

**Fandom, Politics and Nationalism:
A Comparative Study of Idolization at the Nexus of
State and Society in Contemporary China**

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Abstract

In contemporary China, the development of new media technology has promoted the change and transformation of Chinese cyber nationalism, as it has an increasingly close relationship with youth subculture and fan culture. The idolization of the officials is a manifestation of this phenomenon. This paper conducts a comparative study of the two cases related to two virtual images, “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao”, which have been created as the representation of the Chinese officials in the past year. Through getting an insight into why “Brother A-zhong” worked but “Jiangshanjiao” failed, this paper mainly find that these two cases reveal the tension between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people related to public discussion and hegemonic resistance under the fandom nationalism phenomenon.

Keywords: Chinese nationalism; Cyber nationalism; Fan culture

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

When the Internet entered China at the end of the 20th century, the ideological trend of nationalism evolved into the form of cyber nationalism, which can be shown as the nationalistic expressions, emotions and thoughts based on the Internet (Min, 2009). In contemporary China, the development of new media technology has promoted the change and transformation of Chinese cyber nationalism, as it has an increasingly close relationship with youth subculture and fan culture. The idolization of the officials is a manifestation of this phenomenon. This paper conducts a comparative study of the two cases related to two virtual images, “Brother A-zhong”(阿中哥哥) and “Jiangshanjiao”(江山娇), which have been created as the representation of the Chinese officials in the past year.

“Brother A-zhong” is a personification of China created by fan groups and was universally known by the Chinese people during the Hong Kong’s protest movement in August 2019. At that time, thousands of internet users, who were fans of real-life or digital idols, flooded Facebook, twitter and Instagram with memes and messages praising mainland China to against those anti-government protesters in Hong Kong. The action has been known as the “Fan Girls Expedition (饭圈女孩出征)”. In this movement, China has been idolized by those fans as they united under the call to “protect Brother A-zhong”. Such a movement has been endorsed by Chinese state media, and has received good feedback on the Chinese Internet.

“Jiangshanjiao” was created by China’s Communist Youth League during the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020. On February 17th, China’s Communist Youth League released two animated cartoon characters on its official Weibo page. They were two virtual idols named “Hongqiman” and “Jiangshanjiao”. The names of them mean “abundant red flags” and “lovely land”, which were derived from chairman Mao Zedong’s poems. Unlike the high acceptance of “Brother A-zhong”, these virtual idols represented Chinese officials were met with lots of doubts and oppositions by netizens as soon as it

appeared on the Internet. With a flood of criticism on Weibo, the original post was then deleted by the official account.

Though “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” are both images of idolizing Chinese officials, netizens showed different attitudes toward them. Through getting an insight into why “Brother A-zhong” worked but “Jiangshanjiao” failed, this paper explores how Chinese fandom nationalism developed and changed on the Internet, how has the political ecology related to Chinese cyber-nationalism changed and what kind of obedience and resistance power relations are manifested by analyzing the discussions and attitudes of netizens.

“Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” are the products of the combination of national politics and entertainment. Ten years ago, however, young people who were interested in politics, and young people who loved animation or who were idolaters were still very different, even incompatible and contemptuous of each other. Tracing back to the history of anthropomorphizing the image of the country, the initial political images originated from the Japanese animation "Axis Powers Hetalia". In "Axis Powers Hetalia", all countries are made into cartoon characters, while the Chinese character "Wang Yao" has aroused a lot of enthusiasm among young people who love to watch anime, and inspired them to express their patriotism in another way. In 2013, the comic “Year Hare Affair (那年那兔那些事儿)” that characterized China as a rabbit began to gain great popularity on the Internet. This comic takes the events of modern Chinese history as the theme, uses various animal images to analogize the country as its source of creation, and tells the history of China in various historical periods since the founding of the People's Republic of China. It has been well received by Chinese netizens. After that, using this comic as the original version, the cartoon of “Year Hare Affair” was produced. For a while, watching this cartoon became the standard for a generation of Chinese patriotic youth. Then, from “Diba Expedition” to “Brother A-zhong”, the use of entertainment-oriented political expressions by the Chinese people became a phenomenon. At the same time, the official media began to gradually report and even guide this phenomenon in propaganda, using it as a way for mainstream media to promote ideology to young people. The confluence of fandom, ACG culture and patriotism has become a common phenomenon in Chinese Internet.

There are some perspectives that can explain why it is reasonable and valuable to focus on these two cases:

1. This research could respond and update existing research on fandom nationalism to help understand the new manifestation of this phenomenon in a new context.

2. The similarity and difference between “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” coexist, and the discussions related to the two images on Weibo are continuous in time and even overlap. Thus, I think these two images are appropriate to be discussed at the same time.

3. The Hong Kong protests and the COVID-19 pandemic have made China experience the internal changes of political environment, which brings complexity and many elements that can be discussed in the content.

In terms of scholarly benefits, my project could help with knowledge creation and enhance research collaboration between politics and communication domain. In terms of social benefits, it could help the governments make better decisions in communicating with young people, knowing how to find a balance between youth culture and politics. This project will contribute to communication strategy developed by governments for harmonious interactions with the public especially the group of young people, by studying public discourse about the discussion of “A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” on Weibo. Also, the general public could clarify their changing attitude towards the authorities on a more structured level.

This paper could help understand the Chinese media and political ecology better, learning more about fandom politics as well. Moreover, it would analyze the conflicts between the people and the governments in the Internet environment, exploring how to form good interactions between them in this context. This project aims to take the perspective of the relationship between party, state, and nationalism into the issue related to fandom culture. Through the analysis and discussion, it is possible to reveal the complex dynamic relationship between fandom and politics, and also, to further reveal the mutually constituting relationship between official discourse and civilian discourse.

