BROTHER A-ZHONG FOR THE WIN

A Qualitative Analysis of Chinese Fan Communities'
Nationalist Practice of Cyber Expedition

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Abstract

This research paper examines how fangirls, the celebrity fandom communities on Chinese social media, enact their national identity and participate in shaping popular narratives of Chinese nationalism through the cyber expedition amid the Hong Kong protests in 2019. In this process, fangirls utilized their unique fandom discourse system, idolizing China as 'brother A-Zhong'. Based on the approach of everyday nationalism, this project consists of nine interviews with fangirls who engaged in the cyber expedition in order to investigate how fangirls deploy their daily fandom activities to defend the nation, their national identity, and nationalism on digital platforms.

The results indicate that collective fandom actions are enabled by the fandom communities' collaborative organization, clear division of labor, and proficient digital media skills. These contribute to the speedy nationalist mobilization. Secondly, after their active engagement in the cyber expedition, fangirls experience different layers of nationalist sentiment, including senses of affirmed national identity, national pride, collective solidarity, and the obligation to defend the nation. Thirdly, brother A-Zhong is a romanticized reimagination of the nation on the basis of heteronormativity. However, by conducting daily fandom practices around A-Zhong, fangirls manage to shorten the distance between the nation and themselves, creating a fangirl-friendly way of voicing opinions. All of these aspects have led to alternative expressions of Chinese nationalism, which are mediated by popular culture on digital platforms.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese cyberspace is witnessing the thriving of what the Chinese scholars of cultural studies call 'fandom nationalism (Liu, 2019; Wu et al., 2019)', of which a significant form is the practice of 'cyber expedition(网络出征)'. In August 2019, during the Hong Kong anti-extraction bill protests, numerous social media accounts of the Hong Kong protestors' were flooded with memes (Xu, 2020) by youngsters from mainland China to defend their national identity. During the past five years, Chinese social media platforms have seen the rise of visibility and sophistication of these collective actions in the shaping of nationalist narratives. The practice of cyber expedition, never lacking creative expressions enabled by the vibrancy of digital media, is reversely altering the way nationalism is perceived, understood, and reproduced in the digital space of China.

Referring to the process of circumventing the Great Firewall of China to mainstream social media platforms outside the country like Facebook, cyber expeditions (chuzheng, 出征) aim to defend the national identity, unity and integrity of the Greater China. The first cyber expedition made a name for itself during the 2016 Taiwan Election (Yang, 2019). In January 2016, Diba, a Chinese online community on Baidu fórum (百度贴吧), called for active participation of all members to join collective 'attacks' against several Facebook homepages for their pro-Taiwan independence political affiliation. Named as 'Diba expedition (帝吧出征)', this self-organized action demonstrated a surprising degree of organization and efficiency, with participants swiftly inundating Tsai Ing-wen's and several Taiwanese newspapers' accounts with anti-Taiwan independence memes and posts (Li, 2019). Since then, a growing number of young social media users in China have been familiarizing themselves with this practice, which has proven to be a powerful tool to convert nationalist emotions into cyber activism.

According to Kit(2014), ever since the handover in 1997, Hong Kongers have been continuously showing ambiguity and resistance towards their Chinese identity. The Hong Kong protests in 2019 unprecedentedly revealed the underlying sociocultural conflicts between mainland China and Hong Kong. It is against this backdrop that several waves of cyber expeditions were carried out in August, 2019. Only this time, demographics of the participants turned out more diverse: apart from the Diba community who still played a leading role in the collective actions, a distinct, lively, and robust force also joined the keyboard battles: Chinese online fan communities (Teixeira, 2019), whose practice of fandom itself became significant cultural phenomena on Chinese social media years ago. Commonly nicknamed as the 'fangirls (饭圈女孩)', fan communities(饭圈/粉圈) primarily consist of young female supporters of celebrities in the popular culture.

As a heavy social media user myself, what draws my attention in the 2019 cyber expedition is the core construct fangirls created to express their love for the motherland. Fangirls rallied around 'Brother A-Zhong (阿中哥哥)', a personification of China, instead of simply singing praises of the national flag. By using the discourse and symbolic system originally circulated in the fandom

communities, fangirls humanize and idolize the Chinese nation as a male popular star who debuted 5,000 years ago (Chen, 2020), achieving magnificent career success despite malicious interferences from his envious competitors. Numerous memes and posts were inspired by this virtual construct of 'Brother A-Zhong', whose character setting(人物设定，人设) and storylines were produced, richened along the process of cyber expeditions, and utilized as the ammunition on the keyboard battlefield more broadly.

Previous research carried out on Chinese nationalism tends to take a top-down historical perspective and interprets it as authoritarian government's manipulation of the official discourse (Christensen, 1996; Zhao, 1998). As an attempt to refocus on human agency, Gries'(2004) reading on the popular nationalism in China was before the booming of digital media. Nowadays, new media technologies have revolutionized the ways of political expression and social activism, giving rise to various online communities. The studies on 2016 cyber expedition (Yang, 2019; Wu et al., 2019; Zhou and Miao, 2019) have filled the gap of Chinese popular nationalism in the age of social media. Liu coins the concept of 'fandom nationalism(粉丝民族主义)' for this emerging form of online nationalism in China, which means to 'love the country the way you love your idol (p. 139)'. Here, 'fandom' was used metaphorically to understand what then was considered a different imagination of the people-nation/citizen-state relation.

Three years later, fandom nationalism fits the term in a more literal sense with actual fan communities creating an actual idol. Yet, no single study exists which emphasizes on fangirls' endeavor to participate in nationalist politics. When fangirls use their language to tell the story of their nation, they are participating in the active construction and reproduction of nationalist narratives. This study aims to explore how the fandom communities engage and enact nationalism by using 'A-Zhong' in the cyber expedition. The study adopts the approach of everyday nationalism (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). In a bottom-up fashion, everyday nationalism considers ordinary people as the 'co-constituents, participants and consumers of national symbols, rituals and identities (Knott, 2015, p. 1). This will contribute to the understanding of fangirls' lived experience of nationalism, their national identities, and how both are represented through a concrete form of popular culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the contemporary public sphere, nationalism is often treated as negative and reactionary from a liberal standpoint (Crawford, 2011). Usually, the notion of nationalism is associated with separatism, populism, or extreme far-right politics (Billing, 1995, p. 5), creating the likes of the British National Party, National Rally in France, etc. According to Zhao, 'aggressive and war-causing behavior of nationalism is often taken for granted (2000)'. However, nationalism within different historical and geopolitical contexts is not homogeneous, and all forms of nationalism are not necessarily backward (Keating, 1996). The advent of nation-states together with nationalism in early Europe made comprehensive political, economic, and societal organizations possible, contributing to the process of modernization. Understanding Chinese fan communities' practices of cyber expedition during the Hong Kong protests is impossible without recognizing the particular circumstances of Chinese nationalism. It is also vital to investigate the intersection of cyber nationalism and popular fandom culture in China. This study will examine two developmental trajectories of nationalism in China: the 'official' or 'state' nationalism, and the 'grassroot' popular nationalism. Then it will take a closer look at the fan communities in China in the context of the 2019 cyber expedition.

1.1 Contextualizing Chinese Nationalism

In his famous arguments, Anderson (2006) points out that nationalism is a cultural 'artifact', while '[nation] is an imagined political community (p. 7)'. As state by Guibernau (2004), nationalism refers to the sentiment of belonging with which community members identify through shared symbols, common beliefs, and daily practices (p. 1252). Nationalism, as a relatively modern and frequently contested concept, often carries with itself three dimensions of connotation: politically speaking territorial autonomy, culturally national identity, and morally self-defense when under attack (Zhao, 2000). Particularly, the nationalistic sentiment flow between the state and the people continue to be an essential research topic (Chen et al., 2019, p. 512). There are primarily two intellectual traditions in the study of nationalism, which are the top-down and the bottom-up standpoints. Previous literature on Chinese nationalism usually links China's position with the former, reiterating the Chinese Communist Party's dominant role in shaping official nationalist discourse.

