K-pop fan labor and an alternative creative industry: A case study of GOT7 Chinese fans

Meicheng Sun
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract
Korean popular music or K-pop has achieved popularity among global audiences. The uniqueness of K-pop fan culture has helped to shape the success of the K-pop industry. Through a case study of Chinese fan labor vis-à-vis K-pop male idol group GOT7, the author notes three types of K-pop fan labor: specialized labor, managerial labor, and unskilled labor. This research argues that fan labor transforms the K-pop industry into an alternative creative industry because fan labor as creative labor is an indispensable part of the K-pop industry. Fan labor is utilized to distinguish fans from non-fans, and to draw boundaries between the grateful, more enthusiastic fans and the casual self-proclaimed fans who do not contribute to fandom or their idols' success. These Chinese K-pop fans comply with the K-pop industry’s commodification of culture, are exploited by the K-pop industry, and seek empowerment in the K-pop production and distribution process. This paper’s exploration of fan labor, based on the author’s participant observations and in-depth interviews, will thus contribute to studies on the creative industries, creative labor, fandom, and the transnational flows of popular culture.

Keywords
China, creative industries, fan labor, Hallyu, K-pop

Introduction: K-pop fandom in China
The global influence of Korean popular music (hereafter, K-pop) can be seen in the way in which it has spread from South Korea (hereafter, Korea) to other parts of the world since the 1990s (S. Lee, 2015). K-pop not only brings economic benefits to Korea; it also helps to export the country’s
cultural values (Choi, 2015). China is not only an early adopter of K-pop; it is also one of the largest markets for Korean popular culture (Fu & Liew, 2005; J. Y. Kim & Lee, 2012). Chinese audiences have been experiencing Hallyu (or the Korean Wave) and K-pop since the 1990s (Sun & Liew, 2019). The spread of K-pop in China occurred in three stages, alongside the changing media environments: the Analog Media Era in 1992–2004, the Pre-mobile Internet Era in 2005–2012, and the Mobile Internet Era 2013-present (Sun & Liew, 2019). As the media environment and government cultural policies changed, Chinese K-pop fans engaged differently with K-pop content through different media and technologies (Chen, 2018; Sun & Liew, 2019; Zhang & Negus, 2020).

Despite sharing similarities with K-pop fandom in other parts of the world, recent Chinese K-pop fandom has distinguished itself from the rest by being more commercialized, and more focused on fans’ physical and financial contributions (Chen, 2018, pp. 54–83). Most noticeably, Chinese K-pop fans in the current Mobile Internet Era use social media to influence information of their idols (Zhang & Negus, 2020). Using empirical data of Chinese K-pop fandom from in-depth interviews and participant observations, this paper argues K-pop fan labor is creative labor, and that it contributes to the continuous growth of the K-pop industry and the global influence of K-pop culture. Individuals who self-identify as K-pop fans engage in specialized, managerial, or unskilled labor, while collaborating with fellow fans translocally and transnationally. This research potentially contributes to studies on the creative industries, creative labor, fandom, and the transnational flows of popular culture.

**K-pop fans: consumption and prosumption**

Fans have been studied at the individual, cultural, and social levels. Although fans were originally stigmatized as irrational and excessively enthusiastic individuals, their cultures have been studied by Hills (2002, pp. 18–39) and Jenson (1992). Recent scholarly publications have not only lifted the stigma of being a fan, but have also shown an appreciation for the fans’ creative passion and self-expression, and acknowledged fans’ goal of eventually working in the entertainment industry (Baym & Burnett, 2009; Duffett, 2015; Jenkins, 1992b; Yang, 2009). Fandom is now recognized culturally and socially as a form of participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992b), whereby fans attach emotions to the objects of their fandom (Hills, 2002, pp. 99–121, 149–160) and cultural meanings to fan practices (Fiske, 1989b, pp. 23–47). However, scholars are still divided as to whether fandom empowers fans as social groups, and whether fandom builds alternative social communities and assists in the construction of ideologies (Ang, 1996, pp. 133–149; Chen, 2018; Fiske, 1989a, pp. 95–113; Jenkins, 1992a).

Noticeably, fans are closely related to creative industries since the industries produce objects of fandoms. Drawing on Flew’s (2017) definition of cultural and creative industries, in this paper, creative industries refer to the industry sectors where the driving force is individuals or groups’ creativity while cultural products, including arts, media, and design products, are produced and distributed. In this paper, creative labor refers to the work in creative industries. Previous research has been done on the economic aspect of fandom or the relationship between fandom and the creative industries. Steirer (2016) suggests the more nuanced and complicated industry–fan interaction instead of the binary industry–fan relationship. Fans influence the industry by creating alternative discourses to industry-produced popular texts, constructing new audienceship, and manipulating the data traffic of Internet platforms, among others (Brower, 1992; J. Kim, 2017; Zhang & Negus, 2020). K-pop fans practice a wide range of activities that influence the K-pop industry (Tai, 2018).
K-pop fan labor is mostly characterized by usually unpaid immaterial labor through often pro-
sumer activities of fans. Lazzarato (1996) defines immaterial labor as “the labor that produces the
 informational and cultural content of the commodity” (p.133). It refers to the labor employing com-
puter and communication skills and the labor forming cultural and artistic tastes and norms that may
not be recognized as work (Lazzarato, 1996). In her book about branding, Banet-Weiser (2012)
indicates that branding needs consumers’ immaterial labor when the creation of a brand is a process
rather than a finished product. K-pop fan labor is immaterial labor since it constantly produces
K-pop-related immaterial products and helps maintain the popularity of K-pop idols. Terranova
(2000) defines that “free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is
translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shame-
lessly exploited” (p. 37). On the Internet, users spontaneously produce affect and culture with
unqualified intrinsic passion and enjoyment, while the users’ production is exploited by Internet
platforms (Terranova, 2000). Fans’ pleasure and the industry’s exploitation happen simultaneously
in fan labor (Stanfill & Condis, 2014). Milner (2009) argues that fans work for the contents instead
of the company. However, as the latter holds the creative and intellectual property ownership of
these contents, it invariably benefits from such fan labor without any reciprocal obligations.