Through analyzing the cases of “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao”, this paper mainly find that these two cases reveal the tension between the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people related to public discussion and hegemonic resistance under the fandom nationalism phenomenon. The creation of “Jiangshanjiao” shows the authority’s appropriation and reconstruction of fan culture through hegemony, which could break the nationalist consensus based on national identity rather than the ruling party’s identity in China. The value of research is to break through the common single-degree understanding of nationalism and political entertainment. While considering the structural state power, also highlights the initiative from society.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1 Patriotism and Nationalism

Both in real life and academia, the concepts of patriotism and nationalism are often used as synonyms (Viroli, 1995). Though even a number of scholars used to confuse them in the past, in these two decades, more authors point out the importance of clarifying the connections and the differences between patriotism and nationalism. In his paper which concentrates on the understanding of patriotism, Igor Primoratz emphasizes that acknowledging the similarities and dissimilarities between patriotism and nationalism are significant to warrant discussing patriotism in its own right (Primoratz, 2002). As “love of country” and “loyalty to the nation” (Viroli, 1995), patriotism and nationalism are relevant to each other, authors often discuss both of them whether in the studies related to the term “patriotism” or “nationalism”.

Although the historical origins and academic factors involved in patriotism and nationalism are very rich, and could not be completely covered here, given that the two concepts both occurred in the discourses of the cases “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” which this paper focuses on, it is still necessary to clarify them basically and also understand the relevant academic viewpoints for the further analysis.

Patriotism

Patriotism is a term involves geographical, cultural and political factors. Thus, the definition in some dictionaries describing it as “love for or devotion to one’s country” or “the feeling of loving your country more than any others and being proud of it” looks too thin and broad. Based on the understanding of its historical origin, Primoratz defines patriotism as a person’s love and concern of his country and polity motivated by the fact that it is his country, and such emotion is “expressed in a special concern for the country’s welfare and that of compatriots” (Primoratz, 2002). Chinese scholar Pan approves this definition, and suggests that a comprehensive definition of patriotism should encompass three aspects, including the object, the ways, and the valuation of patriotism (Pan, 2006).

Another definition of patriotism was given by Stephen Nathanson earlier in 1993, who described patriotism as the special love, compliance, and concern for one's country, with the willingness to act on behalf of the will of the country (Nathanson, 1993). He distinguishes the appropriate patriotism from the extreme patriotism. The former is manifested as the special but not exclusive concern for one's country, the restricted pursuit of national interests, and the selective and conditional support for national actions; whereas, the latter means people believe their country is superior to other countries, have no restrictions in the pursuit of national interests, and support any national actions.

Nationalism

Just as some scholars believe that "appropriate patriotism" and "extreme patriotism" are two forms of patriotism, nationalism is also discriminated as "good nationalism" and "bad nationalism" in common language as some scholars pointed out (Liu, 2017). "Good nationalism" is considered as patriotism, while extreme patriotism, which characterized by "depreciating the other", is considered as nationalism. This is kind of a common way to distinguish between patriotism and nationalism when discuss them, and in such a distinction, we can see that the attitude towards the "other" is a critical factor.

There are many studies and monographs on nationalism in the academic world. Different nationalist theorists, such as Anthony D. Smith, Benedict Anderson and Craig Calhoun, have different tendencies when discussing nationalism, while it is not a concept which can be simply defined. The content covered by nationalism is broad and multi-faceted, which not only means that it is difficult to define it comprehensively and accurately, but also further leads to the pluralism of its interpretation by the academic community. There are four main paradigms in contemporary western research on nationalism, namely, primitivism, eternalism, modernism, and ethnic-symbolism. I started by understanding the origin and evolution of the concept of nationalism, trying to build an overall framework and establish a macro understanding of the concept. At the same time, I also realized that the concept of nationalism needs to be considered over a long period of time, and it is necessary to understand it based on the specific context.

To understand the cause of nationalism, Benedict Anderson introduced the concept of “imagined community”, which means a nation can be regarded as “a socially constructed community imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of the group” (Anderson, 1983). The attitude from the “imagined community” towards “the other” becomes the essential difference between nationalism and patriotism. Nationalism is more like a constructive variant of patriotism, and also, more binary arguments can be seen in nationalism than patriotism. Patriotism highlights the individual’s love, pride, and sense of belonging to the country, while nationalism emphasizes the individual’s sense of national superiority and dominance over other countries.

In the traditional neutral definition, however, nationalism sticks to the ideal pursuit of national autonomy, national unity, and national identity. Nationalism is an ideology that focuses on nationality while striving to promote national interests, and the core concepts of it are “(national) authenticity, continuity, dignity, destiny, friendship, love and the motherland” (Smith, 2001).

Nowadays, the core issues of nationalism are basic territorial and political issues, further including issues of national identity and national culture (Calhoun, 1997).

Nationalism and Cyber-nationalism in the Chinese Context

Specific to the Chinese context, Liu argues that there are three types of nationalism, which are official nationalism, elite nationalism and grassroots nationalism (Liu, 2017). The so-called stigmatized Chinese nationalism that is currently being discussed in the academic world is mostly grassroots nationalism. Though Chinese Internet users prefer the label “patriotism”, the behavior of them is often considered to be a lack of rationality in patriotism, also, is almost equivalent to the extreme type of patriotism. When the Internet entered China at the end of the 20th century, the ideological trend of nationalism evolved into the form of cyber nationalism in cyberspace. Cyber nationalism can be shown as the nationalistic expressions, emotions and thoughts based on the Internet (Min, 2009). Given some typical cyber nationalist events, cyber nationalism in China has mainly undergone three waves in history, corresponding to three groups of nationalists: the 70s-generation intellectual netizens in the wave during 1998 and 2005, the 80s-generation informed nationalists in the wave from 2008 to 2010, and the 90s- and 00s-generations fan oriented groups in the wave after 2010 (Wang,

2016). University BBS, commercial portals, state-run forums, bottom-up networks and urban proxies offered online ground for nationalism in the first wave of cyber nationalism (Qiu, 2006), while social platforms, especially Sina Weibo has become the main gathering ground for nationalist expressions over recent decades.