Rectifying the *Century of Humiliation*, which starts from the loss to the British in the Opium War until the surrender of the Japanese in WWII (Kaufman, 2010), is a fundamental nationalist goal for any modern Chinese regime. Suisheng Zhao (2005) argues the state-led pragmatist nationalism has been predominant in today's China, meaning that after a careful assessment of risk and opportunity, the CCP could effectively mobilize people's nationalistic sentiment for the purpose of securing its political legitimacy (p. 2). Indeed, the CCP has a longstanding tradition of promoting nationalist ideologies, which sometimes override the socialist dimension of the Party's ruling concepts (Liu, 2019). From its very establishment in the 1920s to the Reform and Opening-up in the 1980s, what the CCP stressed transformed from the 'salvation of the Chinese nation from western imperialism and

internal feudalism'(反帝反封建民族救亡) to the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'(中华民族伟大复兴), a notion still palpable in Xi's China dream policy (Callahan, 2017, p. 251). Against the backdrop of China's marketization and the Soviet Union's dissolution in the 1990s, nationalism became the source of national solidarity for China to survive the turbulent internal transition and external political criticism. As Christensen(1996) succinctly puts it, 'since the Chinese Communist Party is no longer communist, it must be even more Chinese(p. 46). ' Cheung (2012) shares the same view and argues that with the aid of new interpretations of Confucianism, the concept of 'Chineseness' is now the new source of legitimacy for China's modernization, a representative example of which is the political reform discourse of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics（中国特色社会主义）'.

The pragmatist view of Chinese nationalism resonates with what Anderson (2006) refers as the 'official nationalism(p. 195) ', a concept developed in reaction to the popular European national movements since the 1820s, during which process printing media played a vital part in the imagination and identification of a 'nation' while transferring nationalist sentiment down to individuals. Gries(2005) stated that this understanding of Chinese nationalism is not wrong, 'but the top-down state nationalism view is incomplete. Nationalist politics is never a one-way street(p. 253) '. When doing analyses of Chinese nationalism, western scholars (also some Chinese ones) tend to present an oversimplified understanding of Chinese politics on the basis of China being an authoritarian regime, picturing Chinese people as impotent objects defenseless in front of coercion and state propaganda. As far as I am concerned, the emphasis on the structural dimension of nationalism leads to the overlooking of ordinary people's agency in the co-construction of popular nationalism, whose ways of practice have been expanding greatly since the advent of digital media technologies in China. Though the Chinese government has been adopting the pragmatist perspective of nationalism instrumentally and effectively, there come times when they find it tricky to respond to or contain popular nationalist sentiments (Gries et al., 2011). Let's shift the discussion to a more bottom-up view, which Hailong Liu(2019) refers to as *grassroot nationalism*.

Practicing Everyday Nationalism With Digital Media

Within the scholarship of nationalism, there is also criticism of the top-down perspective. Hobsbawn (1992) insists on the duality of nationalism study, arguing that nationalism is 'constructed above' and at the same time 'cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below (p. 10).' Against such a background, Billing (1993) distinguishes between the banal and 'hot' forms of nationalism, with an attempt to understand the taken-for-grantedness of nationalism through ordinary people's daily practices and popular culture. Building on banal nationalism, the approach of everyday nationalism (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) focuses on ordinary people's lived experience of nationalism, and how they actively participate in reproducing it.

Although both approaches start from critiques of the elitist tradition in the area, their understanding of what constitutes 'the ordinary/everyday' are quite different. For Billing, 'banal' means mundane details and ordinary people's familiarization of national symbols through popular culture (e.g. a national flag hanging outside a souvenir store), which differs from the usually state-led and potentially conflict-eliciting 'hot' forms of nationalism. On the other hand, scholars of everyday nationalism argue that everyday domain consists of both banal processes and possibilities of conflicts. It emphasizes the everyday contexts and 'combines banal and hot elements in more complex and contingent ways (Jones and Merriman, 2009, p. 164)'. What would be a useful tool for this study is everyday nationalism's incorporation of the researches on national identity (Knott, 2015, p.2). For the issue of national identity related to Hong Kong and Taiwan continues to be a territory of confrontation and nationalist sentiment in China's public sphere (Fisher, 2019; Hughes, 2013).

According to Qiu (2006), nationalism is pivotal to China's online discourse and 'the evolving political identity of Chinese internet users (p. 125)'. As mentioned earlier, there is a tension between Chinese state nationalism and popular nationalism. Meanwhile, emerging media forms have altered the way nationalism was perceived and practiced in China since the late 1990s. A great example of this is the spontaneous nationalist activism in response to the racial attacks against Chinese Indonesians during the May 1998 riots in Indonesia (Wu, 2007, p. 35). In 1998, Chinese hacker communities and students of Peking University organized appeals and protests at the Indonesia Embassy through university-based electronic bulletin-board systems (BBS), where the primary force in influencing Chinese cyber-nationalism discourse in the earliest stages took shape. Online forums of a like nature were later strictly censored or shut down by the government (Wu et al., 2019).

During the past two decades, the advancement of digital media technology and online culture diversification have enabled different forms of cyber-nationalism practices. The source triggering cyber-nationalism campaigns is also shifting away from mass media's agenda-setting towards social media in an increasingly bottom-up manner, entering the everyday domain. In 2017, the Japanese hotel chain APA group caused outrage among Chinese internet users after two tourists posted a vlog on social media about finding a book in their hotel room which denied the 1937 Nanjing Massacre. Many called for a boycott and demanded apologies from the hotel chain, causing countless Chinese tourists canceled their reservations through online travel bookers (Griffiths and Ogura, 2017). The APA incident became the fuse of another Diba Expedition in 2017, which, unlike the playfulness in 2016, presented a far more serious tone in the memes and posts the expedition participants utilized. Historical events, pictures of the massacre and commentaries were used to express sentiments of angst and indignation (PKU New media, 2017).

The bottom-up, spontaneous, participatory characteristics are what defines web 2.0 (O'reilly, 2009); thus, the trend of decentralized agenda setting in the practice of cyber-nationalism is not unique in the era of social media. Nonetheless, what draws attention here is how online subculture communities deploy their exclusive everyday practices to reproduce nationalism in defense of their national

identity, voicing support for China in the context of digital media. Before it became the bellwether of Chinese nationalist collective activism, Diba community had been organizing 'forum-warfare(爆吧行动)' against other communities that it disapproved on Baidu Forum (Huxiu, 2016). From 2005 to the mid-2010s, the way of mobilization, organization, and content production in these crusades were already highly sophisticated and similar to those of today's cyber expedition. The deployment of forum-warfare in daily digital practices also makes it part of Diba's community culture.

Interestingly, it can be stated that Diba was at odds with celebrity fan communities for long before the 814 Great Unity. In 2007, the first extensive forum-warfare was triggered by the animosity between Diba and the fanbase of the popular Chinese singer Chris Lee (Ju, 2009). Under the attack of massive electronic spamming, Chris Lee's forum on Baidu was down for hours, and the admin had to suspend the posting function. The year 2015 witnessed Diba declaring another keyboard battle against South Korean boy-band EXO's fans in China (Feng, 2015). In this study, I want to look into the Chinese fandom communities, whose productivity and identity, according to Zheng (2016), have been continuously dismissed and never fully legitimized (p. 2) by the mainstream media. Meanwhile, they are also constantly subjected to the negative readings from other subcultural communities in the cyberspace.

'We Are All He/She's Got': The Celebrity Fandom Community in China

There are numerous kinds of fans—sports fans, music fans, movie fans, etc., and one wouldn't find it easy to generalize them. When Henry Jenkins (2013) proposed the participatory paradigm to understand fans' fluid appropriation and interpretation of the popular texts, he mostly indicates fan communities of particular media products, like fans of movies or TV series. Jenkins' arguments on media fans significantly correspond to the circumstances of fandom practices in China. But more specifically, this study focuses on a distinctive type within the entire fandom community: the celebrity fans.

