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Fans' passion drives China F1 growth

Shanghai Grand Prix keeps setting new benchmarks, as attendance and engagement continue to rise







China's growing F1 fan base brought the color to the Shanghai International Circuit for the Chinese Grand Prix over the weekend, with a record attendance of 230,000 spectators. F1's official data shows the country has exceeded 221 million fans, nearly 50 percent of which are female. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

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The engines of the 2026 Formula One Heineken Chinese Grand Prix may have fallen silent, but the passion of Chinese and international fans continues to reverberate.

Held at the Shanghai International Circuit over the weekend, the second round of the 2026 F1 season captivated motor sports enthusiasts worldwide.

Mercedes 19-year-old prodigy Kimi Antonelli claimed his first-ever F1 victory, with teammate George Russell securing second place and Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton rounding out the podium in third.

Cultural phenomenon

For Chinese fans like Xu Fan and Zhao Yongqing, the 2026 Chinese Grand Prix was more than just a race — it was a celebration of their passion and dedication.

Xu, from Ningbo, Zhejiang province, bought a three-day ticket for the whole race weekend, and rose at 5 am to attend a fan meet-and-greet with Cadillac's Chinese racing driver Zhou Guanyu.

"When Zhou Guanyu knelt down in tears in front of thousands at the 2022 Chinese Grand Prix, I was deeply moved and became his fan right then," she shared.

Zhao, a Shanghai-based F1 fan of 20 years, has followed Zhou since his early racing days, crafting his own fan merchandise and collecting replica helmets.

"He is a pioneer for Chinese F1, inspiring more people to engage with the sport," Zhao said.

The dedication of local fans like Xu and Zhao is just one part of the story.

F1's official data reveals its fan base in China has surpassed 221 million — with nearly 50 percent of fans being female, challenging the sport's male-dominated image.

Young people under 35 make up the majority, and over half of the sport's new followers have joined in the past five years.

Records tumble

Meanwhile, the race set a new attendance record since its post-COVID resumption, drawing 230,000 fans over three days.

According to post-event statistics from Juss Sports, the operator of the event, ticket revenue increased by over 30 percent compared to last year, with approximately 16 percent of the audience being from overseas and 64 percent from other provinces and cities.

"It has been incredible to see a fantastic increase in the fan base in China in the last few years," said Laurent Mekies, CEO and team principal of Oracle Red Bull Racing.

"Not only did we see the fan base being much, much bigger than in the past, but we also saw an incredible transformation in that fan base.

"And we think it's only the beginning of the transformation."

This growth is not only reflected in the numbers, but also in the increasing engagement from international fans.

For Spanish fan Carmen Pacios, her first visit to the Chinese Grand Prix was a revelation. Beyond the race itself, she spent five days exploring Shanghai's landmarks and savoring the local cuisine.

What struck her most was the unparalleled enthusiasm of Chinese fans.

"I think Chinese fans are amazing, like everybody is super involved," she remarked, highlighting a dedication rarely seen elsewhere.

Pacios was particularly captivated by the viral limited-edition Adidas red jacket inspired by traditional Chinese culture, symbolizing the blend of urban vitality, local flavor and sporting fervor that defined her Shanghai experience.

Brett Kay, an Australian fan fresh from the Melbourne Grand Prix, was stunned by the vibrant atmosphere in Shanghai. "It's just extraordinary, and people are so enthusiastic," he said.

The lively fan interactions, paddock support and even a chance encounter with Lewis Hamilton made his trip unforgettable.

"It's amazing to see how quickly it's grown here," Kay added. "Hopefully, we'll see more Chinese drivers in Formula One in the future."

Embracing the boom

Teams and drivers have reciprocated this passion with deepening engagement.

Mercedes driver George Russell has designed custom helmets for the Shanghai Grand Prix to repay supporters' loyalty.

"I love the people here. The culture is amazing, and every time we race in Shanghai, there's so much love for Formula One," he said.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton further bridged the gap with Chinese fans by launching his Douyin account during his China tour and launching an official Xiaohongshu (RedNote) account after finishing the Chinese Grand Prix.

Haas, the smallest team on the F1 grid, expanded its local presence by opening an official Weibo account ahead of the race.