Nathan and Ross said, “In contrast to American nationalism of manifest destiny, Chinese nationalism is powered by feelings of national humiliation and pride (Nathan and Ross, 1998).” In addition to the objective technical guarantee brought by scientific and technological progress, the emergence of the waves of cyber nationalism is related to China’s rise and the reorganization of the international order from the perspective of international relations (Zheng, 1999). Besides, the issue of online nationalism in the new media environment differs from the earlier issues of online nationalism in that, those issues before mostly came from political events reported by the mass media that occurred in the real world, while the issues in the new environment tend to be bottom-up, starting with the spontaneous promotion of netizens.

To understand contemporary Chinese nationalism, many scholars give explanations from the perspective of indoctrination and construction. They believe that, like communism in the revolutionary era, nationalism, which is constructed by Chinese political elite as a tool for ruling, is an important source of political legitimacy in post-Mao China, and officials have the motivation and need to organize and mobilize nationalism (Zhao, 2000). Hughes believes that from 1998, Beijing began to control the “nationalist cyber-tiger” to solve the dilemma of speech governance brought by the use of the Internet to develop the economy (Hughes, 2000). In a series of international incidents, such as the incident of the bombing of the Yugoslav Union ambassador and the South China Sea plane collision, the Chinese government deliberately concealed the facts, exaggerated or fabricated information in order to cover up the failure of diplomatic work, thus inciting and misleading the people Anti-American mood. Zhao emphasizes that nationalism in contemporary China is organized artificially from top to bottom (Zhao, 2000).

On the one hand, the political elite strengthened the nationalism of the Chinese people through patriotism education and other activities. On the other hand, the intellectual elite’s description and praise of the strong motherland also contributed to nationalism. Some scholars also point out that in a series of anti-Japanese incidents,

media prejudice, elite agitation, and government tolerance have jointly created the nationalism in contemporary China.

However, there are also some scholars holding different views. For example, Gries argues that the Chinese people are challenging the state's monopoly on nationalism through the Internet. The people are playing a greater role in nationalist politics, making the ruling party adjust their diplomacy policies to respond to the needs of domestic nationalists (Gries, 2005). In fact, neither of these two types of views can simply define current cyber nationalism in China, especially the cases of "Brother A-zhong" and "Jiangshanjiao". As for the incident about "Brother A-zhong", it was obviously not a product of government and elite manipulation, but was happened because of the action of netizens, youth subcultural group, or more specifically, fan groups who want to defend their idols. Besides, although such incidents were often defined as cyber nationalist movements due to the extreme ways of expression in the past, the way used in this movement is mild and gentle because females play the most significant role in it, which shows the strong femininity. The meme element used by the patriotic youth is soft and lively, and the feminine expression has successfully weakened and resolved some conflicts in the incident, which may often occur in the past events.

2.2 Fan Cultures

My cases are related to fandom nationalism, which means love the nation the way you love an idol. The fan bases of China play an important role in the cases of "Brother A-zhong" and "Jiangshanjiao", especially presented by the group of "fan girls", which means a colloquial term among China's online community to describe the fans who engage in a great many postings to boost the profiles and reputations of their celebrity idols. In the past three decades, fan culture research has experienced three waves and has shown two types of research biases: treating fans as irrational and ill people, or praising fans for their initiative and creativity fighting against mainstream ideology. After entering the 21st century, the popularization of Internet technology and the highly-developed mass media culture have made some differences in fan culture. Fan groups have expanded unprecedentedly, at the same time, their activities have become more frequent, more organized and more purposeful. In this new context, scholars explore fan culture in more depth from three different paths while seeing fans as members of online communities, enthusiastic consumers or free laborers (Hu, 2018).

Referring to these three main paths, this paper supposes to focus on the behavior of online fan communities here for the further discussion of the case of “Brother A-zhong”.

Online Fan Communities

The development of the mobile Internet has provided technical guarantees for the gathering of fan communities, reconstructing the spatial and temporal distance of cultures. People who don't know each other can gather together because of their common enthusiasm and the same point of view. This makes it easier for originally scattered fandom individuals to find like-minded people, form online fan groups, and better participate and share. Participatory culture transforms the experience of media consumption into new texts, and even the production of new culture and new community (Jenkins, 1992). Internet researcher Rheingold notices that through network technology, the traditional mob can establish effective cooperation mechanisms in a new way (Rheingold, 2003).

Henry Jenkins has always regarded the fan community as a progressive social force. He believes that the fan community has a typical utopian characteristic, and the values it contains are far more human and democratic than the values of secular society (Jenkins, 1992). He points out that those who engage in “participatory culture” pool resources and combine skills so that collective intelligence emerges as an alternative source of media power. Jenkins conceives that the concept of “collective intelligence” which proposed by Pierre Levy provides a vision of achievable utopia and a future we can strive for. The fan community is a place where the public can learn how to collaborate and co-exist in the knowledge community (Jenkins, 2006). Participatory culture is “in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (Jenkins, 2008). With the deepening of “media convergence” and the shaping of “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2008), fans who actively using new media are no longer just passive consumers of cultural products and one-way recipients of media information, but new producers under the empowerment effect of the Internet. In recent years, Jenkins' research has also made new progress studying innovative online and digital media practices in grassroots youth-led civics and activism movements, showing the trend of embedding fan culture into politics and providing more views and perspectives to link youth culture and political participation.

