity (p141), he thinks that fandom is a far more sophisticated phenomenon than those one-dimensional answers. There can be many levels of experiencing a media text before an individual identifies himself/herself as a fan. For instance, to be identified as fans of a television series, people firstly need to have the chance to watch the

broadcasting, and then they have to keep on watching and evaluating it until s/he gets interested. It is hard to locate when and where is the point that the viewer becomes a fan, because there are countless variables in those two stages, let alone the other possible stages that come after.

Fans used to be considered passive receivers whose lives were based on empty daydreams and fantasies empowered by popular culture. They were seen as social underachievers who failed to realize that what they loved were after all merchandise. Many believed that if the material basis of popular culture were revealed in front of them, fans would break free from their delusions and unrealistic imaginations (Booth, 2010). This idea of fandom was considered problematic and can be contested by the idea of “oppositional reading” from Stuart Hall (1980), suggesting that popular media audiences can read the text against its original meaning. Jenkins (1992) takes this further by defining their mutual relationship as an inter-active one. He argues that even though the audiences have the free will to decide whether they emotionally accept what the text conveys or not, their reception or interpretation are not fully autonomous nor totally vulnerable. The viewers at the receiving end have a to obtain a certain degree of admiration and deference to the original texts so that they can understand the texts. This logic can also be applied to fan culture. It’s on the basis of passion and love for the original text that the fans are carrying out their own interpretation of the text and related fan activities.

## **2.2. Fan Practice**

One of the most important dimensions of fan culture is its special mode of reception. Different from other readers, fans develop a special mechanism of interpretation when dealing texts they are interested in. According to Jenkins (1992), there are three stages of fannish reading: initial reception of the original text, gradual interpretation and remaking of the text.

Fan reading is to some extent more of a collective process than an individual one (Booth, 2010). They are most likely to discuss what they have watched or read with other members of the fan community. Paying attention to every detail of the original text

functions as the basis for their discussion, which forces the fans to get fully involved and devoted when they are reading texts they love. Otherwise they would feel marginalized and isolated by their own groups.

Fans are much more active than ordinary media consumers in that they try to transform their experiences of interpreting a text into a sharing culture where other members of the fan community are welcomed to participate (p.23). But their interpretations of a certain program are not just about fascination or adoration, but sometimes also disappointment and antagonism. With a certain degree of deference towards the program producers, fans are very critical of the original work. Their love for the program and wish for it to be more popular drive them to pay close attention to its strength and weakness and later exchange their opinions within their fan communities.

Fans sometimes are so attached to the popular texts that they use these texts as a basis for creating their own works. Michel de Certeau (1984) names this type of active reading as “textual poaching,” which suggests that the fans take away those things that are useful or entertaining for them from the original texts and use them to create their own fan works, such as fanzines, fan fictions and cover songs, etc. Within the boundary of fan communities, the poachers themselves determine what to obtain and keep from an original text. Fans would draw on their personal life experiences as a filtering system to decide what materials in the original text can be used to make a fannish work.

After being “stolen” from the original work, the meanings of the poached texts are no longer what they were originally but changed to what the poachers want them to be (Jenkins, 1992, p51). The meanings of the poached texts don't lie in their intrinsic qualities any more but what the fans have bestowed on them. The remaking process is not adding on to the meanings that the author have conveyed through the original work, but re-adjusting these borrowed texts to the larger picture the poachers are trying to create. Michel (1984) characterizes the relationship between text poachers and original writers as a struggle for the control over the text's meanings. However, this struggle is to some extent based on the compatibility they share with each other and their love for the original work.

The struggle of the fans as producers can be best illustrated by the case of book *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Originally a *Twilight* fan fiction (Publisher Weekly, 2012), the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* is granted as the best-selling book of all time in Britain, surpassing J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (The Telegraph, 2012). The *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy has also become a global sensation with over 100 million copies sold worldwide (The Guardian, 2014). The huge success of the novel also got the writer Erika Leonard, who is better known by her pen name E. L. James, named one of "The World's 100 Most Influential People" by Time magazine. No one could have foreseen a novel that started as a fan fiction can be such a phenomenon around the world. In the early stage of the writing of this book, the main characters of the book are named after characters from a popular teen novel called *Twilight*. But due to its explicit depiction and sexual content, the writer was criticized by other fan writers and removed her story from the fan fiction website. She later changed the names of the book's characters and posted it on a website she especially created for this fiction. Despite its huge success, its origin as a fan fiction has attracted lots of controversies (The Wire, 2012), and it is also widely criticized for its "appalling and boring writing" (The Telegraph, 2012).