Previous literature indicates that fans practice a gift economy in which they give rather than sell
fanmade goods (Scott, 2009; Stanfill & Condis, 2014). Researchers argue that such practice is
because of fans’ enjoyment of the work or their rejection toward the capitalist logic (Stanfill &
Condis, 2014). The gift economy helps fans avoid copyright infringement, and construct fan identi-
alties and communities (Scott, 2009; Stanfill & Condis, 2014). Even though in some cases, fans
monetize their labor by selling the products to the individuals outside of their fan community, this
practice can be explained as a protection from being exploited and monetized by the industry
(Scott, 2009). However, current K-pop fan practices contradict previous research findings. In
K-pop fandom, the differentiation of commodities and gifts does not depend on the recipient’s
identity. K-pop fan producers distinguish between commodities and gifts by the cost of production.
Usually, paper banners are to be given while cloth banners are to be sold (Masterpiece_jb, 2020;
Pjyloveeeeee922, 2019). Non-fans or outsiders may get free fanmade gifts at a K-pop event; how-
ever, only fans or insiders are likely to purchase fanmade commodities.

Fan labor is possibly creative labor. Existing literature on the creative industries, creative labor,
and fan studies agree that the boundary between producers and consumers in the creative industries
is blurred (Flew, 2013, pp. 28–53). The blurred boundary is because new information and com-
munication technologies (ICTs) have enabled global consumers to become “cultural producers,
commentators, and content co-creators” (Flew, 2013, p. 33). Existing research has identified a wide
variety of fan labor in the music and entertainment industries. For example, Swedish independent
music fans promote musical bands on social media and radio, and arrange concerts and tours
(Baym & Burnett, 2009). The K-pop fandom is no different. J. Kim (2017) uses the term
“K-popping” to indicate Korean female fans’ active participation in music production as listeners,
singers, producers, and promoters. K-pop fans even produce, distribute, and consume their own
products to both resolve their dissatisfaction with official production, and to demonstrate their
investment in their fandom (J. Kim, 2017). However, there is as yet no research on the classifica-
tion of these forms of fan labor.

Fan identities may help explain why some Chinese K-pop fans engage in fan labor. They are
often closely related to their everyday practices, as well as their knowledge and object accumula-
tion (Fiske, 1992; Williams, 2006). However, fan identities in East Asian idol culture—a niche,
highly commercialized popular culture—tend to be more closely related to consumption. Chen
Global Media and China 5(4) indicates that Chinese fans, especially those of Japanese popular music groups under the management of Johnny’s Entertainment, view only those who had paid for their idols’ products to be fans. This results in the postmodern fans’ overconsumption and high commodification of their idols’ products (Zheng, 2016). Chinese K-pop fans mainly identify themselves as fans of a particular idol, fans of a particular idol in a certain period, fans of a certain group, and fans of two or more idols in a certain group (Chen, 2018, pp. 84–101). The careful classification of fan identities possibly relates to fan labor as creative labor.

However, creative labor is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, individuals engaging in creative labor are able to informally, autonomously, flexibly, personally and emotionally invest in their self-actualization; on the other, this form of creative labor is insecure, uncertain, unequal, self-exploiting, self-commodifying, and usually not well-paid (Gill, 2002; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, pp. 52–77). Stahl (2006) argues that the autonomy of creative labor hides the inequality in employment relations in the American popular music industry. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, pp. 113–138) point out, students and junior employees willingly work for free or a very low salary in the extremely competitive creative industries in the hopes of securing a job there. Neilson and Rossiter (2005) use the term “precarity” to refer to the flexible exploitation, and flexible work and life circumstances of creative labor. If fan labor is regarded as creative labor, it is important to see whether these fans work in conditions similar to legitimate creative labor. This study intends to add to the literature on creative industries and fandom by demonstrating the link between creative labor and fan labor in its analyses of the ways in which K-pop fan labor is practiced and incorporated into the creative industries. Through empirical research, this study will show how fans become creative labor, and how fan labor is an indispensable part of the creative industry of K-pop.

**GOT7 fan labor in China**

This research focuses on the fan labor expended by Chinese fans of the K-pop male idol group GOT7. GOT7, a seven-member K-pop male idol group, is managed by JYP Entertainment and debuted in 2014 in the Mobile Internet Era (Sun & Liew, 2019). The group, still actively performing all over the world (J. K, 2019), comprises multinational members—a common strategy in the K-pop industry, specifically designed to target foreign markets. GOT7 has four Koreans (JB, Jinyoung, Youngjae, Yugyeom), one Hong Kong-born Chinese (Jackson), one Chinese American (Mark), and one Thai (BamBam).