Characteristics of Online Fan communities

In the opinion of those optimistic scholars, fans exist as a group that opposes secular social norms with no difference in rank and status between fans and fans. The basis of community construction is equality and tolerance. Conversely, Hills found in his research that “any given fan culture is no longer just a community but also a social hierarchy” (Hills, 2002). When fans share common interests, they are also in a competitive relationship due to the differences in related knowledge and resources they have, and also the differences in their status and reputation. The existence of hierarchies further implies a difference in power and proves inequality in status, which will eventually cause desire and chase for power within the group. We can see that in fan research, celebratory and critical are the two main entry points of scholars. The former believes that fans are empowered to become key players in the new digital economy, while the latter believes that fans are exploited innocents and free labors who work for emotional pleasure rather than wages (Baym & Burnett, 2009).

In terms of internal characteristics, the online fan community has a significant feature of “self-declaration”. Those forming communities often rely on the production, the release, and the dissemination of “fan symbols”, “fan statements”, and “fan text” to carry out self-naming and self-definition of the whole community and the individual members of them (Chen & Lin, 2016). Based on the social platforms, online fan communities are now becoming more well-organized due to the management in different ways. They learn to perform fan behavior ritually, and defend idol interests through organized actions, thus accumulating many experiences which are similar to those in political fights (Wang, 2016).

3.3 Fandom Nationalism in China

In the third wave of online nationalism in China, “Diba” netizens and fans who follow some idols are the two main groups which play significant roles. “Diba” netizens are those who gather in an online community because they all like to ridicule Li Yi, a football player in China. “Diba” was the online community which started in 2004 as a soccer forum and has more recently become known for its highly-organized nationalist “battle missions”. As the number of “Diba” netizens grow, nationalist issues are gradually brought into group’s internal interaction. They fight as “patriotists” when nationalist

incidents happen, and, as a result, are regarded as traditional nationalists on the Internet. Different from them, fan groups in China have experienced some changes in nationalist incidents.

In 2010, there was an incident called “Liujiu Shengzhan” (六九圣战), which was deemed as the prequel of “Diba Expedition” (帝吧出征). In this incident, the target of the attack on the Internet by “Diba” netizens was a fan group who pursued the Korean star group Super Junior, and the reason was that some fans beaten and abused the armed police and volunteers who maintained order during the period of Shanghai World Expo. After this incident, fans who originally did not care about politics began to change. They gradually realized that entertainment and politics are not completely isolated, and they also need to recognize and maintain the political correctness of national justice and mainstream society for the interests of their idols and themselves (Wang, 2016).

The series of studies on the case of Diba Expedition is a phased and concentrated study of Chinese cyber-nationalism in recent years, which gives a deep description of the new trend in Chinese cyber-nationalism through the examination of Diba Expedition. Scholars discuss the topics related to the evolution of symbolic devices, the impact of information and communications technologies, consumerism, fan culture, and Internet subcultures on cyber-nationalism and also the political consequences of it. By the time of the “Diba Expedition” in 2016, fans became the main force of the online nationalist movement, and the group of them was named “Little Pink” (小粉红), which means a group of young patriotic fans, of which women accounted for a relatively high proportion. In the past, nationalism was generally considered as a strong male phenomenon (Ozkirimli, 2010), and fans were used to be regarded as those who were naïve and politically insensitive (Laifu, 2019). Now, however, the “Diba Expedition” demonstrated some femininity as a nationalist movement and showed the change of the image of fans. For the 90s-generation-based online nationalists, network technology and nationalism, which were two irrelevant things in the past, have merged into one during the construction of individual subjects. Considering this change of basic features of cyber nationalism, Hailong Liu defines the new type of nationalism as “fandom nationalism” (Liu, 2017). He especially explores why traditional nationalism, with hatred, anger, and actions in the real world, has evolved into fandom nationalism, with love, satire, and actions in the virtual world, as illustrated in Diba Expedition.

When analyze the case of “Diba Expedition”, Wang combines the characteristics of the online fan community with China’s online nationalist movement, and concludes that highly organized and ritualized collective actions often occur in the online fan community, so as to lay the most fundamental foundation of instant and efficient mobilization to act together in online nationalist movements (Wang, 2016). Liu points out that, due to the frequent cross-border and cross-regional activities of fan groups, they suffer unfair treatment and conflict with local fan groups sometimes. As patriotism can be a weapon used by celebrities and their fans to combat competitors, fans of mainland stars often accuse stars in other regions of insulting China to raise the status of their idol. This has led to the “Little Pinks” merging the country, the nation and their self-identity into their daily consumption (Liu, 2017).

The “Diba Expedition” took place in the Chinese Internet space on January 20, 2016, and the participants of it were mainly young people born in the 90s and millennials. Many of them were online game players or fans. The platform for the mobilization of the event was mainly based on “Diba” of Baidu Tieba, meanwhile including QQ group, Weibo, Douban, Tianya Tieba, AcFun Barrage Video Station, Bilibili Barrage Video Station and so on. The target battlefields of the “conquest” or expedition were the Facebook page of Taiwanese leader Tsai Ing-wen and the websites of Taiwanese media such as Sanli News, Apple Daily, and Liberty Times. The main “weapons” used by the warriors were graphic memes and text slogans. The specific method was to put a large number of these “weapons” on the target webpages, forming a trend of network “bombing”.