*Fifty Shades of Grey* is not the only fan fiction that gets criticized for its fandom characteristics. As a matter of fact, fan productions have long been considered unprofessional and hardly tasteful. But Jenkins (2006) argues that fans are experts in their own way. Having paid close attention and devoted time to a particular object, fans have the "popular expertise" that the scholars or critics don't have and fail to give credit to. This popular expertise is essential to fan writing just like how years of professional training is required to academic writing.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Fandom Online**

The advent of the Internet has changed the landscape of fan culture and transformed fan communities in many ways. It acts as a turning point for the development of fan culture in that it has upgraded and diversified the ways fans communicate (Booth, 2010) and how they produce fan works. The digital environment provided by the Internet has increased the speed of the communication between fans, which results in what Matt Hills (see Jenkins, 2006) calls “just in time fandom”. The Internet has also dramatically broadened the scope of fan communities, promoting communicative exchanges between fans around the world.

It has also transformed fan production in many ways. For example, online publication has entirely replaced paper publications like fanzine. Fans use social media as the distribution channel for fan works, which drastically cut down the cost of fan production. Fan products nowadays are way more diversified too because of the Internet, growing from fan fictions to fan-made videos, photo collages and etc.

Mark Poster (see Curran, 2012) argues that the Internet has empowered the grassroots, and in particular, previously marginalized groups, and it will also undermine the elitist control culturally and politically. It has brought about a brand new social dimension that can go beyond the limitations of traditional media, thus leading to a “Fifth Estate” that exceeds the limitations of the current media outlets. The presence of the Internet makes it much easier and more practical for fans with similar tastes and interests to get in touch with each other and share their own stories with other fans. Prior to the existence of online fan communities, fans were more likely to be examined as individual audience members (Booth, 2010), because without the technology to get connected to each other, fans were dispersed and decentralized, both geographically

and culturally. The Internet makes it possible for fans to virtually exist as a group on the basis of their love for the same media object.

Defined as a subculture, fan culture has long been isolated and categorized as “otherness” by the dominant mainstream media outlets (Jenkins, 1992). It is barely practical for fan production to be based on market-driven platforms, such as Television station, because the motivations behind the construction of fan groups are never profit-oriented. Many even argue that fandom is to some extent anti-market in that they may destruct the market demand (Booth, 2010). For instance, sharing within fan communities has the potential to cut down the sales of the media product because piracy problems are inevitable. However, providing a space for the development of grassroots activism (Jenkins, 2006), social media have enabled the building of alternative information infrastructure and have made it possible for fandom spaces to exist alongside the market-based media structures (Fenton, 2012).

The Internet itself has also gone through a huge transformation in the past few years, transforming from a system that is oriented to information provision to one that is more oriented to communication and the community building (Fuchs et al, 2012). The emergence of the notion of “web2.0” came about in such a context. Web2.0 platforms, such as popular social media, are online spaces that majorly focus on the construction and maintenance of cyber communities. Social media promote collaborative information production, information sharing and user-generated content. They provide spaces where the users get the most autonomy.

Natalie Fenton (2012) argues that the primary motivation behind the rapid development of social media is not people’s need for information dissemination but the desire to be connected to each other, to get involved in the loop of communication. The desire to be heard and to be linked in is driving us to take advantage of social media where people can function as a media outlet for themselves. The development of social media thus has brought a great chance for the further development of online fan communities, because the spirit of social media fits perfectly to that of fan culture, which is, fans are driven by the desire to share their thoughts with a bigger group of people with same tastes and similar life experiences. As a matter of fact, fans have the

tendency to focus their fannish practices around programs that have the potential to be popular enough to have a sizable fan community (Jenkins, 1992, p88). The wish to be connected to more people and to have a sense of belonging drives fans to establish fan communities on social media, such fan groups and specialized fan websites.

Digital technologies have also transformed fan production in many ways. For example, online publication has entirely replaced paper publications like fanzine. Fans use social media as the distribution channel for fan works, which drastically cut down the cost of fan production. Fan products nowadays are way more diversified too because of the Internet, growing from fan fictions to fan-made videos, photo collages and etc.