This paper uses data collected from my own participant observations, in-depth interviews and other related online and offline materials to determine what constitutes fan labor in the Chinese K-pop fandom, how fan labor is practiced, and the meanings behind these fan labor practices. My participant observations took place during physical GOT7 events in Beijing, Chengdu, Shanghai, Qingdao, Incheon, Seoul, and online in September-December 2019 (see Table 1). Chinese K-pop fans normally have specific fan identities (Chen, 2018, pp. 84–101). During the fieldwork and everyday communication with other fans, I performed as an ordinary Chinese fan of GOT7 with my bias as JB. Even as a participant-observer, I consciously try to keep my distance from especially the more problematic areas of fan practices and behaviors. I state research identity as a PhD student who studies K-pop fandom in commencing interactions with fans throughout my fieldwork.
During my fieldwork, I took raw records (Tracy, 2013, pp. 105–129), pictures, and videos. Most of them were taken by my smartphone since frequently using a smartphone for typing and shooting come across as being more unobtrusive among Chinese youngsters. Pictures and videos sometimes were taken by my mini digital singular lens reflex (DSLR) camera when using such a camera was not obtrusive. In many cases, after participation in an event, I wrote formal fieldnotes (Tracy, 2013, pp. 105–129) based on the raw records, pictures, and videos taken in the field. When the time was too limited between events, I had no time to write formal fieldnotes. In such circumstances, I would document more details in the raw records, pictures, and videos during the events. Overall, I have taken approximately 65,000 words’ (in Chinese) fieldnotes, 2800 pictures, and 200 videos. Artifacts, screenshots, and relevant pictures, videos, social media posts, and other materials, have also been collected. The materials that are relevant to fan labor contribute to this paper. In the course of my fieldwork, I met many Chinese GOT7 fans engaged in different types of fan labor. Overall, I have interviewed eight Chinese GOT7 fans face-to-face or via Internet voice calls in September to December 2019 (see Table 2). Five are the fans who I encountered during my fieldwork while the other three had been introduced to me by other fans. Interview questions cover the participants’ K-pop fan practices, fan identities, social media usage, and their attitudes and thoughts that are related to K-pop fandom issues, among others. The collected data have been subsequently analyzed through a systematic qualitative analysis.

Table 1. Events attended and observed.

| No. | Date         | Event                                                                 | Location     |
|-----|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1   | Sep 7 and 22 | Mark and Jinyoung’s birthday café cheering events                      | Beijing      |
| 2   | Sep 14       | Mark’s ON YOUR MARK Fan meeting                                        | Chengdu      |
| 3   | Sep 15       | Mark’s YIXIA photobook fansign event                                   | Chengdu      |
| 4   | Sep 15       | Seeing off Mark at airport                                             | Chengdu      |
| 5   | Sep 26       | Jackson’s MIRRORS album billboard cheering event                       | Beijing      |
| 6   | Sep 26–27    | Jackson’s MIRRORS album online purchase                               | Online       |
| 7   | Sep 30       | Jackson’s MIRRORS Album Pre-launch Party                               | Shanghai     |
| 8   | Oct 19 to Nov 10 | GOT7’s CALL MY NAME album purchase for joining Qingdao fansign event | Online       |
| 9   | Oct 26 to Dec 5 | Delegate purchase of Singaporean fan-produced GOT7 pins             | Online       |
| 10  | Nov 2        | Simple Urban Plus Music Festival                                       | Chengdu      |
| 11  | Nov 4        | GOT7’s CALL MY NAME Comeback Showcase                                  | Incheon      |
| 12  | Nov 4        | GOT7’s CALL MY NAME album subway cheering event                        | Seoul        |
| 13  | Nov 6 and 8  | Delegate purchase of GOT7’s CALL MY NAME album                        | Seoul        |
| 14  | Nov 7        | M2 cheering event for GOT7’s variety show Hard Carry 2.5              | Seoul        |
| 15  | Nov 8        | GOT7’s CALL MY NAME album giveaway at Hongik University Subway Station | Seoul        |
| 16  | Nov 9        | Drinks at JYP Entertainment Soul Cup Café and dinner near the old JYP Entertainment building with fans | Seoul        |
| 17  | Nov 15       | Waiting for GOT7 outside the KBS TV Station                            | Seoul        |
| 18  | Nov 15       | Dinner with a fan near the old JYP Entertainment building             | Seoul        |
| 19  | Nov 16       | GOT7 mini fanmeeting                                                   | Seoul        |
| 20  | Nov 16       | Yugyeom’s birthday café cheering event                                 | Seoul        |
| 21  | Nov 16       | Vlive V HEARTBEAT Awards Ceremony                                      | Seoul        |
| 22  | Dec 22       | GOT7’s CALL MY NAME album fansign event                                | Qingdao      |
The typology of K-pop fan labor

Fan labor is part of K-pop fan practices. Not all K-pop fans engage in fan labor. The paper does not intend to make K-pop fan labor to represent the whole population of K-pop fans or make K-pop fan labor represent all K-pop fan practices. It explores how some K-pop fans become creative labor, and how fan labor is an indispensable part of the creative industry of K-pop. Existing research has classified fans based on fan practices or fan production. However, the existing classifications can hardly demonstrate contemporary K-pop fan labor. According to Obsession inc (2009), affirmational fans are sanctioned fans who support and emphasize the original production, while transformational fans are non-sanctioned fans who support and engage in fan production making use of the original production to serve fans’ purposes. However, K-pop fan production may show a mixture of the tastes of the K-pop industry, a fan producer, and fellow fans since the industry’s criteria and fans’ tastes of K-pop idols interact over time and the fan producer can display personal style in the fan production. Busse and Gray (2011) classified fandom as traditional fandom and industry-driven fandom: traditional fandom is a spontaneous subculture while industry-driven fandom is an industry-organized mainstream culture along with the wide adoption of new ICTs and the industry’s viral marketing strategy. In K-pop, the industry does intend to manage K-pop fandom; however, fans also create content and communities on Internet platforms spontaneously without the control from the industry. Company-organized fan clubs and fan-organized communities coexist. An individual K-pop fan can register at the company-organized fan club to join company-organized events while join fan-organized protests to fight against the company at the same time. According to Busse and Gray (2011), traditional fans are more socially and emotionally involved and invested than industry-driven, individual, or casual fans. As explained above, it is hard to classify K-pop fans as traditional fans or industry-driven fans. Casual K-pop fans may be less involved or invested than other fans. Noticeably, in the Mobile Internet Era, it is hard to distinguish between individual fans and members of fan communities. Even the otherwise more private individual fans have to join social networks to get updated information and media content. In social networks, they encounter other fans and other fans’ works.

