‘Protecting Our Best Brother China’:

Fangirls, Youth Political Participation and Nationalism in Contemporary China

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Declaration

I certify that the thesis I have presented for examination for the MPhil/PhD degree of the London School of Economics and Political Science is solely my own work other than where I have clearly indicated that it is the work of others (in which case the extent of any work carried out jointly by me and any other person is clearly identified in it).

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Abstract

The ongoing concern with the intersection of fandom and nationalism has sparked discussions of civic and political participation in different social contexts. This research investigates 'fangirls', a young female-led fan community of Chinese pop idols that gained attention from a high-profile event in 2019, the 'Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement'. Participants from Hong Kong and mainland China engaged in dramatic clashes on social media. The clashes stemmed from the Hong Kong protesters' condemnation of local celebrities for their silence on sensitive political issues out of the fear of damaging commercial interest on the mainland. In response, the fan communities from the mainland mobilised under the slogan 'Protect Our Best Brother A'Zhong (China's nickname)', flooding to Twitter and Instagram to 'occupy' the protesters' threads. This action turned from a fan-based campaign in defence of the idols into a nationalist movement in defence of China. By doing an ethnographic study with both online and offline components, I investigate the cultural practice, political subject, and historical significance of fangirls. After providing a historical overview of youth political participation in modern China, I lay out the theoretical framework and explain the research design of this study. The first empirical chapter examines the development of China's idol culture and emphasise the idea of 'persona' in fangirls' activities in a data-driven media context. Fangirls developed distinct principles of action in quasi-political activities that have been appropriated for political participation. Chapter Five then explores how fangirls became nationalists. China was 'idolised' as 'Brother A'Zhong' and the notion of 'brotherland' emerged, while the principles derived from fandom reshaped fangirls' perceptions of 'civility' and 'rationality' in the cultural and political realms. The last empirical chapter focuses on the historical significance of fangirls, which has received little attention. I situate fangirls within the history of China's modernisation and explore how they reimagined their relationship with the nation-state. By a historically informed sociological approach and an interdisciplinary analytical framework, my efforts of revisiting the nationalist expressions of fangirls advance the understanding of both fandom culture and youth political participation.

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Introduction

My research interest is grounded in addressing the oversimplified perspectives on youth political engagement. I aim to examine the heterogeneity of youth politics through a case from modern-day China in the context of global media, specifically focusing on the pop fan communities and their young female members. By employing a digital ethnographic methodology, I will shed light on the diverse nature of youth politics across various social and cultural contexts. This research concentrates on three questions, that is, how do young individuals participate in the popular culture mediated by social media? In what ways do young people transition from engaging in popular culture to participating in nationalist movements? How should we interpret the historical roles of youth participants within these contexts?

For the past two decades, scholars concerning digital civic engagement within the confines of Chinese sociopolitical dynamics have been inextricably influenced by the interpretations of the Tiananmen Incident of 1989. From this perspective, the Tiananmen Incident is considered an event of paramount significance, which is deemed indispensable for comprehending the transformation of Chinese society. The Tiananmen Incident is regarded as a critical inflexion point in the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Lin 2019), serving as the ultimate culmination of popular demonstrations in contemporary China (Saich 2019), and presenting a significant challenge to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime (Zhao 2008). Some scholars (e.g., Fish 2015; Lum 2015; Saich 2019) posit that the Tiananmen Incident constituted a radical shift that forced civic engagement, particularly youth political participation. Such scholarships on the emergence of digital civic engagement at the turn of the century suggest that the availability of the Internet, which became popular a decade after the 1989 events, is responsible for the resurgence of overt civic engagement. According to this line of argumentation, Chinese citizens' enthusiasm for political participation was absent from 1989 to the end of the century, and it was only

due to the emergence of the Internet as a technological factor that the previously repressed political fervour in the offline sphere had the opportunity to be expressed in the online sphere. However, adopting an arbitrary and oversimplified statement with a focus on the Internet as the technological driver of a resurgent Chinese civil society makes it difficult to comprehend the intricate relationship between citizens, the government, and the Internet in contemporary China.

Firstly, from historical facts, it should be noted that political apathy only represents a portion of the events that have unfolded in China since 1989. The 1990s in China were characterized by a series of continuous upsurges in youth politics. Following the United States' bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 (also known as the 'May 8th Incident'), large groups of college students gathered in front of embassies and consulates of the United States and other NATO states in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu. As the demonstrations progressed, they displayed signs of unrest and violence, including the burning of US-owned fast-food restaurants and the destruction of US embassies and consulates. The then U.S. ambassador to China, Jim Sasser, was also held captive in the embassy for several days along with his colleagues.[1] The protests also spread to regions where overseas Chinese were situated. The May 8th Incident drew attention not just because it was the largest political street movement in Mainland China after the Tian'anmen Incident, but also because of the growing influence of the Internet, which was rapidly beginning to play a critical role in the field of political communication. Patriotic Chinese hackers launched attacks on US websites, leading to a veritable cyberwar between China and the United States, with over 100 websites on each side being adorned with the other country's national flag. Chinese online forums were filled with denunciations of the 'imperialism' of the United States. This condemnation extended to offline actions, such as parades or boycotts of US goods.