## **Chapter 4.**

### **Fan Culture in China**

#### **4.1. Two Landmarks of Chinese Fandom History**

In the past few decades, China has experience a rapid growth of fan communities, both online and offline. The origin of Chinese pop culture fandom can date back to the era of Teresa Teng, whose Chinese name is Deng Lijun. Teng shot to fame in mainland China in the 1970s and 1980s when China first started to adopt the policy of reform and opening up. The cultural policies then were relatively liberal and open for popular music and thus created a space for her to be become the most influential pop star for the younger generation at that time. Teng was known for singing folk songs and romantic ballads, which were significantly different from the dominant “red songs” that mostly were carrying out the will of the government by promoting the ideology of communist party and singing the praises of Mao. Teng’s songs were mostly about the feeling of love and the expectation of being in love, and she sang those songs in a very different style from the “red singers”. The content of her songs and her singing style were heavily criticized by the communist media and Teng was called a singer of “靡靡之音”, which means her songs were too obscene and demoralizing ( Zhao, 2012).

In spite of the criticism from the communist media outlets and the older generation, Teng had recruited a great number of fans among young people across China. Under the policy of reform and opening up, overseas cultural exchanges had increased and those who had the chance to travel overseas would buy Teng’s cassettes and bring them back to mainland China, sometimes even making pirate recordings of tapes for themselves (CZTV online, 2014). Without the technology to communicate with the other fans, they organized their own groups of fandom by sharing Teng’s tapes or listening to her music and discussing the lyrics together (Zhu, 2014). Teng’s music

fandom can be considered the initial stage of the development of fan culture in China, before which no popular media could be found. State-owned media and media production organizations dominated and they only followed the orders of the communist party (CZTV online, 2014)

The 2005 talent show Super Girl Voice was another landmark pop culture phenomenon in China and a corner stone of the development of Chinese fan culture. Inspired by the British reality TV show Pop idol (Huang, 2014), the show was originally produced by Hunan TV, a provincial satellite TV station. The viewers were given the right to decide who would be the winner by voting through text messages or directly calling in, which was never seen in Chinese media history before. The show instantly became a cultural and social sensation with a phenomenal audience rating. The last episode of the show attracted more than 280 million viewers (Huang, 2014). The influence of the show was not only constrained in Mainland China, the show as a Chinese popular sensation also drew lots of attention from around the world. The second runner-up Zhang Liangying (Jane Zhang) ended up appearing on the Oprah Winfrey Show and the winner of the contest Chris Lee (Li Yuchun) even appeared on the cover of Time Magazine (Asian edition) that year and was named one of the “Heros of Asia” (Xinhuan Net, 2005).

The huge success of Super Girl Voice 2005 attracted lots of analysis from scholars in different areas such as communication and economy. What most of these various kinds of scholarships have in common is that they all have paid close attention to the fan activism throughout the whole contest. Mostly young people, the fans divided themselves into different fan groups according to the different singers they were supporting. Thousands of blogs and chat rooms devoted to the discussion of the contest sprung up on the Internet (Madden & Wentz, 2005). To attract more votes for the contestant they loved, the fans also strategically came up with catchy nicknames for their fan communities to distinguish themselves from the other fan groups. Li Yunchun’s fans, for example, called themselves “玉米”, which literally is the Chinese word for “corns” but also carries the denotation of “the fans of Li Yunchun”. Lots of fans, mostly teenagers, would even go out on the street to seek votes for the contestant they supported (Tencet.com, 2005). The sensational scale of the fandom activated by the

contest can best be shown by the number of votes the contestants managed to attract. On the night of August 26, 2005, the top three contestants gathered over 80 million votes in total from around the country (Huang, 2014). The over-heated fan activism throughout the broadcasting of the show was later taken as a lens to look at social problems in contemporary China. For instance, some scholars argue that the show introduced Chinese people to the real practice of voting (Madden & Wentz, 2005) and the gigantic number of the votes indicated the Chinese public's desire for a more democratic world where the general public have more say in politics (Meng, 2009). When addressing the show's influence on the younger generation, some scholars suggest that the remarkably active participation of Chinese young people in the show's fan activism is a sign of their resistance to the status quo in contemporary China, where young people don't have much say in politics (Huang, 2014).

The reason I consider the phenomena of Teresa Teng and the 2005 Super Girl show to be the biggest two landmarks in the history of the Chinese fan culture is not just because that they were both sensational on a national scale, but also because they represent two stages in the development of Chinese fandom that is divided by the emergence of the Internet. In the era of Teng, music fans shared their love and passion for the singer by physically gathering together and exchanging self-recorded cassettes. Limited by the communication technology at the time, their fan activism couldn't go beyond their geographical boundaries to reach fans from other areas.