K-pop fan labor is diversified. K-pop fans produce photographic and videographic works (H. K. Lee, 2019), paintings (“These Talented K-Pop Fan Artists Bring Every Fan’s Fantasy to Life,”

Table 2. List of interviewees.

| No. | Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Place of residence | Place of origin | Main fan production output |
|-----|-----------|--------|-----|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1   | Yanhui    | Female | 23  | Guangdong, China    | Guangdong, China | Visual materials, cheering billboards, café cheering events |
| 2   | Xiwen     | Female | 23  | Beijing, China     | Beijing, China | Group purchase, cheering products |
| 3   | Xixi      | Female | 24  | Beijing, China     | Inner Mongolia, China | Repetitive streaming |
| 4   | Xinchen   | Female | 23  | Beijing, China     | Beijing, China | Café cheering events |
| 5   | Yujing    | Female | 25  | Tianjin, China     | Shanxi, China | Café cheering events, cheering billboards, fan-fiction |
| 6   | Siqi      | Female | 23  | Seoul, Korea       | Shanghai, China | Translation, visual materials, cheering products |
| 7   | Tongtong  | Female | 23  | Seoul, Korea       | Hunan, China   | Repetitive streaming |
| 8   | Xinfei    | Female | 22  | Seoul, Korea       | Gansu, China   | Visual materials |
2017), fan-fictions (Lahkim, 2016), translations (Kelley, 2017), music (GOT7_GPjifantuan, 2019),
dance performances (Liew, 2013), and original creative merchandise. They also organize fan events. Some of these are run like corporate social responsibility events in which fans engage in charitable activities to enhance their idols’ positive image in society (Bae, 2013). Others function as team-bonding exercises where their idols’ birthdays and idol groups’ anniversaries are celebrated (Ong, 2019). Chinese fans have also acted as groups or individuals that help fellow fans by taking delegate purchase orders of albums or idol-related paraphernalia from Korea, purchasing these goods in Korea or other countries, and working as ticketing service agents (Baidu Jackson Wang Bar, 2016; GOT7xuanchuannvvangyanvshen, 2017). In so doing, they contribute to K-pop fandom in China by reducing international shipping fees for fellow fans, and helping those who are not good at foreign languages and those who do not know how to use foreign online shopping platforms. K-pop fans zealously seek to boost the popularity and competitiveness of their idols by repetitively streaming specific K-pop content online, continually reposting social media posts, and voting for their idols repeatedly (EXO Voting Team, 2019).

Fan labor is not self-expression without rules or restrictions. Creative dispositif can be understood as a social regime that expects and produces the aesthetically new in the fields of arts, mass media, and economy, among many others, starting from the late-modern society (Reckwitz, 2018). When incorporating into the K-pop industry, K-pop fan labor tends to be disciplined by the creative dispositif. Fan art producers have to produce creative works in distinguishable styles if they wanted to attract fellow fans’ attention. Meanwhile, creative dependence and creative tolerance (Fung, 2016) are behind Chinese K-pop fan labor. Fans’ creative work is dependent on the K-pop content released by media institutions, entertainment agencies, and idols. These creative endeavors have to carefully toe the line vis-à-vis their idols’ rights to privacy, fair use of their idols’ image, and the norms in fandom culture.

Based on the analysis of the data generated from my observations and in-depth interviews, I established three general categories of K-pop fan labor: specialized labor, managerial labor, and unskilled labor. Specialized labor is labor produced from the fans’ creativity, knowledge, and specialized skills. These creative end products are then consumed by fellow fans. These products of specialized labor can be released online, as is the case for images, videos, translated texts, subtitled videos, music, dance performances, paintings, comics and fan-fictions; or offline, as is in the case of photobooks, photo cards, calendars, keychains, pins, clothing, blankets, fans, hand mirrors, and other goods based on fans’ photography, paintings, comics, and designs. Managerial labor is where fans organize events to assist existing and potential members of fandom and promote their idols. Examples of managerial labor are the coordination of cheering events such as gatherings to celebrate their idol’s birthday and idol group’s anniversary at a local café, or making a billboard advertisement for their idols. Unskilled labor is the fans’ repetitive engagement with officially released products of their idols (such as music videos online, social media posts, physical albums, etc.) with the end goal of boosting the performance figures of their idols. These fans will typically watch their idols’ videos online a great number of times and vote for their idols repeatedly in polls.

Specialized labor

Homma, or webmaster of a homepage, is an example of specialized labor. The homma runs a website or a social media account focusing on specific idols; he or she also posts originally generated images and videos of the idols (J. Kim, 2017). In the Korean K-pop fandom, a “home” is a fansite that focuses on representing the homma’s idol; on producing and distributing originally produced
visual materials related to the idol; and on selling originally produced goods based on the pictures of the idol taken by the homma (J. Kim, 2017). In Chinese idol fandom, homma is called as zhanjie. Zhan means site and jie means older sister.

As seen in Figure 1, the hommas are clearly identifiable at male idol group VICTON’s mini fan-meeting at Digital Media City in Seoul on 9 November 2019. These are the people standing or sitting on ladders, and using digital DSLR cameras. The photographs taken under these conditions would then be posted on the homma’s fansite. Delegate photographers who take photographs and sell them to hommas, as well as ordinary fans who use DSLR cameras casually may also be among them.

