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China's AI Path | Asia Pacific

Doubao Goes Paid?

In our view, ByteDance's reported introduction of paid tiers for Doubao, China's largest AI chatbot app by MAU, signals that China's consumer AI user education phase is largely complete and the industry is pivoting from user subsidies to commercial sustainability.

What's new? Chinese media reported that Doubao's App Store page now includes a paid service agreement and three paid tiers – Standard at Rmb68/month (US\$10) or Rmb688/year, Enhanced at Rmb200/month or Rmb2,048/year, and Professional at Rmb500/month or Rmb5,088/year. At the time of reporting, the app itself had not yet broadly surfaced these paid options. ByteDance stated that Doubao's free daily-use services remain unchanged, while value-added services are being explored and tested, such as PPT creation, data analysis, and video/film production, which consume more inference time and computing resources than standard chatbot queries.

Our take on Doubao's key motivations and implications for the China AI industry:

1) The most aggressive subsidizer turning to paid memberships is a meaningful industry signal. Doubao has been the most aggressive player in China's consumer AI space – free access and massive marketing spend drove it to 300mn+ MAU.

Introducing paid tiers signals that **China's consumer AI user education phase is largely complete, the cost of acquiring new users is rising, and the cost of serving existing users with rising token consumption is also increasing.** By charging for complex workloads while keeping basic chat free, ByteDance is taking a first step toward making Doubao's unit economics work, which is important to justify continued AI capex and building a longer-term monetization roadmap.

2) Pricing confirms prosumer positioning, not mass-market monetization. The Standard plan at Rmb68/US\$10 per month appears somewhat aggressive: it sits modestly above global peers (US\$8/month), above domestic alternatives like Kimi (Rmb49/month) while the Qwen, Yuanbao and Ernie apps remain free, 30%-60% above entry-level tier domestic coding plans, and in-line with ByteDance's own video-generation app Jimeng (Exhibit 1). The pricing, together with the value-added feature set (PPT, data analysis, video production), makes clear that the target audience is creators and knowledge workers, not Doubao's broader 300mn+ MAU base.

3) Compute cost pressure is the underlying economic driver. With daily token consumption reportedly exceeding 120tn in Mar 2026, maintaining flat free access for heavy workloads is economically unsustainable. The tiered structure effectively asks heavy users to subsidize their own compute. (Continued)

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CHINA INTERNET AND OTHER SERVICES

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Industry View

Attractive

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Sensitivity analysis: We refer to US AI chatbots as a benchmark with a paying ratio of 5% in 2025 (50mn subscribers out of ~1bn MAU). Doubao, while the clear MAU leader in China at 345mn as of Mar 2026, is at a much earlier stage of monetization, and consumer willingness to pay for AI subscriptions in China remains largely unproven. We therefore assume a significantly lower paying ratio range of 0.3–3.0%, an MAU range of 345–525mn (reflecting continued user growth from current levels), and an ARPPU of US\$98/year (Standard annual plan). On these assumptions, Doubao's annualized subscription revenue could range from US\$101mn-1.5bn, with the mid-case (1.0-1.5% paying ratio, ~435mn MAU) implying US\$426-684mn, though still modest relative to its core advertising business.

Exhibit 1: Subscription plan comparison

| Types | Peer Comparison | Monthly Pricing |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Chatbots | US players | Tier-1: US\$8 Tier-2: US\$20 Tier-3: US\$100/200/250 |
| | Doubao (per App Store) | Standard: Rmb68/US\$10 Enhanced: Rmb200/US\$29 Pro: Rmb500/US\$71 |
| | Kimi | Andante: Rmb49/US\$7 Moderato: Rmb99/US\$14 Allergretto: Rmb199/US\$28 Allergro: Rmb699/US\$100 |
| | Zhipu Qingyan | VIP: Rmb49/US\$7 SVIP: Rmb229/US\$33 |
| Coding Plans | ByteDance trae coding plan | Lite: US\$3 Pro: US\$10 Pro+: US\$30 Ultra: US\$100 |
| | ByteDance Fangzhou coding plan | Lite: Rmb40/US\$5.7 Pro: Rmb200/US\$29 |
| | Alibaba Tongyi Lingma coding plan | Pro: Rmb59/US\$8.4 (limited-time free) |
| | Alibaba Bailian coding plan | Standard: Rmb198/US\$28 Pro: Rmb698/US\$100 Max: Rmb1398/US\$200 |
| | Tencent Codebuddy coding plan | Pro: Rmb58/US\$8.3 |
| | Tencent Hunyuan coding plan | Lite: Rmb28/US\$4 Standard: Rmb78/US\$11 Pro: Rmb238/US\$34 Max: Rmb468/US\$67 |
| | Tencent cloud coding plan | Lite: Rmb39/US\$5.6 Standard: Rmb99/US\$14 Pro: Rmb299/US\$43 Max: Rmb599/US\$86 |
| | Minimax coding plan | Starter: Rmb29/US\$4.1 Plus: Rmb49/US\$7 Max: Rmb119/US\$17 |
| | GLM coding plan | Lite: Rmb49/US\$7 Pro: Rmb149/US\$21 Max: Rmb469/US\$67 |
| Video Generation | Jimeng AI (domestic) | Basic: Rmb69/US\$10 Standard: Rmb199/US\$29 Pro: Rmb499/US\$71 |
| | Kling AI (domestic) | Gold: Rmb58/US\$8 Platinum: Rmb234/US\$33 Diamond: Rmb586/US\$84 |

Source: Morgan Stanley Research

Exhibit 2: Sensitivity Analysis: Doubao subscription revenue (US\$m)

| Doubao | | Paying ratio | | | | | |
|--------|-----|--------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| | | 0.3% | 0.5% | 1.0% | 1.5% | 2.0% | 3.0% |
| MAU | 345 | 101 | 169 | 338 | 507 | 676 | 1,014 |
| | 375 | 110 | 184 | 368 | 551 | 735 | 1,103 |
| | 405 | 119 | 198 | 397 | 595 | 794 | 1,191 |
| | 435 | 128 | 213 | 426 | 639 | 853 | 1,279 |
| | 465 | 137 | 228 | 456 | 684 | 911 | 1,367 |
| | 495 | 146 | 243 | 485 | 728 | 970 | 1,455 |
| | 525 | 154 | 257 | 515 | 772 | 1,029 | 1,544 |

Source: Morgan Stanley Research Estimates

Exhibit 3: Sensitivity Analysis: Doubao+Qwen+Yuanbao subscription revenue (US\$m)

| Doubao+Qwen+Yuanbao | | Paying ratio | | | | | |
|---------------------|-----|--------------|------|------|------|-------|-------|
| | | 0.3% | 0.5% | 1.0% | 1.5% | 2.0% | 3.0% |
| MAU | 446 | 131 | 219 | 437 | 656 | 874 | 1,311 |
| | 476 | 140 | 233 | 466 | 700 | 933 | 1,399 |
| | 506 | 149 | 248 | 496 | 744 | 992 | 1,488 |
| | 536 | 158 | 263 | 525 | 788 | 1,051 | 1,576 |
| | 566 | 166 | 277 | 555 | 832 | 1,109 | 1,664 |
| | 596 | 175 | 292 | 584 | 876 | 1,168 | 1,752 |
| | 626 | 184 | 307 | 613 | 920 | 1,227 | 1,840 |

Source: Morgan Stanley Research Estimates