The Super Girl sensation, on the other hand, happened in a context of a rapid proliferation of cyber fan communities in China (Zhang & Mao, 2013). The popularization of social media allowed the show's fans to build their own online communities with minimum cost. Manuel Castells (see Fenton, 2012) argues that social media have enabled a new type of communication from individuals to the mass audiences. It creates an overlap of the private and the public that makes it possible for people to get connected to others with shared interests in spite of time and distance problems. It is this type of connection that has acted as the foundation for the building of online Super Girl fandom.

With rapidly increasing visibility, the speed of the development of online fan communities has reached a point that would never have been achieved before. In China, online spaces such as Weibo and Baidu Post Bar, a community-based online forum, have provided fans with autonomy and thus instantly gathered numerous users. In 2005, Baidu Post Bar was used by the fans of Super Girl Voice as the base for their fan activities. They built their communities centering around the contestant they supported and discuss various types of topics with these online communities, including how to attract more votes for their idols. The fans' active participation and heated discussion has, as a surprise to many people, helped Baidu surpass Sina and became the biggest Chinese website around the world (People.com, 2005).

## **4.2. A Political and Economic Context of Chinese Fandom**

From Teng to Super Girl Voice, Chinese fan culture has experience rapid development in terms of its social visibility and how it is received by the general public. As the entertainment industry and popular culture are becoming increasingly important in Chinese media system, fan culture accordingly has gained rapid growth in contemporary China (Zhang & Mao, 2013). To examine the social conditions and factors of its growth, it is essential and inevitable to put fan culture in such a context. The current Chinese fan culture is developing in a more globalized yet still socialist China. It could be used as a mirror to take a closer look at the contemporary China and its current social problems, which in return could reshape the landscape of Chinese fandom.

Since China's accession to WTO in 2001, the communication system of China have been profoundly marketized, which has led to, both online and offline, a rapid growth of popular media in the forms of magazines, popular idols, movies, TV shows and so on (Zhang & Mao, 2013). In her book *Communication in China*, Zhao (2008) argues that the current landscape of Chinese pop culture is a result of the dynamics and interaction between the state control, private investors, media producers and, last but no least, the pop culture consumers. Intertwined with each other, there are three sectors of power that have shaped the current communication and media system of China, i.e., the party-state, transnational corporations and private investors (Zhao, 2008). Yet their control over the communication system has shown a very interesting pattern, which is

what Zhao calls “a division of labor” (p. 195). The party state media play a dominant role in domestic news provision, and the private capital has more control over media that are oriented towards popular entertainment and amusement, while the transnational media are more likely to cater to the elite strata with international journalism, business information and so on. So out of all three sectors, private capital is most directly connected to the development of Chinese pop culture.

Private financing has led to vast expansion of media outlets that specialize in catering to media consumers, which results in the rise of consumer strata (p. 211). Moreover, it also has played a main role in reshaping the Chinese media outlets to be more entertainment-oriented. As a result of the transformation, money-centered media programs such as syndicated TV drama and reality show have flourished in the past few decades. The rapid development of popular culture fandom happens in such a context. Along with many other factors such as the popularization of the Internet, the expansion of pop culture industry has given rise to a growing body of fan communities in contemporary China (Zhang & Mao, 2013). The massive production of popular products such as the talent show Super Girl Voice has cultivated a great number of active fans and has significantly boosted the proliferation of pop culture fandom around China.

However, on the other hand, the development of popular culture is still subject to state control. Although transnational capital and private financing are allowed in many parts of the communication system, the state capital still occupies a dominant proportion of the current Chinese media system, which allows the government to keep the ideological control of the system (Zhang & Mao, 2013). But the state control over popular media doesn't suffocate the development of popular culture in China. Instead, the government of China has strategically prompted the development of entertainment-oriented media outlets in China. As long as pop culture fan activism is under the party's demand and kept at the level of material consumption, the authorities would rather keep a free space for its development (p.50).

This idea could be justified from three aspects. Firstly, as Zhang and Mao (2013) argue in their analysis of Chinese online fandom, the top priority of the Chinese government has long been economic expansion, which forces it to put aside its

ideological and cultural difference from the capitalistic consumerism. Secondly, Zhao (2008) suggests that the relationship between government and private investors is not just uni-directional. Instead, the government is well aware of the fact that private production companies can respond to consumers' tastes more effectively because of their unique institutional mechanism and that they can bring more profit to the state-own media outlets such as TV stations. Thirdly, the government is also aware that online pop culture sensationalism can distract people, more or less, from publicizing confrontational opinions online (Zhang & Mao, 2013). As a matter of fact, the government has been using consumerist popular culture as a method to pacificate the tension between the government and the general public (Zhao, 2008). Overall, popular culture is strategically controlled by the government to serve to its goal of sustaining its political dominance as well as economic growth, which has in return boosted the development of China's popular media and fan culture.