The hommas I interviewed use professional cameras: Yanhui uses a Canon EOS 7D Mark II with a 100–400 mm lens, and Xinfei uses a Canon EOS 6D Mark II with a 70–200 mm lens. Yanhui told me that some hommas also use the Canon EOS 5D Mark III. Hommas take pictures and videos of idols on and off stage in their countries and abroad, regardless as to whether photography or videography is permitted. Thus, they would attend concerts, fanmeetings, showcases, fansign events, and go to airports, television stations, and other locations whenever their idol was due to appear. In 2019, Xinfei went to concerts, award ceremonies, television broadcast recordings, airports in Seoul, a fan meeting in Nanjing, and a fansign event in Qingdao to see the GOT7 members.

After taking their pictures, some hommas immediately used their smartphones to upload previews of the images to social media. A preview is a picture taken by a smartphone. It shows the DSLR camera screen of the idol’s photograph taken by the homma as well as the homma’s logo. Others would go home to edit the photographs and videos before uploading them in high definition on social media. These up-to-date images and videos enable global fans to keep up with their idols, and help to maintain these idols’ visibility in the public eye. Hommas are so efficient in taking and disseminating their images and videos that by the time the entertainment agencies and local hosts post the official photographs and clips online, a large number of fan-taken versions can already be found on the Internet. Many hommas have both Twitter and Weibo accounts, enabling them to post
with ease. As of 30 December 2019, Yanhui has 4000 and 11,300 followers, respectively, on her Weibo and Twitter accounts. Her Tweets and Weibo contents are often reposted by other fans or other fansites. It is hard to determine the nationalities of hommas from their social media posts, as they tend to be multilingual.

Homma-produced images and videos are also made into merchandise, including photobooks, DVDs, calendars, fans, blankets, and so on (Definerjb, 2020; Markstouch, 2019). These products are usually sold to fellow fans (Saleeverythings, 2019). Hommas have the power to creatively tweak the styles of their idols’ images. For example, Yanhui eschews making her idol’s skin unnaturally smooth like the other homma-produced images on social media. To obtain the most up-to-date pictures and videos of their idols, hommas have to expend a great deal of time, energy, and money in their fandom. In Yanhui’s case, she attended fewer GOT7 events in 2019 because she could not get time away from her new job. Even though she attended fewer events, she still collectively spent 2 months on fandom. Her annual fandom-related expenditure is 10,000–200,000 Yuan (1460–29,207 USD). In 2019, Yanhui traveled to Korea, Japan, and Thailand to see GOT7, spending a total of 2 weeks in those locations.

Hommas often take pictures and videos during performances, even though it is prohibited. They sought to do this by hiding their cameras from the notice of the security guards at concert venues. Hommas like Xinfei do this to gain recognition from fellow fans and obtain experience in visual material production. Xinfei believes the experience will help her to get a behind-the-scenes job in the entertainment industry, thus enabling her to become colleagues with her idols. She attended two concerts of GOT7’s SPINNING TOP World Tour in Seoul and tried to record one of them:

When I finished shooting that performance, I saw that no security guards had noticed me. So, I kept shooting. […] At first, I put the camera at a lower place. […] Then, I slightly raised the camera and continued shooting. But a hand came up behind me and pulled me away. At that time, the security guard was very severe with me. She dragged me out and told me to delete the videos. [Sigh.] What can I do? I have no experience, and had to delete the videos anyway. (Xinfei, personal communication, 15 November 2019)

Hommas gain experience through trial and error. Their specialized labor is dependent on the idols as their objects, the professional cameras as their instruments, and the entertainment agencies’ policies at performance venues.

Hommas also practice managerial labor as an extension of their specialized labor. Yanhui, a homma of her favorite GOT7 member since 2016, is a case in point. In 2019, she and another homma conducted a birthday billboard cheering project for this GOT7 member. In addition to inviting a friend to design billboard posters, they also edited a video, contacted an advertising agency specializing internationally in fan cheering billboards, paid about 20,000 Yuan (2920 USD), and got billboards in China and Korea to display their promotional content of this GOT7 member. Their 20-second fan-produced video played a hundred times each day for 2 days on the large LED screen on the outer wall of Lotte Young Plaza in Myeong-dong, one of the trendiest areas in Seoul.

Managerial labor

Café cheering events are an example of managerial labor. Planning for these events occur several months before an idol’s birthday, and they are jointly coordinated by the event organizers, recruited
fellow fan organizers and sponsors. While the organizers usually sponsor the event, other sponsors may chip in financially without taking part in the work. Each sponsor pays several hundred Yuan per event. As these events consume both time and effort, some organizers fail to find enough fellow organizers and the project falls through.

Xinchien and other organizers organized the café birthday cheering events for three GOT7 members’ September 2019 birthdays (Jaycee_chen, 2019; Ruidiya, 2019; Zhenrongdezhezi, 2019). According to Xinchien, she coordinates these events to make fans happy and promote her idols. She and her fellow organizers believe that doing so would maintain the interest of current fans while attracting new ones. Xinchien and her colleagues began planning this project in June 2019. For these GOT7 members’ birthday events, they selected the Sanlitun area in Beijing because of its popularity with Chinese youths. They then investigated several cafés in the area as possible venues; negotiated with café owners; sought image reproduction permission from more than 10 hommas; discussed, designed, and produced freebies for attendees; collaborated with café event organizers in other cities; and utilized cheering event experience gained from other events. A few days before an event, the organizers went to the chosen café to decorate the place with fan-reproduced official and unofficial pictures of their idols, official dolls, and official lightsticks. On the day of the event, a homma sent a birthday cake and card to the venue, paper banners and shopping bags with the idol’s images were given to fans as freebies, a lucky draw took place, and the screen in the café continuously played GOT7 videos prepared by the organizers. After the event, the organizers had to fulfill their agreement with the café owner by taking down the decorations, and making sure that the attendees posted positive reviews of the eatery on DianPing (China’s most popular restaurant rating platform) and tagged the café in their Weibo posts about the event.