Online celebrity fandom culture has become one of the research focuses in digital cultural studies in China during the past five years. Celebrity fandom communities, more commonly known as 'fangirls(饭圈女孩)' on the Chinese internet, are relatively fanatical fanbase who devote most of their time online to supporting their favorite celebrities. The advent of social media has increased fangirls' visibility for providing them with digital platforms where they congregate, coordinate, and perform collective actions to defend their idols (Zhao, 2018). The rise of celebrity fandom in China coincided with the reform of marketization and booming of consumerism in the 1990s (Fung, 2009), when 'Hallyu(韩流, South Korean popular culture)' was enthusiastically embraced and pursued by Chinese youngsters (Lee, 2011). After decades of development, Korean popular culture's degree of industrialization has been rather profound, while its fandom mechanism has matured

correspondingly (Kim and Ryoo, 2007). K-pop fan communities, usually called 'fan armies' these days (Billboard, 2020), are famous for their organized group actions (Coscareli, 2020). All these have had a tremendous influence on Chinese fandom culture in two aspects: exclusiveness and coordination.

On the one hand, celebrity fandom has a distinct and coherent discourse system (Du, 2020), with competition and confrontation as the eternal motifs throughout fangirl's daily digital practices. An archetypical narrative mode has always been popular with the community to construct a shared sense of identity and solidarity: From fangirls' perspectives, their favorite artists are good-looking and versatile talents who are frequently abused by their agents, mistreated by their companies, and robbed off opportunities by their competitors, whose fan communities are named 'the opponent party(对家)'. Conscious of the industry's limited resources, fangirls see it as their obligation to protect the idols and pay for their commercial endorsements. 'We are all he/she's got (哥哥/姐姐只有我们了)' is a golden catchphrase among celebrity fans (Laifu, 2019). According to Yan (2016), there's always ongoing battles among different fanbases on social media, and the presumption of *war* is embedded in the celebrity fandom culture.

On the other hand, battles cannot be won without the effective mobilization of armies. As self-initiating and self-organizing communities orbiting around different idols, celebrity fandom communities' internal management can be surprisingly systematic with a clear division of labor (Yang, 2019). From 'data-producing' (做数据, repeatedly commenting idols' posts or buying products endorsed by their idols) to 'commenting management' (控评, targeting troll posts and striking back), these fans form spontaneous publicity squads to contribute to their idols' positive impression building. Apart from these comparatively daily routines, fans also actively participate in charities. When a public crisis occurs (natural disasters, public health crisis, etc.), fan communities, almost functioning like NGOs, can swiftly mobilize, fundraise, and donate to relevant institutions in the name of their idols. For instance, during the COVID-19 lockdown in China, Taylor Swift's Chinese fan club donated 19,000 dollars' worth of PPE to Wuhan hospitals within a week (Zhang, 2020). Jeffreys and Xu (2017) argue that the 'celebrity-inspired, fan-driven philanthropy (p. 244)' has the potential to encourage public-oriented youth cultures in China, where there is almost no exit for collective activism.

It is now clear that due to the conflictual nature embedded in celebrity fandom culture, different fanbases are destined to go separate ways. This is why the event of the '814 Great Unity (814 大团结)' seems exceptional. 14th August 2019, during the Hong Kong protests, '#814 Great Unity' became the trending topic on Weibo, a central social media platform in China. Equipped with cyber-combat experience and devoted love for the nation, various troops of celebrity fans joined the Diba community in the 2019 expedition. Meanwhile, creative fans utilized their distinct discourse system, which was born and developed in the daily fandom practices, to construct an idol of their own, one that was later endorsed by the official discourse: Brother A-Zhong.

A-Zhong for the Win: the '814 Great Unity'

Cyberspace is not a vacuum–it is both social and political, which is heavily mediated by the popular culture and deeply influenced by its surrounding climate. Initially unrelated to politics, the forming of celebrity fandom communities was more relevant to the notion of 'commodity audience' coined by Smythe (1981), created and courted by cultural industries. However, the case of '814 Great Unity' turned fandom practices political in very special circumstances.

In the age of social media, the Chinese government has adjusted its official nationalism strategy, cultivating new types of top-down nationalist narratives to draw the attention of the younger generations. The Communist Youth League(共青团, hereafter called the CYL), a party organization of the CCP, has been promoting 'qualified' young idols by featuring them in state-run television programs and inviting them to party events to appeal to young people, especially the celebrity fandom communities (Bloomberg, 2019). We can say that the pragmatist nationalism reinvents itself through partly merging with popular culture, and it works. 'To be patriotic is the bottom line (爱国 是底线)' is a famous saying among fangirls. Patriotism (or nationalism in this context) is common sense knowledge within the fandom communities and the 'political correctness' of Chinese online discourse (Jin, 2019). According to Chen's(2019) observation, over the years of political austerity, there has been a tension between celebrity fan communities and the state-run media, with fangirls always maintaining a mixed attitude of respect and fear towards the latter. Fans are exceedingly proud when the official media acknowledge their idols, and extremely concerned when there's criticism of the idols straight from above. Chen also points out that fangirls have learned to leverage politics against their opponent parties, whose idols would be reported to the official media's social accounts if they demonstrate 'lack of patriotism' on important national holidays.

Against this backdrop, the '814 Great Unity' during the Hong Kong protests originated from Chinese fans defending their idols from Hong Kong protestors. Severe confrontations between police and protestors arose on August 13th 2019, and several popular singers openly voiced their support for the Chinese government on Instagram and received strong backlash (Einbinder, 2019). After Jackson Wang, a popular artist from Hong Kong, sided with mainland China and was called a 'traitor' by the Hong Kong protestors in the comments, his Chinese fan community quickly rallied and fought back. Following this, fangirls' defending their idols gradually transformed into defending the nation-state itself. A spontaneous mobilization of the grassroot nationalism managed to take place as fangirls expressed their unconditional support for A-Zhong, a virtual construct of the Chinese nation. Fangirls utilized their distinct fandom discourse, imagining the world as a stage where the popular artist A-Zhong who debuted 5,000 years ago has a 'living fanbase(活粉, followers except for the fake accounts)' of 1.4 billion, the entire population of China. Masses of memes, videos, fan artworks and text posts were created, and later used in the cyber expedition to Instagram, Facebook and Twitter.

Fangirls' participation in nationalism expression was strongly endorsed by the state media. The day after the 814 Great Unity, the official Weibo account of the CYL published an article in praise of fangirls' efforts in defending the nation, which was later reposted by People's Daily, the official newspaper of the CCP (Du, 2020). Since then, A-Zhong has been frequently referred to by all sorts of official media's social accounts. On August 18th, the Network News Broadcast(新闻联播), a daily news program produced by the CCTV, mentioned both Diba and celebrity fandom communities as representatives of public opinions when reporting the Hong Kong protests.

Figure 1: The official Weibo account of CCTV reposted the news clip mentioning Diba and fangirls

Hailong Liu (2019) argues that fandom nationalism, the practice of combining celebrity worship with nationalism in a bottom-up manner, is highly imprinted with online subcultures in discourse, organization, and collective actions. Through the gamification of politics, young netizens who participate in the cyber expeditions utilize digital media technologies to defend their national identity of the undivided Greater China. Liu believes that from the standpoints of those expedition participants, politics is not real or serious, while issues like national identity can be solved in the way of game playing or fandom practicing. As stated by Guobin Yang (2019), the cyber expedition is more of a self-performance than an actual intercultural crusade. Some fangirls who then were known as 'little pink (小粉红)' were in the 2016 Diba expedition as well. Liu believes that the underlying motivation of little pink's engagement 'might be the desire to obtain social recognition rather than love for the country (p. 140).' According to Zheng (2016), it is true that fandom communities in China have been having trouble gaining full legitimacy from the mainstream culture; hence they're eager for social acknowledgments. But in the case of the 814 Great Unity, merely writing off fangirls'

practice of fandom nationalism as self-defense is a reductionist understanding of the fan communities. Fangirls have intricate behavioral patterns, which are the joint invention of a highly competitive celebrity-centric commercial environment and the top-down nationalistic education from an authoritarian regime, reacting simultaneously to the cultural and social issues surrounding them.