Team principal Ayao Komatsu emphasized: "I want Chinese fans to feel close to us. We've been racing in Shanghai for years, and I believe we can build a genuine fan culture here."

Drivers Esteban Ocon and Oliver Bearman further connected with fans by signing autographs for everyone who attended their first fan event in China last week.

Mekies noted that the sport's continued growth in China is as much to do with the Chinese GP's location as it is the racing itself.

"The energy in Shanghai, in the city, is incredible," he said. "It is a city where you want to stay awake day and night."

Li Junfeng contributed to this story.



Shanghai has been engulfed in F1 fever for weeks, with specially liveried buses and lots of exciting activities, including a huge fan event with Chinese F1 driver Zhou Guanyu. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Women deliver perfect blend of racing and lifestyle

By HE QI

Formula One cars adorned with makeup brand livery and LEGO-themed cars adding a playful touch, the paddock for the F1 Academy — a series for female racing drivers — at the Shanghai International Circuit was a hive of activity over the weekend, and the fusion of lifestyle and competition perfectly encapsulated the 2026 Formula One Chinese Grand Prix.

This year's event transcended mere motor sports by integrating beauty, pop culture and lifestyle brands into its fabric. High-end exhibitions and public art experiences extended the excitement from the track to city landmarks, embedding F1 into urban life as an expression of culture and lifestyle.

The F1 Academy Shanghai round marked the start of the 2026 season for the female drivers. Sephora, the season's official partner, sponsored Spanish rookie Natalia Granada, who made her debut in Shanghai in a Prema team car adorned in exclusive Sephora livery featuring the brand's iconic black-and-white stripes with bold red accents.

"Beauty and sport might seem like different worlds, but both celebrate confidence and expression. Support like this is incredibly important for female drivers," Granada remarked.

Aligning with the growing trend of young female fans, now comprising nearly 50 percent of the nation's F1 audience, Xia Ding, managing director of Sephora Greater China, emphasized the significance of choosing Shanghai for the F1 Academy's season opener, highlighting its aim to embody female power through speed and passion.

Meanwhile, Danish powerhouse LEGO Group debuted its partnership with the F1 Academy by decking out Dutch driver Esmee Kosterman's MP Motorsport car in one-of-a-kind LEGO Racing livery — as well as launching a corresponding "Speed Champions" LEGO set.



Sephora-sponsored driver Natalia Granada participated in the F1 Academy event at the Shanghai International Circuit over the weekend. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

LEGO Group noted that its latest research confirms that 87 percent of girls surveyed want to see more opportunities for them in motor sports, 75 percent thought racing sounded exciting, while 52 percent could one day see themselves as a racing driver.

Elsewhere on the grid, the return of Chinese driver Shi Wei underscored the rising presence of local female talent. Shi said she wanted to "show that Chinese women can also stand on the world stage".

Driving for British outfit Hitech, unfortunately, Shi was forced to retire during the race.

Off the track, F1's lifestyle influence was evident through brand collaborations. Louis Vuitton crafted a custom trophy case for the Grand Prix, with red and yellow V-patterns echoing Shanghai's colors.

TAG Heuer, celebrating its 166th anniversary, launched an exhibition in Shanghai, showcasing a Red Bull Racing car.

"The shared values between TAG Heuer and Oracle Red Bull Racing drive our partnership, both chasing performance and pushing boundaries," noted Laurent Mekies, Red Bull CEO and team principal.

From the commercial to the cultural, Zhou Guanyu's photography showcase at Sinan Mansions presented *Time Without Speed*, chronicling his journey from karting in Shanghai to the F1 grid, revealing the personal side of the Cadillac reserve driver.

"As a professional driver, I travel year-round for races. Amid the fast-paced hustle, I love capturing those precious, beautiful moments of life through my lens," Zhou said.

Additionally, there were collaborations with Shanghai Disney Resort, as Mickey and Minnie Mouse F1-themed characters made their debut, while Red Bull's "Urban Garage" at Century Square recreated the pit lane experience outside the circuit and showcased the gear of four-time F1 world champion Max Verstappen.

Li Junfeng contributed to this story.

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