Xinchien explained that in planning such fan events, organizers practiced their abilities in negotiating with partners, made decisions to minimize cost and maximize benefits, and deployed their teamwork and leadership skills. While these event organizers may be well known to fans in their locality, they are relatively unknown among GOT7 fans within and without the country. Their recognition and power, gained through the event, might not last long if they ceased to organize such events. Interestingly, fans reproduce officially released images without obtaining the entertainment agency’s permission, but they carefully seek the permission of hommas and fan-artists before reproducing their images. According to my interviewees, hommas usually refuse to give permission if they intend to use the images to produce merchandise for sale. This shows that even as hommas give away part of their creative works as contributions to fandom, they will not hesitate to make use of the commercial value of their images and videos.

Unskilled labor

Streaming videos and voting for idols online are examples of unskilled labor. Idols’ recognition within the entertainment industry is reflected in the number of music chart and award shows they win. However, these achievements can be strategically and intentionally attained through fans’ unskilled labor. According to Xixi, working for a fan streaming and voting team is very time-consuming. A streaming and voting team is an online fan community where the team leaders would assign daily tasks to team members to ensure that their idol was promoted. These tasks involve the streaming of certain songs or voting in certain charts multiple times. After graduating from university and starting her job, Xixi had more disposable income, but less time. Thus, she stopped repetitive streaming and voting, and instead traveled to other cities to see her idols. Yujing told a similar
story, as the streaming and voting team she had joined required members to complete daily tasks. Failure to do so would result in immediate expulsion from the team. Thus, she left the team when she got busier. To boost the number of views a video has, it must be streamed in its entirety continuously so that the system will not identify the views as data fraud. Fan streaming and voting teams make guides for fan labor to cope with the constantly changing algorithms of the online platforms. One of my interviewees, Tongtong, has two smartphones: one for everyday use, and another for repetitive streaming during GOT7’s promotional weeks. Repetitive streaming of music videos (MVs) is exhausting, as stated by Xiwen:

When I streamed MVs on YouTube, my brain exploded. In order to maximize the time utilization ratio, I opened many browsers at the same time. Once, I opened six browsers to stream an MV. Then, the MVs in each browser ended at different times. Then, you just listen. On that day, my brain exploded. Play once, clear the cache, and manually replay the MV. [. . .] You need to clear the cache! If you don’t, it means your streaming of the MV has already been counted! (Xiwen, personal communication, 25 November 2019)

Fans can practice unskilled labor if they have a smartphone and access to the Internet. Unskilled labor is dependent on the fan’s time and energy. Individual fans tend to engage in different types of fan labor at the same time, even as they focus on one type of fan labor. For example, a fan might simultaneously be one of the organizers of a birthday cheering event (managerial labor) as well as part of a streaming and voting team (unskilled labor). However, fans mostly shift from one type of fan labor to another, depending on their personal circumstances or preferences.

Translocal connections and the transnational division of work

Fans are connected locally, nationally, and transnationally. Some individual fans and fan organizations are key nodes in the fan network. Fans may get to know each other at local events, and at online or offline events in cities where their idols appear. Apart from local café events, most fan works are the results of online collaborations. The coordination of fan projects is mostly done through instant messaging platforms QQ and WeChat, social networking platforms Weibo and Twitter, fan crowdfunding and retailing platform OWhat, and online payment platforms WeChat Pay and Ailpay. Local fan event organizers are also connected through translocal collaborations. According to Xinchen, the September 2019 GOT7 birthday cheering events in Beijing are part of the collaborative effort of fan organizers from eight Chinese cities. Each city’s organizers would share the same designs for some freebies, but plan and host the event differently in their own locality.

Within the Chinese GOT7 fandom online, one can find fansites of the group, individual members, and two members. There are integrated fansites, and fansites focusing on specific fan works such as translations, purchase of official merchandise, streaming and voting, and so on. For example, the fansite to which Siqi belongs has 20 workers in total, with 5 or 6 fans working on translations. According to a former worker of an integrated fansite of a GOT7 member, there are on average 30–40 workers per site, of whom 10 are very active. Chinese fansites also collaborate in subbing videos (i.e. making subtitled videos), thus expediting the process. For example, according to the information posted on their social media, 10 Chinese fansites worked together to subtitle episodes of GOT7’s variety show Hard Carry 2.5. Siqi outlined the fan-subbing process as follows. After obtaining the video, one or more translators would listen to and translate the dialogue into Chinese in a text document. Then, one or more colleagues would make sure the Chinese text
matched the timing of the audio in the video. After that, another colleague will compress the subtitled video, while a designer creates a poster crediting all the parties involved. Finally, the video would be uploaded on Bilibili (a Chinese video streaming site) and the release publicized on Weibo with the poster.