So far, this study has revised some key literature focusing on Chinese nationalism and Chinese celebrity fandom communities. There are two traditions of understanding nationalism as a cultural construct: the top-down and bottom-up ones. Neither one should be neglected to grasp fangirls' subjectivity within the bigger picture. Liu (2019) selected Diba community as his main research subject. What he didn't have the chance to dig into is the digital ecology of Chinese fan communities. Fangirls transfer their everyday practices of supporting idols into distinct expressions of nationalist sentiment and national identity. Therefore, the theory of everyday nationalism proposed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) with its focus on human agency would be a handy tool in understading fangirls' practice of fandom nationalism. According to Hobsbawn (1992), when analyzing nationalism from below, one has to take 'the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people(p. 10)' into consideration, even though they are 'not necessarily national and less still nationalist'. Fangirls, who themselves are skillful social media users, are the young, ordinary people of the nation. For a deeper grasp of the popular nationalism in contemporary China, this study is also an attempt to broaden everyday nationalism's scope of application to the context of Chinese digital media landscape.

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

The primary goal of this study is to investigate how the celebrity fandom communities enact nationalism and their national identity through the practice of cyber expeditions. Several sub-questions are as follows: How do fangirls deploy their daily fandom activities to defend their national identity? How do they perceive and imagine their nation, together with their relations to it? How do they reproduce nationalism through the idolization of 'A-Zhong' using their distinctive discourse system? As an exploratory research, this study seeks to offer potential explanations without the ambition of exhausting all possible answers. I try to answer these questions by semi-structured interviews of real participants in the 2019 cyber expedition. A thematic analysis is then conducted to the data in the approach of thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Rationales for the Chosen Methodology

Scholars of everyday nationalism need to capture the daily 'active construction (Mann and Fenton, 2009, p. 518)' of nationalism. Therefore ethnographic observation and interviews are the most common approaches (Knott, 2015). Originally, I planned to use digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) as the main methodology for this study, since the practices of celebrity fandom and cyber nationalism are both situated in online space, which is mediated by digital technologies. The method of digital ethnography allows for a rich and deep observation of the subjects. Nevertheless, as mentioned in the literature review, due to the competition and antagonism between different fanbases, celebrity fandom in China is quite a member-only game with strong senses of exclusivenss. It could take more time than expected to blend in fan communities for all the research questions to be answered, rendering the whole study uncontrollable.

On the other hand, the semi-structured interview focuses on the 'lived experience (Galletta, 2013, p. 9)' of the respondents, providing researchers with ample opportunities of grappling with the complexity of a story that needs contextualization. In the empirical study on young adults' attitudes towards being British/English in Bristol, Fenton(2007) also points out that qualitative interviews offer great insights into people's authentic feelings of their national identity. Therefore, I finally chose semi-structured interviews as the main method, which corresponds with everyday nationalism's emphasis on human agency and the need to reveal fangirls' personal stories. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews also helps to open up conversations based on interviewees' different narratives (Wengraf, 2001), generating unpredictable answers which may contribute to our discussion later.

Sampling and Recruitment

According to Robinson (2014), the first step of conducting a qualitative interview is defining the sampling universe. In this study, the research subjects are celebrity fans who participated in the 2019 cyber expedition during the Hong Kong protests. Though members of celebrity fandom communities are not necessarily female, they are most frequently referred to as 'fangirls' both by the official media

and mainstream culture. Meanwhile, despite the transnational/border-crossing sense which the word cyber 'expedition' contains, Weibo is the main 'camp base (Du, 2020)' where 'A-Zhong' was originally constructed and the discourse of fandom nationalism circulated. Therefore, the entire sampling process took place on the social media platform of Weibo.

Each respondent has to meet two conditions: 1) that she engaged in the '814 Great Unity' expedition; 2) that she is still a practitioner of celebrity fandom. Following this principle, the sampling was carried out in two ways. Firstly, after using 'fangirls' ,'brother A-Zhong' and 'expedition' as keywords to search on Weibo, I found three hashtags with comparatively large readerships, which were:

1. #FangirlsSupportBrotherAZhong#(#饭圈女孩给阿中哥哥打 call#)；
2. #FangirlsOnCyberExpedition#(#饭圈女孩网络出征#);
3. #FangirlsDissHongKongCynics#(#饭圈女孩爆笑怼香港愤青#).

Then the sampling pool was narrowed down with advanced searching to make sure posts with at least one of the three hashtags were published on August 14th, 2019. Before inviting every possible respondent through direct message on Weibo, I examined the profile and recent posts of the accounts in the sampling pool to confirm they had been actively participating in fandom practices. I identified this by checking whether they had been voicing support for their idols, reposting content of the same celebrity continuously, etc.

Secondly, a particular way was added to extend the existing sampling pool. I looked at the article the CYL publichsed on August 15th, 2019. This article harvested over 257 thousand likes, 18.6 thousand comments, and 33.6 thousand times of reposts. Numerous fangirls also congregated under this post, expressing their love for China with their fandom disursive system. I selected from those who commented, checked their profiles, and sent them interview invitations through direct messages.
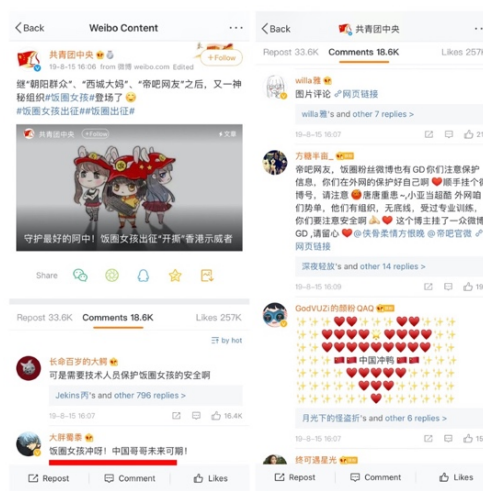

Figure 2: CYL's Weibo article and its comments

After successfully contacting the respondents, I ensured the interview's confidentiality and gave them the consent form. Then they were asked whether the talks could be hold on WeChat, a messaging application more suitable for instant communications. Two people insisted the interviews be conducted on Weibo, refusing to expand our interaction to a more private territory 'out of security concerns(Su)'. Meanwhile, all respondents chose texting to respond instead of video or voice calls I offered. Their vigilance was not entirely unforeseeable. The difficulties in finding respondents coincided with what Wu et al. (2019) encountered in their study on the 2016 Diba expedition. Wu at el. failed to reach the respondents by publishing online recruitments, and only later did they manage to conduct the interviews through offline social connections in universities. For one thing, there is an increasing privacy trust crisis in China in the era of big data (Wang and Yu, 2015), with young social media users more and more conscious of personal information protection. For another, according to the replies of some potential respondents, the topic on the cyber expedition during the Hong Kong protests was 'too sensitive to comment on'.

In all, I managed to recruit nine interviewees out of 53 sent invitations. The interviewing lengths varied from 40 minutes to 70 minutes, with interview details shown in Table 1. All interviews were carried out in Chinese and later transcribed in English.

#	Preferred Name	Age	Occupation	Year(s) in the Fandom Community	Interveiw Details
1	Meteor	14	Middle School Student	2	Wechat, 15/07/20
2	Andrea	20	Undergraduate Student	6	Wechat, 16/07/20
3	Daytoy	23	Office Clerk	6	Wechat, 22/07/20
4	Chen	16	High School Student	2	Weibo Message, 30/07/20
5	Heydry	19	Undergraduate Student	3	Wechat, 06/08/20
6	NoGangster	18	Undergraduate Student	1	Wechat, 12/08/20
7	Xuan	23	Cafeteria Manager	3	Wechat, 17/08/20
8	Tu	20	Undergraduate Student	2	Wechat, 18/08/20
9	Su	21	Undergraduate Student	3	Wechat, 19/08/20

Table 1: Interviewee information and interview details

Topic Guide and Analytical Strategies

Interviews are divided into three sections: demographic information, interviewees' experience on celebrity fandom practices, and questions concerning the research objectives. The design of the interview topic guide in the third section is based on everyday nationalism proposed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008). They believe 'four modalities(p. 538)' should be taken into consideration in the study of everyday nationhood, namely (1)talking the nation: 'the discursive claims for, about and in the name of the nation(p. 540)'; (2)choosing the nation: national choices made by individuals; (3)performing the nation: collective rituals and their symbolic meanings; and finally (4)consuming the nation: the consumption and reproduction of nationhood in individuals' everyday life. Combining with the literature review and fangirls' specific performances in the 2019 cyber expedition, I translated these modalities respectively into:

1. How 'A-Zhong' was talked about as a construct of the Chinese nation by fangirls;
2. Why fangirls chose the cyber expedition to defend their national identity;
3. How fan communities were organized to perform collective actions, and
4. What subjective feelings fangirls had of their nation after their active participation of the cyber expedition.