Scholars now point out that fan girls’ joint expedition for “Brother A-zhong” is an online nationalism phenomenon similar to that of “Diba” in 2016. The slogan “Fans’ Expedition, fights for every inch of land (饭圈出征，寸土必争)” echoes the previous slogan of “Diba Expedition”, which was “with Diba Expedition, no grass will grow on the field (帝吧出征，寸草不生)”.

Though there are already some studies based on the third wave of cyber nationalism in China especially focusing on the case of “Diba Expedition”, both the subjects and the context of such fan-related cyber nationalist movements have changed in the cases of “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao”; also, it was the first time that China itself became an idol in the new cyber nationalist movement “Fan Girls

Expedition”, which implies the necessity to research on the new case with a comprehensive vision involves politics and fan culture. Besides, while the discussion of power relations is an important part in fandom study, the analysis of power relationships and dynamic interaction between the group of fans and the Chinese authority in “fandom nationalism” issues is still little. Jenkins argues that, the more politically oppressive society, the more people tend to trust pop culture (Chang & Xu, 2018). It is worthwhile to study that how to use low-risk approaches such as fan culture, to engage in discussions of high-risk topics such as political issues in the Chinese context.

Chapter 3.

Methodology and Research Design

This research aims to get an insight of the phenomenon of Chinese fandom nationalism in the new context through analyzing the two cases of “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao”, combing the timeline to see the zigs and zags to answer the questions mentioned above in the chapter 1.

Social platforms in China, especially Weibo has become the main gathering ground for nationalist expressions over recent decades. Weibo is currently the largest social media platform in China. Statistics show that, by the end of March 2020, Weibo monthly active users reached 550 million, and the proportion of people aged 16-25 was over 60%. As a space where users can express their opinions publicly, many social hot issues are discussed on Weibo, providing rich text materials based on huge active users.

The two images of “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” were both created or appeared on Weibo at the beginning, and have been widely discussed on this platform. A large number of posts related to the attitudes and opinions on these two images with the obvious or hidden reasons for the views can be searched on Weibo. Hence, those posts or comments are reasonable to be the materials for exploring the answers to the main question through the method of critical discourse analysis, which means go outside the text, using academic and nonacademic sources to get a sense of its social context (Fairclough, 2012). The method of critical discourse analysis, which is the analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis (including language) and other elements of social practices (Fairclough, 2001) was employed to conduct the study to analyze the data on Weibo.

Regarding the approach of collecting text materials, I searched for two terms “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” on Weibo, browsing the netizens’ posts with the comments under the posts. The search function of Weibo allows users to view the “latest” posts in chronological order while reading the “hot” posts in order of popularity. Both of these orders could be useful and I combined both of them but gave priority to the latter. By focusing on the “hot” posts, I was able to directly collect those posts with a

large number of reposts, comments or likes, which means that the posts have received lots of attention because of their content, and I supposed the content could be more representative to be analyzed compared to the less popular content. Then I selected valuable texts and interpret their meanings based on the theoretical knowledge of communication. To be more specific, my analysis focused on the dimension of the nationalism discourse with the influence of active fandom culture in the context of contemporary China. The relationship between party, state, and nationalism in China is a key when conducting critical discourse analysis.

Chapter 4.

The Case of “Brother A-zhong”

Through the general longitudinal observation of the texts in chronological order, I can find that, unlike the situation in which “Jiangshanjiao”’s image launched to be criticized overwhelmingly, “Brother A-zhong” has experienced some fluctuations in public opinion. Especially when China was facing the hard situation of Hong Kong protests and then celebrating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, Chinese people’s nationalistic sentiment was rising because of the desire for national unity and a sense of national pride. When such a sentiment needed to be expressed at that time, the discourse and format of the fan culture which idolized the nation were easily accepted and directly misappropriated by people. After several months, however, while “Jiangshanjiao” appeared in public and was criticized, “Brother A-zhong” could also not escape the fate of being discussed and criticized as a virtual idol of the similar type as “Jiangshanjiao”.

4.1 The Creation of “Brother A-zhong”

By tracing the origin of the term “Brother A-zhong”, using the "advanced search" function of Weibo to gradually narrow the time range will find that, in fact, as early as May 2019 before the incident of Hong Kong protests happened, the term "Brother A-zhong" has been created by fan groups and appeared on the Internet. Specifically, on May 13, 2019, in the internal discussion group “Goose Group” of Douban platform, a fan posted some words to show her opinion that, China should be considered as the most in line with the image of “beautiful, strong, but miserable”, which were used to describe an idol in fandom.

The content of the post is written as follows,

“Our China is really beautiful, strong but miserable.

He has thousands of miles of mountains and rivers with magnificent waves.
He was divided up a hundred years ago, and later stood up on its own and climbed to the top of the world.

The people of China are hard-working and capable. After mobilizing people before the war, they would say just one thing: I will work hard, support our country, and not hold back.”

“Beautiful, strong but miserable” are the words used by fans to describe those idols with good appearance, strong professional ability but a cruel twist of fate. The fans illustrated that China is beautiful because of its stunning scenery, China matches the word miserable because of its history of being invaded and China has now become the second largest economy so it is strong. This view has been echoed by many other fans, and then they naturally personified China as “Brother A-zhong”, which is very characteristic of the expression of fandom.

Some discoveries can be made from the creation of the name “Brother A-zhong”.