As K-pop fans are connected globally, they often work collaboratively to promote their idols. Fan productions are divided up according to local circumstances so as to minimize costs and maximize the overall benefits for both idols and fandom. During GOT7’s comeback (album release and promotion) periods, GOT7 fans all over the world wanted their idols to top the music chart shows. As physical album sales, online streaming views of songs and MVs, and social media discussions are among the scoring criteria, fans purchase the albums, play songs on Korean music streaming platform MelOn, stream MVs on YouTube, discuss GOT7 on Twitter, and so on. Chinese fans do their part by buying large numbers of the physical album and streaming the songs and MVs where possible. Although only the registered residents in Korea are permitted to register MelOn and stream their idols’ songs, there are people selling or distributing MelOn accounts online to foreign fans, thus allowing some Chinese fans to stream their idols’ songs. Tongtong explains that Korean and foreign fans in Korea stream the songs often on MelOn, and buy the albums in bulk at local record stores so as to win a chance to meet their idols and obtain their autographs at fansign events. Chinese fans are less active on YouTube and Twitter, as those platforms are blocked in China. In contrast, Western and Thai fans stream MVs on YouTube and discuss and trend certain hashtags on Twitter because of costly shipping fees between Korea and their countries. Chinese fans, on the other hand, buy more physical albums because China and Korea’s geographical proximity means shipping is more affordable. This resulted in Chinese fans purchasing 103,898 copies of GOT7’s November 2019 album, CALL MY NAME, within the first week of its release (GetO_Together_7, 2019). According to fans’ records of the Hanteo Charts, the album sold a total of 224,459 copies at the end of the first week (OneandonlyG7, 2019). If the statistics are reliable, this means Chinese fans bought almost half the number of albums sold in the first week.

Fans value the first week physical album sales and mainly purchase albums then because the sales figures during this crucial window impact the idols’ scores in the music chart shows. Chinese fans buy the albums through Chinese fansites offering group purchases, Chinese fansign organizing companies, and online delegate purchase shops. A unique practice of Chinese fans is unshipped album purchase. This is where the physical albums purchased by the Chinese fans would be donated to charity organizations or cafés in Korea to promote their idols. Chinese fans do this to save on shipping costs and purchase more albums to boost sales figures. Of the 103,898 albums bought by Chinese fans, 42,457 were unshipped albums (GetO_Together_7, 2019). By engaging in unshipped album purchases, Chinese fans show that the K-pop fandom is more than being proud and supportive of their idols’ music and image; it is also about achieving the same goal as their beloved idols in the market.

“I don’t want to baipiao”: fans’ definition of fans

When many fans and I queued in front of the café in Beijing to collect fan-produced freebies at Mark’s birthday event, fan organizers asked us to produce evidence that we had bought Mark’s or GOT7’s official products. They said album orders would be the best, and shipped or unshipped album purchases were fine. [. . .] Proof of purchase of Mark’s joint-designed products was okay too. I prepared a screenshot of my purchase of Mark’s joint-designed T-shirts, thinking this would be enough. However, when my turn came, the woman checking my phone swiped to see the photos before and after the screenshot. I was astonished
that she expected to see more than one piece of evidence. [...] She asked if I bought GOT7 albums. I said I bought the albums through non-domestic channels, as I resided in Singapore. She asked me how many copies I bought. I explained that though I did not buy much, I attended their concerts. Then the woman said to the other organizers, “Here is a Singaporean [fan]!” The organizers probably agreed to give me the freebies because I was allowed to collect my gifts and pick my lottery ticket. However, in the process, I felt pressurized and judged. (Author’s fieldnote, Beijing, 7 September 2019)

Before fans could collect freebies produced by the event coordinators at Mark’s birthday event in Beijing, organizers checked for evidence of their expenditure on official GOT7 products. If you could not prove that you had purchased GOT7’s official goods, you would not be given any freebies at the birthday event. The rules were set and implemented by the fan organizers who had invested money, time, and energy to the project. A decade ago, fans who knew entertainment agency staff and privileged information about their idols possessed high status in the fan hierarchy (Chen, 2018, pp. 54–83). In recent years, investment in your idols gives you power over fellow fans in fandom. Fans also judge fellow fans’ investment in their idols.

Chinese K-pop fans define fans, non-fans, and different types of fans carefully. This is consistent with previous findings of the Chinese K-pop fandom (Chen, 2018, pp. 84–101). Fans define the fans of K-pop and the fans of specific K-pop idols differently. According to the interviewees who engaged in fan labor, fans defined K-pop fans as people who are interested in K-pop, follow K-pop news, listen to K-pop, and watch K-pop videos. In other words, a K-pop fan is in love with this culture. However, fans of a K-pop idol group are defined as people who make the effort to “repay” the group for entertaining them. This can be done by spending their money on official merchandise, and devoting their time and energy to ensuring the success of their idol group.

A lot of official, un-official, and fan-produced K-pop content are available online for free. To promote their idols, entertainment agencies encourage the fans’ repetitive labor vis-à-vis winning the chance to see them at a studio show recording or a fansign event. If GOT7 fans want to attend the recordings of music chart shows, they must be a member of the group’s official fan club, and they must have streamed the required number of certain songs (usually several hundred times) on MelOn. Similarly, fans must buy physical albums at an assigned record store in Korea if they are to stand a chance of winning a ticket to a fansign event. The more albums the fans buy, the higher their chances of attending this event. Fans believe that foreigners are more likely to buy more albums to win a fansign event ticket. The testimony of several interviewees confirms that each Chinese fan usually buys at least 100 copies of an album, spending over 10,000 Yuan (1460 USD) in order to win an opportunity to attend a GOT7 fansign event in Korea.