Questions were all phrased in plain language, asked in different sequences based on the interviewees' responses.

This study then used Attride-Stirling' s (2001) 6-stage thematic networks to approach thematic analysis. The thematic network is a way of organizing themes derived from textual data at three different levels, which are the basic themes, the organizing themes, and one or more global themes. It allows flexibility to recognize and interpret patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; George, 2019). According to Atrride-Sirling (2001), the network itself emphasizes the fluidity and interconnectivity of the themes, facilitating 'disclosure for the researcher(p. 390)' and a more structured understanding for the readers. I used NVivo software to examine the transcripts thoroughly.

Firstly, the coding framework was devised using a hybrid approach of deduction and induction. A focus on the pre-determined codes originated from everyday nationalism was maintained throughout data examination. Simultaneously, I made room for inductive codes to emerge from the data. After breaking up texts with the coding framework, different themes were identified and refined to construct the thematic network. During this period, the transcripts were frequently revisited. Then the basic themes were gathered to infer the organizing themes, which later were summarized as one global theme.

Limitations and Reflexivity

First of all, there is a possibility of sampling bias, meaning respondents who actively responded to me in this research might present certain characteristics celebrity fans don't necessarily share. This recruitment method results in the underrepresentation of what I refer to as 'fan influencers'(大粉/粉头, who often play essential roles in organizing fandom activities as intermediaries between celebrities and 'common' fans). The second limitation is concerning the way the interviews were conducted. All respondents preferred conversations through text chatting, which denied me the opportunities to observe respondents' non-verbal behavior, an equally significant indicator of the interviewee's authentic feelings(Ekman, 1991). Furthermore, considering the fact that every interview was 'separated by two screens', each respondent's attention wasn't guaranteed. Answers in a textual form also tend to be more organized, making the responses lack a sense of temporality. On the other hand, structured answers out of careful thoughts do facilitate our analytical discussion.

In terms of research reflexibility, I also fall into the category of fans, but in a sense of what Jenkins refers to as 'textual poachers (2013, p. 24)'. I believe that I have enough in common with the fangirls to understand them, while keeping a distance to stay objective as possible. When I was a fan of the Avengers franchise, I spent considerable efforts on creating and sharing my fan arts on various digital platforms. In this process, I encountered numerous celebrity fans, and witnessed different battles between fanbases. Back then their motives, collaboration and antagonism within the community seemed rather curious to me, so I familiarized myself with their discursive systm in my observation. Therefore, when conducting analysis of the transcripts, I could quickly recognize the phrases which belong to the fandom discourse. To some extent, my experience as a fan smoothed the path for my study. Still, as a member of Generation Z who grew up against the backdrop of 'Patriotic Education Campaign(we will come back to this later)' in China, conducting this study both means revelation and a certain degree of struggle. Lots of taken for granted assumptions of mine were also tossed out, and questioned by myself. Admittedly, it has not been easy. Therefore, the terms and wordings used in this study are all carefully examined to rule that out as much as possible. I have been deconstructing many naturalized and normalized dispositions, some of which I still possess, and I am observing how I practice nationalism in everyday life. To keep questioning, to have conversations with the self, to feel the chemistry of theory and one's own subjectivity, I guess these are the benefits and blessings of studying media and social sciences.

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings of this study followed by a detailed discussion. During the course of thematic analysis, a total of 13 basic themes were rearranged into three organizing themes, namely, appropriated fandom practices during the cyber expedition, different layers of nationalist sentiment embedded in these practices, and 'A-Zhong' as fangirls' reimagination of the nation. A global theme was then deduced, the practices of cyber expedition as alternative expressions of nationalism for frequently dismissed online fan communities. The thematic network was constructed to illustrate a summary of the main themes and their interrelations.
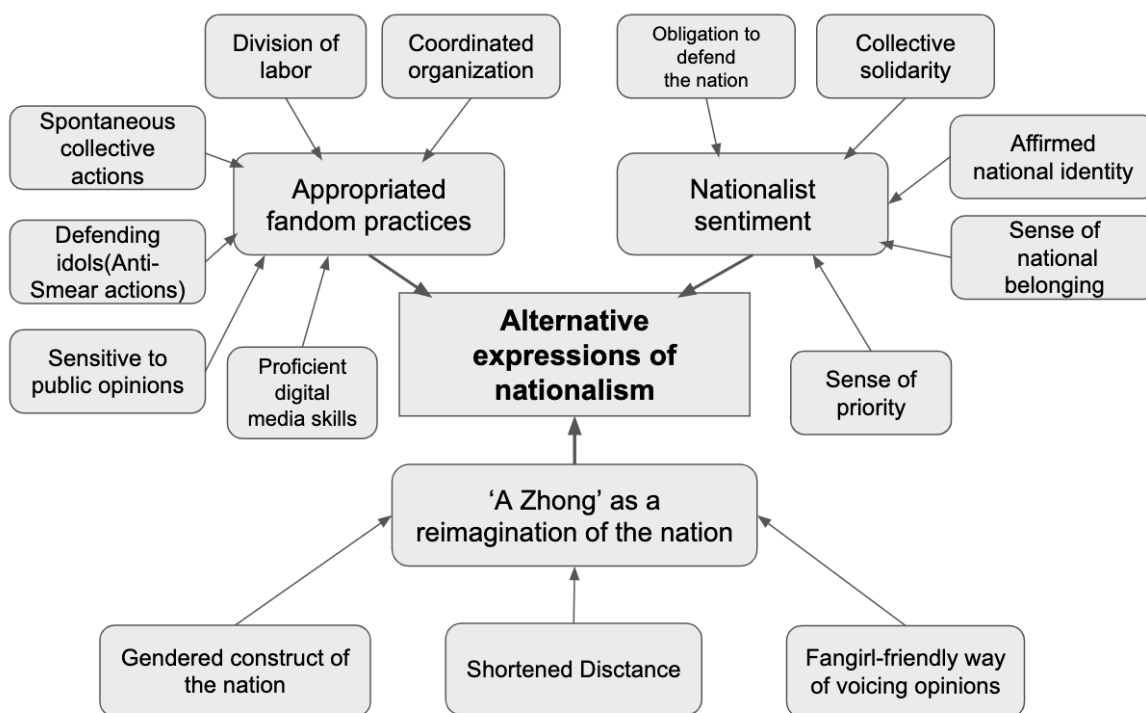

Figure 3: Alternative Expressions of Nationalism-A Thematic Network

The appropriation of fandom practices in the cyber expedition

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were asked about the following questions: (1)) who their favorite celebrity was, (2) how they became fangirls, (3) their experiences within the fan communities, (4) how daily practices of fandom were organized, (5) and how it felt to engage in these practices. They were then asked to give a description of celebrity fandom culture in their own understandings. While most findings coincided with the theoretical arguments in the literature review, there were also some interesting new discoveries regarding the fan communities. The practice

of cyber expedition appropriated the form and content of everyday fandom practices, hence lots of paralleled attributes could be drawn between this two.

As mentioned above, one of the most noticeable characteristics of celebrity fandom's daily practices is its coordinated way of organization, which many interviewees gave their versions of detailed explanation. Some interviewees argued that fan communities were 'disciplined and organized (NoGangster)' and 'play by the rules most of the time (Su)'. According to a senior fan who has spent 6 years practicing celebrity fandom, the internal management within fanbases is carried out in 'a militarized manner (Andrea)'.