First of all, this behavior of fans is to apply their usual set of text production paths to the name of an idol. They practice and share such a set of discourse system, and consolidate their internal consensus of value recognition through the use of special texts in the field to achieve closer connections between individuals within the group, while achieving their self-satisfaction. This kind of text production is the result of their subjective initiative, from which we can see the cultural creation of fan communities in their internal interaction process. The cultural creation is also contemplating Chinese nationalism in the real world. When using the text, fans break away from the logic of chasing their idols and embezzle it into the imagination of the country.

Secondly, the form of language expression that calling the idol they are fond of as a “brother” is a common way of expression in China’s fan communities which are mostly females. When referring to the idol as the brother, the fans substitute themselves in the position of the idol’s younger sister, and the younger sister’s affection for the older brother contains the meaning of worship, respect, and some attachment. Through the production and manufacture of texts, Chinese fans use the term “brother” to build interpersonal relationships with the idol in their imaginations, which could be a form of “quasi-social interaction”. In 1956, psychologists Horton and Wall proposed the concept of "quasi-social interaction" to describe the relationship between media users and media characters, that is, some audiences, especially TV viewers, tend to attach themselves to TV characters or roles including announcers, celebrities, fictional characters they like,

and develop a certain attachment and develop an imaginary interpersonal relationship. Because of its similarity with real social interactions, Horton and Wall named it “quasi-social interaction”. Fans use the term “brother” to “talk” to idols in the Internet field, and uniaxially narrow the distance between themselves and the idols. They are trying to strengthen the psychological connection between themselves and the idols in this way, and also to build anthropomorphic interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, the imaginary interpersonal relationship brought to fans by the text “brother” has its own characteristics. Specifically, this represents a kind of kinship in the context of Chinese society. Chinese people have a tendency to kinship social relations. In their communication habits, Chinese tend to use titles such as “big brother” and “little sister” to refer to other members of society who are not related by blood to build up closeness. However, the difference between the kinship appellation habits of the new generation of young people and the habits of previous generations is that, young people more often use words that refer to the same generation and relatively equal status, and more often use a softer tone. Those words they often use, such as “brother” and “sister” relatively weaken the unequal power relations constructed in the kinship social terms of the previous generations.

It is worth mentioning that, a large part of the current generation of young people in China are the only child in a family. In their real life, they may not have direct siblings in the sense of blood relationship. It is the lack of real comparison in their real lives that makes an imaginatively constructed personal set of relatives of the same generation can be easily produced. Therefore, the meaning behind the name “Brother A-zhong” is not only related to fan culture production and nationalist sentiment, but also related to the characteristics of the society of contemporary China.

4.2 Passion, Production and Mobilization

In the process of applying the idiomatic logic of fan culture to the practice of online nationalism, fans not only created a simple vocabulary such as “Brother A-zhong” from the beginning, but also gave the corresponding annotations of personality of the image as “beautiful, strong but miserable”. This behavior set up a set of relatively self-consistent idol image shaping logic, satisfying their imagination of China, and realizing the personification of the country. However, at the beginning of the birth of “Brother A-

zhong”, it was only a term that existed in the fan communities, and its use and spread did not break through the barriers.

In August 2019, the spread of the Hong Kong protests incident began to affect the entertainment industry. Some celebrities publicly posted messages on their personal homepages of overseas social platforms, expressing their support for the Hong Kong police and the government to stop the riots, causing some netizens with opposite opinions to comment on the celebrities’ Facebook and Instagram homepages. Those netizens attacked these celebrities and smear China at the same time. When fans saw their favorite idols and their homeland being attacked, they began to plan an “expedition” as an action to defend their idols and the Chinese government on the overseas social platforms. On August 14th, all fans from different communities united to defend China, which was called “814 Great Unity”. Their behavior can be said to be a continuation of the previous “Diba Expedition” incident and integrated into the third wave of China’s cyber nationalism represented by the action of “expedition”. The micro-elements of “Brother A-zhong” created by fans before this also achieved a large-scale dissemination by means and rituals of “expedition” in virtue of the Hong Kong protests incident which was a relatively grand political event.

From the creation of “Brother A-zhong” to the “Fan Girls Expedition” defending China on the overseas platform, this series of incidents would happen and ferment must be driven by some unpredictable accidental factors, such as the sudden occurrence of the riots in Hong Kong and the conflict between the Hong Kong police and the people; but apart from that, analyzing the process of these as a whole shows that there is also a certain inevitability. On the one hand, from the perspective of the larger social environment, the series of events surrounding “Brother A-zhong” conform to the trend of the development of China’s cyber nationalism to this day, which uses “expedition” as an important behavior, with the post-90s online sub-cultural groups and fan groups as the core groups, and is closely related to their daily entertainment culture. On the other hand, from the organizational level, as the main group of the event, the fan community exerts creativity and subjective initiative in its long-term in-depth fan activity practice, accumulates struggle experience and the ability to generate materials in long-term network interactions. At the same time, fans gradually realize the connection between entertainment and politics from an ideological perspective, thus revealing the political potential of fan consumers.

From the daily practice of celebrity worship to the creation of the concept of “Brother A-zhong”, then to the action of “fighting” for it and triggering a national carnival, how was this process achieved? To what extent are different entities such as fan groups and national governments interacting and constructing each other? What roles do they play? The consideration of these issues will help to understand this incident more clearly and further compare it with the subsequent incident about “Jiangshanjiao”.

Those fans who pursued different stars in the daily practice, on August 14, united in an organized way and went on an expedition on the overseas platform for China, that is, “Brother A-zhong” as a cyber nationalist movement. From the perspective of the subjects participating in the movement and the groups that support the action in terms of their concepts, or for those “nationalists”, they prefer to call it an online “patriotic collective action”.