## Chapter 5.

### Western Pop Music and Chinese Youth Culture

Under the influence of globalization, media products can circulate around the world and media consumers now have more options to choose from. Besides the Asian sensation “K-Pop (Korean pop music)”, Chinese music consumers, especially young people, have also developed a huge fandom for western pop music. Chinese music fans refer to pop music from Europe and America, mainly England and America, as “欧美” pop music. “欧美” literally means Europe and America, but in Chinese it also carries the same connotation as the word “western” . So in this section, I use the phrase “western pop music” to refer to this heated music category in China.

Western pop music has long been influential in the history of Chinese pop music. Although not known to everyone, previous global sensations such as Michael Jackson and Madonna were also popular among many Chinese youngsters and were considered a symbol of the then rebellious Chinese youth culture in the 1980s and 1990s (Zhao, 2012). With the advent of the Internet, music lovers can have more access to western pop music, and as a result fandom for western pop singers have experienced a rapid growth in the past few years. Take fandoms on Weibo for example, “Houson Houmu”, an account devoted to western pop music videos and photos of western pop singers, has attracted nearly 1.5 million followers. Most of his posts have been reposted for at least hundreds of times. There are dozens of other popular Weibo accounts similar to “Houson Houmu” and their popularity on social media can be taken as a sign of the increased influence of western pop music in Chinese youth communities. As a fan of western pop music myself, the aim of this section is to look into the relationship between western pop music and Chinese young people, and I hope to use western pop music fandom as a lens to examine Chinese youth culture in contemporary China.

## 5.1. Pop Music as Message

In his book *Studying Popular Music*, Richard Middleton (1993) argues that popular music can function as a medium conveying messages to its listener. Although it is determined by the audience how the message is decoded and there inevitably can be miscommunications, popular music is still one of the most efficient method of communication when it comes to selling messages (Henard & Rossetti, 2014). Researches (Jang & Lee, 2014; Henard & Rossetti, 2014) have shown that both the lyrics and the non-verbal elements, such as the tunes of a song, in popular music are effective messengers in delivering information. Different pop music genres, for example, attract different groups of fans and show different characteristics of the listeners. While the tunes of a love ballad might suggest a wish for love, the beats of a heavy metal might be more likely to be used as an outlet for anger and insanity. Moreover, the interpretation of a pop song is determined by the personal experiences and values of the listener (Henard & Rossetti, 2014), so the choice of music can be used as a method to define the characteristics of the certain group of people.

As a way of communication, popular music can be linked to many social issues in various contexts (Jang & Lee, 2014). The relationship between popular music and politics, for instance, has long been a heated topic. Popular music has been used as a site for resistance by the younger generation (Jang & Lee, 2014). In the 1980s, Teresa Teng's music was considered as degenerative and corruptive in mainland China (Zhao, 2012) because it was introduced from capitalist Taiwan, so it was considered as a challenge to the ideal music style in the eyes of the government. Teng was even stigmatized as a "capitalist spy" by many people from the older generation. However, despite of all the criticism, listening to Teng's music was considered the coolest acts by the young people then and showed the rebellious side of the younger generation. The act of forbidding Teng's music in the initial stage of China's reform and opening up only made her music more popular and won her more loyal fans (CZTV, 2014)



## 5.2. Fandom and Youth Culture

Youth culture studies have always been closely connected to that of fan culture. In fact, in many fandom studies, questions about empowerment and agencies of fan communities always lead to the analysis of youth culture (Fung, 2009). Young people are considered as active media consumers that are more likely to participate in fan activism and function as the main agent for the development of fan communities. In the context of cultural globalization, young people are playing a central role as grassroots consumers that help to facilitate the transcultural flow of popular media contents (Jenkins, 2006).

The reason for the close tie between fandom and youth culture is because they share similar intrinsic subcultural values. Both defined as subcultures (Jenkin, 2006; Nayak, 2003), fan culture and youth culture are thought to operate with a different set of social identities from those held by the mainstream society. Considered as the agents of social changes (Nayak, 2003), young people have a different cultural landscape from their parents' generation (Jenkin, 2006) and they seek to find their own cultural identities outside of the social mainstream. Young people do not just take fandom as an outlet for entertainment, they also, consciously or subconsciously, take fan communities as a place where they can negotiate with and criticize the norms taught by the dominant culture (Grossberg, 1992). Fandom acts as a platform for young people to search for their own identities, and in return, the selfhood construction of them enhances the formation of fan communities (Fung, 2009).