> (Andrea, aged 20) There are different teams (types of work) you can choose from, such as the data team, the defense team, the comments management team, the resource team and so on. Mostly we communicate in WeChat or QQ group chats. There are no hard and fast rule about whether you join the teams or not, but you'll need the latest information and the connections if you want to be a fan influencer.

> (Heydry, aged 19) I'm on the data team. The WeChat group leader always reminds us to vote for our idol or if he publishes a new post on Weibo. I also take the defense job when trolls leave stupid hate comments of my idol on social media and would just report those accounts.

In this sense, what Andrea means by 'militarized management' is a clear division of labor in organizing collective fan activities. Fan influencers (大粉/粉头, meaning 'big fans' or 'head fans' in Chinese), who serve as important nodes in the community network and heads of each troop, set basic rules for other fans to follow. Two platforms are essential for fangirls' congregation: WeChat for internal communication and Weibo for 'show of fan army force'. This is also the case when it comes to the cyber expedition, where different troops of celebrity fans rallied to defend the nation with this same division of work. For instance, the great firewall in China served as the main obstacle from participation in a larger scale, thus, 'some fan influencers made VPN tutorials for us to climb over the firewall (Chen)'.

> (Su, aged 21) I wasn't literally on 'expedition' because setting up the VPN was too troublesome for me, but I saw some VPN tutorials circulating in many group chats. Other fans would always love to help out. My main battlefield was on Weibo, where many groups were divided for specified tasks, like meme-production, sample post writing, video edition, and comments management. I made several memes myself.

In addition, all interviewees showed the spontaneity of engagement in both practices of celebrity fandom and cyber expedition. They often subconsciously used fandom discourses in their answers. When asked what drove them to voluntarily participate in daily fandom practices, the most

frequently used term was 'generating electricity from love(为爱发电)', a typical fandom phrase to express fangirls' willingness to devote their time and money to their idols for nothing in return. In the name of love, fangirls mobilize to form free publicity teams for their idols, and feel the urge to defend their idols together when there's 'brainless rumor made up by trolls(喷子无脑黑)(Heydry)'. It is also worth noting that in the fandom discursive system, the practice of defending idols from hate comments is called 'anti-smear actions(反黑)', constructing a victim narrative in order to justify their self-defense. As the interviews moved deeper into the discussion of cyber expedition, the same theme turned up repeatedly that many of them referred to the practices of cyber expedition/the 814 Great Unity as 'anti-smear actions for China/A-Zhong(为祖国/阿中反黑)'. This would be discussed in detail in the next organizing theme.

Another significant feature of these respondents is their assessment of the communities they belong. For instance, they were clear on the fact that 'the perception of fangirls in mainstream culture is not that positive(Andrea)' and 'there has been prejudice towards the whole fandom communities for long (Daytoy)'. In the course of their daily battles for idols, fangirls, as sophisticated social media users, have high chances of seeing different sides of opinions and are sensitive towards social evaluation. When asked how she perceived public opinions of the fan communities, Tu responded:

> (Tu, aged 20) Things do turn ugly between different fanbases sometimes, actually a lot. But you cannot generalize the whole community based on extreme cases. Not every fangirl is paranoid. It's just that we know how to make the most of social media and all. We are more visible.

A deeper analysis of the entangled relations between fangirls' defense of idols, fan communities and the country would be introduced in the following themes, as well as the role of their self-cognition in this intricate matrix.

Various Layers of Nationalist Sentiment

As stated by Calhoun(1997), 'nations are constituted largely by […] the way of talking and thinking and acting that relies on these sorts of claims to produce collective identity, to mobilize people for collective projects, and to evaluate peoples and practices(p. 5)'. From the perspective of everyday nationalism, discourse is a vital dimension through which the nation becomes meaningful to people in their everyday life. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) point out, many studies on nationalist discourse emphasize on elite's roles in articulating and propagating visions of the nation, while limited literature focuses on the degree of ordinary people's appropriation of these top-down articulations. During the interviews, I sought to capture the respondents' understandings of the nation, their national identity and national belonging in the practices of cyber expedition on social media. Several types of nationalist sentiments were identified as pervasive, which are obligations to defend the nation, collective solidarity in actions, affirmed national identity after the cyber expedition, sense of

national belonging and national pride, and sense of priority when it comes to supporting idols or the nation.

'It's like an instinct.'

When asked what the motives were for them to join the expedition, all fangirls answered without hesitation: for the love of country. Cyber expeditions, or the 'anti-smear actions for A-Zhong', were triggered in response to 'the anti-China forces in Hong Kong (Meteor) and the prejudiced western media coverage on the Hong Kong protests '. From this perspective, the 814 Great Unity operated on a defense mechanism, which could also be found in everyday practices of celebrity fandom. Interestingly, the victim position fangirls took to defend their idols was also adopted in the cyber expedition to tell the story of China on the stage of international politics, where it was unfairly treated and iced out, but still earned achievements on its own (Du, 2020). This corresponds with some scholars' arguments that the CCP has been utilizing a mixed victim-victor narrative since the 1990s (Gries, 2005; Purvis, 2015).

As the approach of everyday nationalism (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) points out, the nation is much more than the object of talk, rather, it is a unselfconscious (p. 540) disposition that ordinary people 'talk with'. Therefore, nationalist discourse sometimes involves the cognitive process of naturalization. During the interviews, taken for granted assumptions on national identities repeatedly turned up. Fangirls regarded it as their obligation to defend the nation when they were needed. According to Tu, 'the anti-smear action for China is like an instinct.'

> (Tu, aged 20)…and I do believe this is the same in any other country in the world. No one would ever like to see the name of their nation blackened for no reason.

> (Meteor, aged 14) Is it wrong to love your country? I don't think so. I think I'm making my contribution to protecting my nation in this way.

> (Daytoy, aged 23) I think it's everyone's duty to protect the country's reputation. When someone with ulterior motives insults and threatens it, we shouldn't be afraid to stand up and defend it.

> (Andrea, aged 20) I won't allow anyone to defame my country. It's my nation. It's my home.

Among all the interviewees, Xuan was the only one who didn't take a strong stand on defending her idols. She admitted that the daily fandom practice wore her out because it was a mindless and repetitive task. When taking anti-smear actions for her idol, She was also afraid that their fanbase might get the facts wrong and her idol was not worth liking at all. However, participating in the cyber expedition gave her a sense of certainty and righteousness which she had never experienced before.

(Xuan, aged 23) It was a whole different case when it comes to the 814 Great Unity. I felt more confident than in any other anti-smear action because I believed that I was on the right side of this. And China's got my back.

'I cried. I really did'

Handman(1921) argues nationalism driven by ordinary people's emotions and instincts creates unity across social stratifications, and that 'what lies at the bottom of nationalistic behavior is […] solidarity in repelling common enemy (p. 106)'. A majority of the respondents reported a strong feeling of collective solidarity after the cyber expedition, and the phrase 'unite against the outside(一致对外)' was brought up frequently. But based on the interviewees' answers, what exactly 'the outside' referred to remained ambiguous. As suggested by the literature review, with battles played out between different fanbases almost every day, the entire celebrity fan community is well known for its fierce internal tensions. Nevertheless, in the practice of fandom nationalism, fangirls put aside their enmity towards each other 'for a greater purpose (Su).' This, combined with a genuine love for the nation, created an intense emotion resonated within the community, which had never existed before.

(Andrea, aged 20) After seeing fangirls on expedition in the name of China, I cried. I really did… And I had the feeling that my community was vindicated by it.

(Chen, aged 16) That we sisters united together to defend China from the same enemy was what attracted me to participate. I was very touched.

(Su, aged 21) I think the cyber expedition is a sign of patriotic solidarity which we all share from the bottom of our hearts. We united together against the outside for a greater purpose. I remember at that time, different fan clubs all got along very well. It's even like a magical scene. I've seen two fans from two opponent parties, who, just a few hours ago, were hurling terrible insults at each other. But as soon as the cyber expedition began, they met in the commenting area under a Weibo post, and liked each other's comment.