In the Chinese K-pop fandom, the term baipiao is commonly used. Baipiao literally means visiting prostitutes without paying, but in the Chinese K-pop fandom, it refers to self-proclaimed fans that refuse to devote money, time, or energy to the idol and fandom. Baipiao can also be used as a verb to describe the consumption of an idol’s free content without expending money, time, or energy on fandom or the idol. Those who self-identify as fans and make the effort to “repay” their idols deny baipiaos’ identities as fans. Tongtong explains the difference between baipiao and fans by comparing the former to beggars and the latter to street performers:

Many beggars look pitiful, but I won’t give them money [...] because I feel they are not sincere [...]. But street performers are artists because they actively earn money through their labor. That is the essential difference between beggars and street performers. [...] Some people call themselves fans and frequently boast that they love some stars, but they say that without doing anything to support them. (Tongtong, personal communication, 10 November 2019)
Tongtong also defines *baipiao* thus:

*Baipiaos* only want to receive, but do not want to give. (Author: What do you mean by ‘give’?) Giving time, energy, or money to our idols. These all count. Being a fan is not limited to the people who give money. I don’t think so, at least. (Tongtong, personal communication, 10 November 2019)

Overall, fans believe that their idols’ achievements are the joint efforts of the idols themselves and the fans who actively give their time, energy and money to them. *Baipiaos*, on the other hand, share in the idols’ achievements without contributing to them. The Weibo fansite to which Siqi belongs was created in April 2015, and posts content related to one of the GOT7 members. As of 30 December 2019, it has 281,811 followers and 26,439 posts. When I asked why she translated idol-related content for this fansite, Siqi replied,

*I don’t want to baipiao; I want to help. [. . .] Through translations, I help to disseminate the latest news about him. I feel like I have contributed something. Translations help people to keep up with the latest information. (Author: You’re doing this to serve other fans?) Yes, yes. I also do it to expand my idol’s influence. If no one makes Chinese subbed videos, the fans of other groups may not know of him. If you make Chinese subtitles, then others will watch the video and may come to like the idol too. (Siqi, personal communication, 8 November 2019)*

In the idol industry, fans are not mere audiences or consumers as they actively participate in the industry by inputting their money and labor.

According to the interviewees, the fans who spend money, time, or energy to produce products and coordinate events earn the right to set standards by determining who can access and possess their products. Gift economy still exists in Chinese K-pop fandom. However, many gift-givers in Chinese K-pop fandom admit individuals as gift recipients only if they have repaid the idol. Some fan organizers of giveaways may look at the fans’ records of expenditure; others may look at the fans’ records of repetitive voting and streaming. Engaging in specialized works is usually not part of the criteria for receiving freebies, as these fans account for only a small proportion of fandom. However, a great deal of expenditure goes into many specialized works. Hommas, for example, spend a fair amount of money attending concert overseas and fansign events multiple times each year so as to take pictures and videos of their idols.

**Conclusion**

In the case of many Chinese K-pop fans, they are more than consumers, as they do not just buy one copy of an album or attend only one concert. In fact, the Chinese K-pop fan labors themselves define fans as those who contribute to the idols and fandom. In other words, fans are those who engage in specialized, managerial, or unskilled labor as well as collaborations in the translocal and transnational fan networks. These fans actively practice fan labor because they believe it is one way of distinguishing themselves from ordinary audience members and the self-proclaimed fans who do not expend money, time, or energy on their idols. While some fans who have found ways of informally earning money from their labor, they are still consumers and labors devoting money, time, and energy to fandom.

Complying with the K-pop industry’s commodification of culture, Chinese K-pop fans value fame and economic gain in a K-pop idol or group’s career. The new ICTs make participation in idols’ careers, in the form of fan labor, available to fans. K-pop fan labor is the space where fans
can engage in creative expression and achieve their self-actualization. Such self-actualization is bound with their beloved K-pop idols’ careers. K-pop fan labor, especially specialized and unskilled labor, may be considered as controversial by the public and the media because they touch on the issues of copyright infringement, and data fraud. However, K-pop companies hold an ambiguous attitude toward fan labor. It is probably because fan labor does contribute to K-pop companies’ benefits while sometimes hurting the rights or benefits of the companies or K-pop idols. In such circumstances, the value produced by fan labor is exploited by K-pop companies and transformed into the companies’ economic gain. Same as Milner (2009) pointed out in digital-game fandom, K-pop fans work for the text, including idols and media content, instead of the K-pop company. However, since the economic gains of idols and companies are tightly bound, when fans intend to contribute to their idols, they also contribute to the companies.

As Steirer (2016) suggested, the fan–industry relationship is more complicated than binary in nature. A common reason for fan labor is the dissatisfaction with official productions (J. Kim, 2017). K-pop fan laborers work for the K-pop industry while they often criticize K-pop companies. K-pop fan laborers do not resist consumerism; instead, as consumers or as co-producers, who subscribe to consumerism, fan labor arises when the official corporate narratives inadequately address the desires and expectations of consumers. In the same vein, as creative immaterial labor (Lazzarato, 1996) and free labor (Terranova, 2000), alongside with the creative industries, K-pop fandom contributes to the commercial and cultural vibrancies to the K-pop industry. Fan labors are disciplined by the creative dispositif and are exploited, while they seek to be empowered through their labor. Like salaried creative workers, fan labors are self-exploiting, self-commodifying, and uncertain (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011, pp. 52–77). When many creative workers are not well-paid, fan labors usually receive no monetary compensation at all. Unlike salaried creative workers, with no formal employment arrangements and commitments, operating on more voluntary and informal engagements, fan laborers do not perceive their labor as a conventional job. Chinese K-pop fan laborers still perceive themselves as consumers who actively seek diverse ways to “repay” the industry’s cultural production when many cultural products distributed online seemingly do not ask for a price. However, such consumers’ “repaying” is a critical step in the production and distribution process of their idol groups. In such circumstances, fans’ creative labor is an indispensable part of the operations of the K-pop industry. In this respect, the binary labeling of K-pop fandom as merely passive and easily exploited consumers by capitalistic corporate institutions does not reflect the more complex experiences of these subjects. Instead, as the case study of GOT7 fandom shows, fan labor draws out the multiple prosumer identities that encompass layered levels of creative engagements in the affective economy of K-pop.

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**ORCID iD**

Meicheng Sun https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7107-6796

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**Author biography**

**Meicheng Sun** is currently a PhD candidate at Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research interests include transnational popular cultural flows, fandom, social media, and cultural industries. Her doctoral research covers the transnational fandom of K-pop in China.