Whether offline nationalist movements in the history of China, or China’s cyber nationalist movements in the early 21st century, or today’s “expedition” movements, “mobilization” is an important step to achieve the smooth start of such activities. Fans posted such text on the Internet to mobilize within the group:

“I call on all fan groups to prepare accounts and VPN for those fans who will battle as the ‘warriors’. Combine our personal destiny with the destiny of the motherland, and jointly create a better home!”

This text uses a language with a revolutionary color in Chinese history to call on the fans, and at the same time uses the militarized language of “battle” and “warriors” to convey the message of gathering together and launching actions in a relatively simple and crude way. The heroic posture is placed on the groups who participating in the expedition, which inspires the common belief of nationalism among fans who were originally based on the practice of star-chasing entertainment.

Moreover, once a “war” occurs in history, it will be an event attracts national concern. Soldiers shoulder the responsibility to charge and become heroes with a sense of faith. Different from traditional warfare, when such a “war” takes place on the Internet, other people who have not participated in the war will not only be able to hear the news from the front line due to physical distance restrictions, but can be onlookers on the

Internet directly. The Internet greatly increases the possibility that nationalists being circuseed during the expedition, and makes it possible for nationalists as “warriors” to communicate with the onlookers. Coupled with its internal organization and mobilization process, as well as all the results of material preparation can be displayed on the Internet in a direct way, those various factors enhance the possibility of the nationalists to obtain imaginative satisfaction in their heroic feats. This kind of militarized mobilization method with relatively strong male characteristics is similar to the characteristics of the incident of “Diba Expedition” and some mobilizations in Chinese history, which shows a kind of historical inheritance.

The way that the text used to build a mutually connected relationship between “personal destiny” and “national destiny” is common in the expression logic of Chinese nationalism. This way of expression is to give individual behavior a sense of mission under the framework of collectivism, enabling nationalists to realize the construction of individual identity and the identification of collective identity. A similar logic also appears in the logic of fan consumption. The cultural industry about fandom is good at combining the emotional investment of fans with the “idol’s destiny”, mobilizing fans deeply emotionally, and making fans feel that their support for idols, no matter what form it takes, could be vital to the development of idols. Emotional consensus is the key to nationalist mobilization. For fans who have long been under this logic in their everyday celebrity-worshipping practices, whether mobilizing others, “coding” and producing the information, or being mobilized, “decoding” and receiving such information, there is not much difficulty can achieve relatively easily.

4.3 The Discourse Belongs to Fans

Moreover, the fan community has also brought some new language expressions into nationalist actions. This type of text shows different characteristics from the texts in previous nationalist actions:

“For Brother A-zhong, he has only us.

Our brother was born in a noble family and has a prominent status. But the family began to decline, and he was bullied and humiliated. Three children of him were looted. He was beaten and beaten for so many years and was stepped on by no matter who in this world. When his life got a little better, the first thing he thought about was to pick up his children home. However,

he never expected that one son and one daughter would recognize the thief as the father and break his heart.

Our brother has only us. I, a little rabbit, is going to let our Brother A-zhong walk on the flower road for a lifetime!!!!

In the Chinese context, when you read this text, you can directly feel the strong sense of fan culture from the wording and sentence formation inside this text, which is a kind of special expression in a cute mode in the consumerism context created by the fan community. In fan culture, national discourse is often transformed into a “cute” coding system that can project emotional identity, helping fans to complete the process of replacing “war” and “conspiracy” with “love” and “will” at the imaginative level (Wang, 2016). Although this kind of expression is often considered feminine, emotional, depoliticized or politically unconscious, reading the content expressed in it shows that fans are still expressing real politics and historical knowledge in simple ways, although this knowledge is only based on a simple, more superficial Chinese historical framework. In a novel form of expression, the content it conveys is still the content promoted by the Chinese government’s official and mainstream media. The high level of similarity of the ideology in essence also allows the expression of “Brother A-zhong” to be recognized by the Chinese official and mainstream media, weakening the conflict between the folk discourse and the official discourse.

The “seeing” and “support” of the Chinese official media for the expedition have led more people to know about this “battle” and also promoted the action to have a sense of performance. There is a self-imaginative “circus-style nationalism” in China, that is, taking nationalism as an exaggerated performance, which will eventually push nationalism to irrationality and extremes. Although the nationalist movement for “Brother A-zhong” also contained some irrational remarks, compared with the previous Chinese online nationalist movements, there were very few expressions that were too emotional and extreme in it. Nowadays, although the nationalist movement with fan groups as the main participants is still in the framework of elevating themselves and demeaning the “other” in the imagination, they will not close themselves in self-expression, but pay attention to the interaction and relationship between their community and the outside world. They care about how others outside their group consider their words and actions, eager to get and be satisfied with the positive feedback from the outside world. But this kind of positive feedback seems to be limited to the scope of the Chinese context. They

still could not form a good interactive communication with the world outside of China, while the response to the activities of China's social media warriors has been divided between opinions at home and abroad.

Fan girls also use their straightforward language to help express the patriotic attitude,

“Although we are celebrity worshipping, we respect those who have contributed to the country more. The motherland is which we will always put first. At very moments, we will always be on the side of our country.”

The text can see the subjective consciousness of the fan community. In the process of their patriotic action, they do not shy away from their identity as fans in the commercial society, and even emphasize this identity. The reason is that, on the one hand, the fan group includes the newly-grown post-00s generation in China. They have grown up in the web 2.0 era and have established a strong sense of subjectivity. They have a strong affirmation and self-awareness of what they like. At the same time, the patriotic education they received played a role in the formation of ideology. Their patriotic expression embodied their patriotic feelings of simplicity, sincerity, and purity based on their personal identity.