Furthermore, most interviewees remarked about a strengthened sense of belonging and affirmed identity of being Chinese after the cyber expedition, which is another significant dimension of nationalist sentiment. Knott(2017) conceptualizes national belonging as national identity and membership. For some respondents, the concept of a nation used to be more abstract. They were unaware of their nationalistic emotion until triggered, and realized that it was embedded 'deep in the bones (Chen)'. This resonates with Fox and Miller-Idriss(2008)'s argument that ordinary people talk with nation as a natural positioning in everyday life.

(Chen, aged 16) To be honest, I didn't realize that I had been such a patriot until I was on expedition for my country as a fangirl. I will not tolerate any slander of it from others.

'No Idols before the Country'

In 2016, South Korea's THAAD missile caused an abrupt ban on Hallyu product imports in China (限韩令)(Teixeira, 2019), shaking up various K-Pop fan communities who had been flourishing for decades. Nonetheless, many fanbases openly sided with the Chinese government in support of the Hallyu ban. Since then, an already famous saying has been circulating among fangirls on digital media: 'No idols before the country (国家面前无偶像)'(An, 2016). A majority of the interviewees made reference to this *community consensus* when asked from their perspectives, what the relation was between their idols and the country. The theme behind this phrase was fangirls' evident sense of prioritization when evaluating the importance of politics and entertainment businesses. Almost all of the respondents emphasized the 'prosperity of the nation(Xuan, Su)' and political stability over 'anything else'.

> (NoGangster, aged 18) I think most of us truly believe 'no idols before the country' and we are actually practicing it. After all, a stable and harmonious environment is the only guarantee of all kinds of recreational activities, including pursuing stars(追星, a frequently used fandom phrase which means supporting idols).

> (Xuan, aged 23) The prosperity of the nation secures the thrive of entertainment industries. For me the biggest difference between idols and the country is that in terms of favorite celebrities, I can always replace one for another. It doesn't really matter. But I will love my country for the rest of my life.

> (Su, aged 21) Me personally, if the nation were not stable or secure enough, we wouldn't have the time and resources to pursue stars at all. All of the fan activities are based on the prosperity of the nation. It's a cause-and-effect relationship.

Interestingly, while all of them acknowledged the importance of politics, many interviewees displayed a certain degree of political apathy (Meteor, Daytoy, Xuan, Tu), stating that there was a fan community consensus on 'staying away from politics' and it was better for the 'state professionals (国家专业人士)' to take over the political affairs. In fact, not every interviewee agreed on defining the cyber expedition as 'political'. They preferred to understand it as 'a spontaneous patriotic action (Tu, NoGangster)'. As communities highly sensitive to social media trends, fangirls stayed updated with the public opinions towards them and the cyber expedition. Although they were most certain about the rationality of their actions, some still worried this form of expression was not 'serious' enough. Now I would like to introduce another aspect to the discussion, which was identified as a common

theme when the respondents talked about 'brother A-Zhong': the gendered reimagination of the nation.

Brother A-Zhong: a Romanticized imagination of the nation

A-Zhong as a heteronormative construct

Question: from your perspective, why do fangirls create a virtual image of China and call it 'brother A-Zhong' during and after the cyber expedition?

> (No Gangster, aged 18) Actually I think 'A-Zhong', if used in daily politics, will reduce the solemnity of the nation. But in this case of the 814 Great Unity, calling China our 'older brother' was an expression of warm love for the country because that's how we refer to our idols.
>
> - (Q)Does it mean you have this presupposition in mind that they are male idols?
>
> - Well, yes. For one thing, the idols fangirls support and pursue are mostly male; for another, I think in international politics, China always faces other countries as a tall and resolute man of masculinity, which I really appreciate.
>
> (Tu, aged 20) I don't know who thought of such a nickname in the first place, but 'brother A-Zhong' sounds really cute to me. Most of us in the fan communities are female, and we are attracted to these good-looking male idols, calling them our 'older/younger brothers'. So it seems quite natural to me when we call our country 'brother A-Zhong'.
>
> - (Q)How did you feel when calling the country 'brother'?
>
> - I would say a sense of security, even like being protected by my boyfriend. From what I can see, China is getting richer and stronger. Last year, watching the parade on the national day really gave me feelings of safety. And I felt like protecting him in return.

The theme of the gendered nation gradually unfolded itself and became significant in the course of interviews. Similar to the naturalized disposition the respondents took in respect to their nation and national identity, a majority of them had the taken-for-granted assumption of A-Zhong's gender role, visualizing this virtual construct as male. Nagel (1998) argues both in historical contexts and contemporary politics, clear connections can be found between manhood and nationhood, and that 'nationalist politics is a masculinist enterprise (p. 244).' As intertextuality was drawn between real world politics saturated with male domination in the nation-states and the fandom practices centered mostly on male idols, fangirls projected the idealized male image on China in the making of 'brother A-Zhong'.

Here, 'brother' is translated from the word 'gege(哥哥)', which literally means 'older brother' in Chinese, and is constantly used by fangirls to call their male idols. In many East Asian cultural contexts, including that of China, South Korea, and Japan, the notion of older brother ('gege' in Chinese, 'oppa' in Korean, and 'onichan' in Japan) can be used for females as an intimate salutation to address their partners in romantic relationship in addition to family kinship. By calling China as 'older brother A-Zhong' in the practices of fandom nationalism, fangirls also reimagined the people-nation/citizen-state relations in a romanticized way established on a heterosexual norm. This parallels with Peterson's (1999) argument on nationalism as heterosexism. She pinpoints nationalism as a subset of political identities and the processes of identification, arguing that heterosexuality became the only acceptable mode of sexual identity and an indispensable starting point of nationalism through institutionalized forces. There is a duality of identity in the construct of brother A-Zhong. Whether he is the big brother or the boyfriend at home depends on every fangirl's personalized interpretation, based on which they reinvented their national identities.

Two interviewees reported on the 'space of gender fluidity' in regard to their understanding of the nation's gender. Andrea mentioned 'Hijra', a Hindustani word, in depicting her imagination of the nation. *Hijra in between* is a popular Taiwanese romantic drama of a hermaphrodite protagonist. In all, these two respondents believed what really mattered was the context. In their order of priority, the central goal of national solidarity and pride outranked all.

> (Xuan , aged 23) To be honest, I normally use 'motherland(祖国母亲)' in everyday life. But I guess it's just a matter of name. If I want to emphasize the greatness of the nation, I will use motherland. If the situation requires national unity against the outside, brother A-Zhong sounds more powerful and aggressive. I think they are different means to the same end.

> (Andrea, aged 20) For me the nation doesn't have a fixed gender. Depending on the context of everyday use, It can be male, female, or both. Just like Hijra, it's beautiful.

A-Zhong as a fangirl-friendly construct

Aside from the gendered perspectives, most interviewees said they found a sense of affability in the construct of A-Zhong. In their understanding, 'China' might be too solemn to talk about on a day-to-day basis. But 'A-Zhong', the personified and idolized version of it, was more concrete and approachable. Many considered 'A-Zhong' as a 'cute(可爱)' way of addressing, shortening the distance between them and the nation.

> (Su, aged 21) I was kind of surprised when I heard 'brother A-Zhong' for the first time. But later I felt like protecting someone I love from my household. Calling China 'A-Zhong' is like getting along with someone of my own age.

(Tu, aged 20) I understand that we normally use 'motherland' to refer to our nation. We all know what mother is like: no matter how much you love each other, there's still distance between you two called the generation gap. Such is the case for 'motherland'. But A-Zhong is different because he is our peer.

Meanwhile, a shortened distance means more daring ways of expression. Coordinated organization is both what fangirls are most familiar with, and what makes them visible to the public on social media platforms. But in order to give full play to their advantages, celebrity fandom communities needed a center of circle. By constructing brother A-Zhong, fangirls explored a distinct and efficient way of nationalistic mobilization, enabling them to voice opinions in a fan-community-friendly manner. Therefore, the practices of fandom nationalism should be regarded as fangirls' alternative entrance to nationalist engagement.