In his analysis of the phenomenal 2005 talent show *Super Girl Voice*, Huang (2014) summarizes the perspectives towards Chinese youth culture into two categories, which are different yet intertwined with each other: (1) Chinese young people are far less rebellious than their western counterparts because of the government's tight control in almost every aspect of young people's lives; (2) In spite of the political context, Chinese youth culture is still characterized by critical thinking and resistance.

It's easy to understand the first category when looking into the political and cultural environment where Chinese youth are raised. As Zhao (2008) argues, China is one of the most oppressive regimes enforcing its state power to control public

communication. Restricted by the political and media environment, Chinese youth, Lee (2010) believes, no longer take mass rebellion as an option because the idea of “mass” youth is no longer valid in contemporary China. Considered one of the most famous rebellious youth figures in China, popular writer Han Han depicted his depression on the state’s tight control of the younger generation in his blog on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010:

We are just a small role on the stage, under the spotlight. But they own the theatre. They can at any time bring the curtain down, turn off the lights, close the door and let the dogs out. Later the dogs all disappear and the sky is blue again; there is no trace of what has happened.

Moreover, from a cultural perspective, Chinese young people are under the influence of Confucianism that emphasizes the importance of “*尊师重道*”, which is often interpreted as a rule for the younger generation to obey what their teachers have taught them.

As a result of such a context, Chinese young people are forced to seek for freedom in alternative spaces such as popular culture fandom (Einerson, 1998). The status quo of Chinese youth culture can be considered as one of the biggest motives for the rapid development of Chinese fan culture. Young people use this space created by popular culture as a platform where they can have more autonomy (Huang, 2014).

### **5.3. When Chinese Youth Culture meets Western Pop Music**

Chris Baker (2002) has argued in his book *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* that youth culture is not locally bounded, but instead, it is a result of the interactions between forces from different spaces around the world. In the case of Chinese youth culture, foreign cultural forces such as Korean Weave and American pop culture have all played significant roles in reshaping the landscape of Chinese youth culture by making it different from that of their parents’ generation. Here I’d like to point out that the relationship between Chinese youth culture and foreign popular cultures is not “cultural imperialism” but what Henry Jenkins (2006) calls “pop cosmopolitanism”.

### **5.3.1. "Pop Cosmopolitanism"**

In a vivid contrast with the concept of pop cosmopolitanism, Jenkins (2006) argues, the idea of cultural imperialism doesn't pay enough attention to the receiving culture and thus has failed to address the resistance of the local culture. So in my article, when I am looking into the relationship between western pop music fandom and Chinese youth culture, I have chosen to follow the framework of pop cosmopolitanism suggested by Jenkins (2006) instead of the classic cultural imperialism argument.

Since globalization has profoundly changed the cultural landscapes of the world, it's nearly impossible to study the pop culture of a country without taking into consideration of the influence of various types of other cultures from around the world. Thanks to the Internet, pop cultures nowadays can go beyond borders and reach people around the world. As a result of this, pop cultures of different countries are reshaping the others and at the same time being reshaped. Jenkins (2006) refers to these transnational flows of pop media content in the context of globalization as "pop cosmopolitanism". In the concept of "pop cosmopolitanism", people are cultural cosmopolitans that are not restricted to their local cultures but are able to experience a broader range of pop cultures.

There are two forces behind the emergence of "pop cosmopolitanism". Firstly, the Internet, especially the social media, makes it possible for people with sharing taste and interest to connect to each other (Booth, 2010). The Internet has built up a universal platform that embraces cultures from afar and for people to look beyond regional and even continental borders. Secondly, Jenkins (2006) argues that the global media convergence is the fundamental reason for the rise of pop cosmopolitanism. Global media convergence refers to two types of convergence: the top-down corporate convergence and the bottom-up grassroots convergence (p.154). As a result of global market competitions, media ownership is gradually concentrated to a small number of transnational enterprises, most of which promote cross-border exchanges and transnational flow of popular culture out of the pursuit of capital interest (p.155). As for the convergence of grassroots, the Internet has empowered them by bringing them together virtually (p.155) and providing them with affordable methods of production, such as blogs and twitter. Grassroots consumers, like never before, have access to a

boundless reservoir of pop culture material. By being Youtubers or Twitterers, they are not just consumers but also producers that can take advantage of the online media resources to make their own media content, which in return enriches online pop culture and promotes the cosmopolitanization of fan cultures.