As for the post-90s and even post-80s generations in the fan community, more of them experienced, witnessed or knew about the period of tension between fan culture and Chinese politics, and realized that the trend of intersection between the two is inevitable. As a result, they chose to use clever ways to face and resolve possible conflicts. These fans know that a correct position on patriotic issues can create a positive image for the entire fan community, reflect their sense of social responsibility, also, reverse the possible negative views of the public, the official government, and the mainstream media on the fan community. Therefore, to understand the official position and move closer to it, it can even be said that it is an act of “conspiracy” with it, in which shows a strategic consciousness of fan communities.

Chapter 5.

From “Brother A-zhong” to “Jiangshanjiao”

On February 17, 2020, the account @China’s Communist Youth League (@共青团中央) posted a Weibo announcing the birth of two virtual idols “Jiangshanjiao” and “Hongqiman”,

“Recalling the past, the red flag swept the westerly wind. Looking at the present over the railing, there are so many beautiful mountains, and the spring is coming.

Let’s meet two new friends, the league’s virtual idols Hongqiman and Jiangshanjiao. Today, the Weibo account @Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman Official launched officially. Come and support them!”

@Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman Official which mentioned in the text are the official Weibo account of two virtual idols. After this post of the China’s Communist Youth League was released, @Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman Official reposted this post announcing its “official debut”. In the past, the comments of the posts of China’s Communist Youth League were mostly expressing approval and support from netizens. However, this Weibo about two virtual idols attracted a lot of doubts. About three hours later, @Jiangshanjiao and Hongqiman Official deleted the reposted Weibo content, and the introduction of the homepage was changed to “Sorry, I need time to rest...”

The following are some discussions among netizens triggered by the Jiangshanjiao incident:

“The official took the initiative to beautify the huge cold state machine into a virtual idol. Even the appearance of a series of operations such as building anti-black stations and super topics community, and the action of controlling reviews indicate that, it is equivalent to the rules of fandom, which means I don’t allow you to say bad things about my idol, I don’t accept criticism, I don’t want to hear any doubts.”

“It’s nothing more than the collective outbreak of public opinion. Some time ago, the enemy of people was the angry young in Hong Kong, so when the CCTV news broadcasts the news about Diba netizens and fan girls, it has won applauds. At that time, Brother A-zhong is also not a symbol of flattering the state or vulgarity. Recently witnessing too many confusing behaviors of officialdom, it naturally spread the fire on anything related to political propaganda.”

"#Our country is not an idol# To be fair, Brother A-zhong is facing outward, just like playing a joke, just a patriotic action by the fan girls, but by no means implementing national measures! The people are the masters of the country, this sentence must be remembered forever!"

"Brother A-zhong was born to oppose the independence of Hong Kong. At that time, the outer net supposed that Chinese people lived in the wall and was uninformed, so many fan girls voluntarily went for the expedition. It is totally different from Jiangshanjiao, which is crustily produced and deliberately leading up by the official media."

In the text about Jiangshanjiao, the types of narratives repeatedly mentioned could be concluded as follows:

1. Politics should be serious and not entertaining.
2. The state should be a political machine, but not an idol.
3. The people are masters of the country but could not be fans of the country.

Combing the text with the context of that time, China was struggling to fight with the COVID-19 pandemic, which means the whole nation was experiencing a collective suffering. It was kind of the period when people were dying of coronavirus and the individuals felt most powerless. They required the government to take the responsibility to handle the crisis well under such circumstances. However, the fact was that, by creating an idol by itself and calling on the public to become its fans, the official was not only appropriating the result of fans collective intelligence, but also creating a new and unequal power relationship from top to bottom.

One other emerging theme here is the public discussion in China. In China's political environment, the public discussion space for people is limited. When the problem of Hong Kong protests emerged and the pandemic has exposed a series of social problems, people's demand for public discussion space showed an upward trend. Meanwhile, to maintain order and social stability during the pandemic, the government has controlled public discussions in the cyberspace to some extent; thus, the tension between netizens and the government in public discussions became more prominent.

Under such circumstances, for those netizens who want to hold public discussions in a limited space, they began to use “Brother A-zhong” and “Jiangshanjiao” as symbols to narrow the discussion of grand topics to the expression of micro-symbol level. “Brother A-zhong” then became a symbol used to criticize and ‘satire the government, and “Jiangshanjiao” became a symbol for discussing gender issues during the pandemic. They are using these two symbols to discuss issues which are related to the Chinese people.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

“Brother A-zhong” was able to succeed at the beginning because the fans’ patriotic expressions outside of the elite logic triggered emotional resonance from people. Their expressions lack deep logic, but it meets the emotional needs of the people under the current Chinese social background. Therefore, the social response brought by “Brother A-zhong” was based on the emotional resonance, and fans only played the role of the main body of the expedition in its special way. The harmony inside this case is based on the relative equality of power relations, and more on the reasonable control of each party’s needs.

When “Jiangshanjiao” and “Hongqiman” appeared, the comments of some Chinese people showed that they clearly knew that this kind of top-down production of official idols and tilting power relations reflected the hypocrisy of the ruling class to a certain extent. The shell of fan culture was used to achieve their own ruling purposes. In addition, in the process of their operation, due to insufficient understanding of fan culture, inappropriate misappropriation and improper ways have caused problems of inconsistency.

From the cases of “Brother A-zhong” to “Jiangshanjiao”, we can see that in contemporary China, conflicts, contradictions, and harmony among different social groups and classes coexist. In some ways, it shows that everyone is trying to connect with each other, trying to form a better social unity, so that Chinese society can progress and develop better. However, the reality has shown us that it is not easy to achieve this goal. It is not only necessary to pay attention to the ways and means, but also to explore better communication modes.

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