(Heydry, aged 19) I think joining the anti-smear army in the name of A-Zhong is a not-that-serious way to let everyone in fandom communities participate in showing their love for the country. I am proud of China for sure, and I am proud of all the sisters who fought side by side.

'We express national love in our way'

Now all of the three organizing themes have been introduced. Through careful examination and mapping of the themes, I deduce the global theme of the study, which is the fandom practice of cyber expedition as a bottom-up, alternative nationalist expression. It is now clear that fangirls belong to a community with distinctive discursive and behavioral patterns. I would like to start by dissecting fandom communities' defense-mechanism from three levels, namely defending the idols, the community, and the nation. Underneath different levels lie different sets of tension, which helps us to gain a better understanding of fandom communities' practice of cyber expedition.

First off, supporting idols is the reason why fans exist. Against the backdrop of the severe market competition in entertainment industries, different fanbases, as subcommunities within the fandom community, feel strong animosity towards one another, normalizing online battles as an essential part of their daily digital practices. Yan (2016) has a negative reading on this norm and uses the notion of 'cyborg', the hybrid of living matter with cybernetic devices (Allison, 2001, p. 239), to describe the degree to which fans master digital media technologies. Secondly, while there's great tension between antagonistic fanbases, all these subcommunities share the same label of 'fangirls', who are frequently dismissed by the official discourses. This internally divided community constantly faces homogenized assessments from the dominant culture. As digital creatures highly sensitive to public opinions, fangirls are aware of their negative public image, and many interviewees displayed discontent. They believed there was 'prejudice(Su, Tu, Heydry)' against the fandom communities, and that their name needed 'vindicated(see part 1 of the discussion)'. The official discourse are

constantly seeking inspiration from them, the construct of A-Zhong included, and fan communities are temporarily recognized. Notwithstanding, the recognition they receive is so precarious because essentially, their access to the mainstream culture is closed.

We can now can come back to Hailong Liu's (2019) argument that what triggered the Little Pink to join the 2016 Diba Expedition might be the desire to win social recognition instead of nation-loving sentiments. This study challenges the argument by proposing the third level of tension in the shaping of nationalism discourse, which is the tension between the top-down official nationalism discourse system and fangirls' bottom-up efforts in creating alternatives in the field of popular nationalism expression. For one thing, all respondents showed a sense of affirmed national identity after engagement in the cyber expedition. Their national pride, unconditional support for the country, and resolution to defend the nation were no less than any other nationalist in a traditional sense. For another, the results indicate fangirls do feel the urge to clear their name and obtain social acknowledgements, but that's only part of the story. 'Ordinary people are not uncritical consumers of the nation; they are simultaneously its everyday producers (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008).' Through the appropriation of their daily fandom practices, fangirls proactively participate in the reproduction of nationalism both as female, and as members of a vibrant online subculture.

Against the backdrop of prevalent male dominance in Chinese society and culture(Attané, 2012), Chinese women's dualistic nature as both included and excluded from the main body of citizens (Yuval-Davis, 1993) is evident in almost all societal aspects. When understanding the title 'Dada (literally 'Big Big')' that Chinese fangirls initially use to address Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama, Zheng (2016) maintains that this intimate salutation is influenced by the 'moe(萌)' culture which converts everything into something cute and adorable, including real-world politics. She continues to argue that it should be regarded as fangirls' endeavor to break into an originally male-exclusive domain. Diba community, who is in charge of the planning and organization of all cyber expeditions, consists mainly of male members. In this context, fandom communities' active participation in the 814 Great Unity, together with the construct of A-Zhong, could also be interpreted from Zheng's perspective. The idolization of the nation provides fangirls with a distinct voice to convey their sincere recognition and love of their nation, though sometimes in a romanticized fashion.

Since 1991, the CCP has been promoting the 'Patriotic Education Campaign', a nationwide nationalist mobilization targeted primarily at Chinese youth on the basis of China's history of 'One hundred years of humiliation(百年国耻)'(Wang, 2008, p. 789). This constitutes an essential part of the state-led nationalism narratives even today. Meanwhile, An (2016) argues that comparing to the rigid propaganda discourse of the official nationalism, celebrity fandom communities rearticulate their national identity with fandom discursive system and practices situated in popular culture. In the 2019 cyber expedition, fangirls' alternative narrative of nationalistic expression was widely accepted, reproduced within different fanbases, and transmitted outside the community, rebuilding the

possibility of participation and expression of popular nationalist politics. As stated by the interviewee Chen (aged 16):

> We fangirls are expressing national love in our own way. Fangirls are also Chinese, and in real life we are all part of the society. When it comes to loving your nation, no one is more noble than another.

Still, in an authoritarian regime, one should never underestimate the institutionalized forces of the state in securing the power to interpret the nation. What people have witnessed on social media is state media's incorporation and appropriation of A-Zhong. 'A-Zhong Ge(阿中哥)' gradually took the place of 'A-Zhong GeGe(阿中哥哥)' on the Weibo homepage of People's Daily. Though these two words still have the same literal meaning, with the deletion of simply one character, 'A-Zhong' as a construct is deromanticized. A vital part of the fandom practices embedded in 'A-Zhong GeGe' is missing as well. The new image of A-Zhong implies a sense of brotherhood, manliness, stability, and authority. We don't know how fangirls will convert their strategies of participating in nationalist politics the next time they feel obliged to side with the country. But one thing is for sure, A-Zhong, who's now signed up by THE state-owned enterprise, will continue to be the most righteous idol in China for a long period of time.

CONCLUSION

Amid the Hong Kong protests, Chinese celebrity fandom communities spontaneously mobilized and engaged in the cyber expedition to defend their national identity. Fangirls utilized their distinctive discourse system, idolizing the Chinese nation as 'brother A-Zhong'. Drawing on the theory of everyday nationalism, this study sets out to examine how fangirls enacted their national identity and engaged in the shaping of popular nationalist narratives in this process. By interviewing 9 fangirls who participated in the 814 Great Unity, this study has strengthened the idea that fandom communities are highly coordinated organizations with division of labor and proficient digital media skills. This contributes to their speedy nationalistic collective actions. After engaging in the cyber expedition, all interviewees experience various forms of nationalist sentiments, including a sense of affirmed national identity and collective solidarity. Through fandom practices and discourse developed exclusively in the social media landscape, fangirls project a romanticized reimagination onto their construct of brother A-Zhong based on a heterosexual norm. All of these constitute possibilities of alternative expressions of nationalism other than the stiff official nationalism discourse.

A major limitation of this study is the number and representativeness of the respondents. I was only able to find a limited number of interviewees because of fandom communities' general wariness towards 'intruders' from the outside. As core members on top of the fandom community hierarchy, fan influencers and their opinions were absent in the interviews, which may affect the applicability of the results to some extent. Meanwhile, this study takes the theory of everyday nationalism as a starting point. Smith (2008) argues this specific approach is 'too micro-analytical and descriptive (p. 567)' in contrast to the structural understanding of nationalism which adopts a 'causal-historical methodology'. In this study, I try to minimize this limitation by building the connections between the two threads of Chinese nationalism, with an emphasis on fangirls' agency and lived experience in reproducing nationalism. Still, more research could be done to the dynamics between the narratives of official nationalism and popular nationalism. The official nationalism discourse is constantly searching inspiration from the ordinary people, including fangirls. At the same time, the fan communities collective actions are shaped, constrained by, and reacting to the pre-existing institutional restrictions.

It would be particularly interesting for future work to investigate Chinese online subcultures' (including fandom communities) engagement in nationalist politics with the methodology of digital ethnography. In an increasingly conservative context, new forms of nationalism are constantly being created as more and more millennial digital natives join in China's contemporary digital space. Digital ethnography will open up more space for us to grapple with their community ecology, rules of organization, and group mentalities. What's more, from the perspective of top-down nationalism scholarship, considerably more studies could be done to systematically examine the strategies the CCP deploys to appropriate popular nationalism expressions, incorporating them as elements of pragmatist nationalism to consolidate its ruling legitimacy.

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