### **5.3.2. Western Pop Music Fandom in China**

Fans are active media content consumers (Duffett, 2013), so as a result of the cosmopolitanization of popular culture, fan culture has also become globalized and fan communities nowadays operate globally. Because of the fast transmission of online information, fan culture has upgraded to what Matt Hills (2002) calls “just-in-time fandom”. Fans around the world can get the information of their interested media program or pop star instantly and communicate with each other without suffering from time delay. Moreover, most media corporations now tend to promote their media products globally, which also helps to form a global fandom. It is in this context of the cosmopolitanization of fandom that western pop music has gone beyond geographical boundaries and reached Chinese young people.

The struggle between young people and the older generations in China has long been seen ever since the era of Teresa Teng. For instance, in his analysis of Chinese pop music fandom, Anthony Fung (2009) argues that youth culture in China is structurally restrained by the Communist Youth League, which is a party organization built for young people with more than 70 million members. It carries out the policies formulated by the party and imposes politically ideal images on the youth. As part of the communist legacy, the ideal image of young people is passed down from the older generation and is still affecting how the older generation views the youth culture now. For example, as is written to the League Constitution, young people are expected to carry out self-criticism according to Leninism and Maoism (League Constitution, 2013), which have both been seriously challenged by ideologies carried by foreign pop cultures (Fung, 2009).

Popular music can be a learning tool for fans to form a new identity (Einerson, 1998). Chinese fans learn about different life styles and ideologies through western pop

music and internalize them into their own lives. As I have discussed previously, Chinese youth expressed their resistance to the state by resorting to pop culture events like Super Girl Voice. In the case of western popular music fandom, music from countries with different politics and cultural environment can cater to the need of the “youth in developing countries to express generational differences or to articulate fantasies of social, political, and cultural transformation” (Jenkins, 2006). In all, western pop music with the messages it potentially carries can be taken as an alternative space for young people to develop new values and identities that are different from the ideal images imposed by the older generation.

### **5.3.3. “She’s taught me to love myself.”**

Lady Gaga is undeniably one of the most influential international pop stars in China. Although she has never performed in China before, thanks to the Internet, she still has become one of the biggest names in China’s pop culture. On China’s biggest online community Baidu Post Bar, Lady Gaga’s fan club has attracted more than 500 thousand members, making it the biggest fan club comparing to other foreign pop singers. So in this section, I choose Lady Gaga’s fan base on Baidu Post Bar as the target of my analysis. Through looking into their fan production and analyzing the heated posts that are created on Baidu Post Bar from July 1<sup>st</sup> to August 1<sup>st</sup>, I hope to capture what is on her fans’ minds and how being a fan of Lady Gaga has helped the formation of their reviews on LGBT communities.

Boosted by the Super Girl talent show, Baidu Post Bar became the biggest Chinese online forum in 2005 (People.com, 2005). It is a community-based platform where users can create their own digital communities for free. Within the created communities, users can add each other as friend and communicate instantly through messages or, most importantly, starting a discussion by creating posts. With over 500 thousand members, Lady Gaga’s post bar has accumulated more than 3.4 millions posts in total since it was created. The posts on her post bar can be roughly divided into three categories: (1) News about Lady Gaga; (2) Posts about fan products, such as fan-made videos and photo collages; (3) Discussions about her songs and personal life. By translating Lady Gaga-related news from foreign websites and introducing fan

productions of other fan communities, her Chinese fans can have access to information about Lady Gaga on Baidu Post Bar that otherwise can't be reached in other media platforms in China. Social media platforms similar to Post Bar has helped gather together Lady Gaga fans across the whole country and facilitate their communication with each other, thus creating a space where the message of Lady Gaga's music can be more easily understood and delivered to her fans.

The significance of Lady Gaga's fandom in China lies not only in its scope of fame and popularity, but also that it has opened up more space for a more diversified representation of gender and sexuality for her fans. Lady Gaga has been considered as a gay icon from the outset of her career and has a huge impact on LGBT communities (Hampp, 2010). She has been actively promoting gay rights and even played a big role in the repealing of Don't Ask Don't Tell policy in America (The Guardian, 2010). She is even banned by Russian government and could face punishment because of being publicly outspoken of gay rights and her speech against Russia's anti-gay law during her concert in St. Petersburg (ABCnews, 2013). Her support for the LGBT community has won her numerous fans around the world including China. Because of Lady Gaga's intentional outreach to gay communities (Hampp, 2010), there is a comparatively more heated discussion about LGBT issues in her fan base, which distinguishes her online fan communities from those of most other pop singers. This is also true in China. By providing the fans with LGBT-related information and promoting discussion about Chinese LGBT issues, her fandom can act as an alternative space for many of her fans to crystalize their sexuality and find a sense of belonging in contemporary China where there is a serious lack of media coverage of LGBT community (Zhang & Min, 2012).

Because of the Internet, the younger generation in China now has an increasingly open attitude towards LGBT communities and is becoming more aware of the importance of LGBT rights (Cai, 2007). For example, on Weibo (Micro-blog), Homophobic posts would be seriously contested. On July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011, Lv Liping, a famous Chinese actress reposted a message that said gay people were doomed and should be ashamed of themselves. Her act caused a wide discussion on gay rights and triggered a huge public backlash. Consequently, numerous Weibo users initiated an online campaign that requested Lv to delete her post and apologize to Chinese gay

communities. A more open attitude can also be seen towards the transgendered. Jin Xing, a transgendered dancer, has been invited to be a judge on many popular TV shows and is very well received by the audience. However, according a research on the media coverage of gay-related topics in China, mainstream media, especially traditional media, still has a considerable lack of coverage on LGBT issues and a problem of stereotyping gay people (He & Chun, 2013). It is in such a context that Lady Gaga that shot to fame in China. For many of her fans, Lady Gaga's fan community can be an alternative source for information of gay-related topics. For instance, posts about overseas gay pride parades are oftentimes seen in her fan club on Baidu Post Bar.

Music as message (Middleton, 1993) can deliver positive thoughts to its listeners. In a research about the relationship between music and gender politics, Jang and Lee (2014) has taken Lady Gaga's hit song *Born This Way*, a song appealing for equality for LGBT and ethnic communities, as a sample and analyzes its effect on the listeners' awareness and consciousness of gay rights. Part of the lyrics of her song is:

I'm beautiful in my way,  
'Cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way  
[...]  
No matter gay, straight or bi  
Lesbian, transgendered life  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born to survive

This song claims that everyone is born the way they are, including the LGBT people, and they have no other options but to be themselves. The results of the research have proven that listening to *Born This Way* can help people develop a more favorable and tolerant attitude towards gay communities (p. 123).

In the case of Lady Gaga fan club on Baidu Post Bar, there are two aspects of how Lady Gaga's fandom has enriched her fans' understanding of LGBT issues. Firstly, it helped her fans in general to have developed a more tolerate attitude towards the LGBT community. In a post (May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013) discussing the lyrics of Born This Way, a fan whose cyber name is "Glory 与 Him", for example, commented that this song has taught her that she should embrace people's difference and to have more understanding of her gay friends. Secondly, for her Chinese LGBT fans that are too young to have a mature view about their sexuality, her music can help them to have a more positive understanding about themselves. There is one post (February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1024) in Lady Gaga's fan club on Baidu Post Bar that can best summarize the relationship between her fandom her LBGT fans in China. Answering to question "Why do you love Lady Gaga?", one of her fans called "MonsterCandyGa" says:

I am 17 years old. I take her as my faith, because a faith is something you resort to when you are in difficulty. As indicated in her song Born This Way, she stands up for the gays and the bullied. When you are bullied for being not pretty enough or being gay, she would encourage you to work hard to strive for the best so that one day you can dance and sing in front of those who have bullied you before. She has taught me to love myself.



## **Chapter 6.**

### **Conclusion**

Fan culture in China has undergone huge transformation since the implementation of reform and opening up policy. As more foreign capital and private financing are allowed into the communication system, popular media that are more entertainment-oriented have been developed in the past few decades, which results in the fast growth of consumerist fan culture in China. Giving priority to the national economic growth and ideological control, the mentality of the government is another reason for the rapid development of the popular culture in China, both offline and online.

Young people are intrinsically connected to the fan activism. In search for a different identities and values from the older generation, young people tend to use fan culture as a space where they can rethink the norms taught by their parents' generation. In China, young people are restrained by the controlled media system and don't have much say in politics. Moreover, the political ideal of what youth should be is imposed on them by the older generation through methods such as education and Communist Youth League. In such a context, young people resort to popular culture as an outlet to crystallize their identities and escape the oppression from the older generation. For instance, in the case of Lady Gaga's fandom, it provides a more diversified representation of sexuality for her young fans.

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