Historical tensions over disputed issues have sparked youth nationalism since the 1990s,

[1] See also: http://news.sina.com.cn/world/9905/051011.html

as exemplified by the dispute over the Diaoyu Islands. The Diaoyu Islands refer to a group of eight islands located between Mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan. The first dispute in 1970, known as the 'Defend the Diaoyu Islands Movements' (Bǎodiào Yùndòng), ignited clear nationalist emotions among mainland and overseas Chinese after the Japanese navy evicted Taiwanese reporters who had flagged on the islands. Since then, intermittent disputes over the Diaoyu Islands have focused on the exercise of sovereignty and the exploitation of natural resources between Mainland China and Japan. The dispute surrounding the Diaoyu Islands was also the immediate cause of two major anti-Japanese demonstrations across Chinese cities observed in 1996 and 2012. The Japanese nationalists' building of a lighthouse on Diaoyu Islands in 1996, or the Japanese government's attempt to nationalize the Diaoyu Islands in 2012, finally led to nationwide anti-Japanese demonstrations and also provoked significant opposition against Japanese products in China.

Secondly, in a notable strand of scholarship and public media, the crass materialism and consumerism of China's younger generations have been highlighted as the antithesis of youth political participation. Fish (2015) suggests that the younger generation following those who converged at Tian'anmen have become accustomed to life in China's economic boom and see 'depressing signals of political apathy and submissiveness' (ix). Fish attributes Chinese youth apathy to the seduction of material comforts and nationalist education. This assertion implies a paradox whereby even nationalist civics curricula orient young people apathetically towards politics. In Fish's account, the ideas of nationalism and developmentalism are not antagonistic. Rather, China's economic boom has shifted the focus of nationalist education from offensively provoking a conflict between China and the West to defensively displaying China's economic achievements. Similarly, at the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident, an article (FlorCruz, Chang, and Ahmed 2009) published on CNN argues that the main reason for youth apathy to politics in China is that China's millennials have turned to pursue wealth, personal success, safety, and steadiness instead of caring about politics. At the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Incident, an article (Fifield and Shih 2019)

published in the Washington Post further characterises the post-1989 generation as moral cynics, politically apathetic, and excessively individualist. These explanations that emphasise the market-driven individualisation as the origin of youth apathy are not uncommon (also see Lum 2015).

However, in contemporary China, the issue of youth political apathy is not limited to just political or economic factors. The individualistic aspect of this apathy is not only connected to individual interests but is also closely intertwined with collective interests. The fusion of the individual and collective domains and the emphasis on both political and economic spheres reflect China's dedication to modernisation, which encompasses both national liberation and economic prosperity. The fact that the post-1989 generations prioritise material and economic well-being does not necessarily lead to political disinterest. Even those who claim to be solely focused on material aspects possess an implicit awareness of what modernity and China as a nation-state represent to them. Rather than adopting a binary political/economic framework that views 1989 as the endpoint of China's political reforms and the triumph of economic reforms, the positions of 'solely concerned with material life' or 'cynicism' remain in line with China's political agenda since the 1990s. Under this agenda, a recalibrated modernization strategy has influenced young people's perceptions of the nation-state and China's modernization trajectory.

Thirdly, the binary framework of consent and repression, previously used to analyse offline activism, is no longer sufficient in studying online activism. In the study of offline anti-Japanese activism, it was believed that the Chinese government was supportive of these demonstrations, or at least tacitly consented to them (Weiss 2014; Gries 2004). According to Gries (2004), for example, while the Chinese government did suppress street movements and media coverage of anti-Japanese demonstrations, its treatment of these events showcased a discourse that reveals 'a dynamic discourse that challenged the CCP's control over nationalism' (122).

In this context, Rosen's (2010) inquiry into the Internet's potential as a 'positive force' in the development of civil society, public sphere, and democratisation in China is of central importance.[2] Some scholars mistakenly assume that agency and structure are binary oppositions and therefore, frame discussions of youth online activism around the question of whether young people exhibit genuine agency or simply parrot hegemonic ideologies. For example, the optimism on political participation echoes the popular opinion (e.g., Uldam and Vestergaard 2015) that the prevalence of social media can revitalise citizens' participation in politics. These scholars believe that nascent social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat can help facilitate democracy and civil society through a bottom-up approach, and challenge the hegemony of the CCP and the state in dominant discourse (Tai 2006). By exploring how activists used the Internet to participate in relief and public supervision after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, some scholars argue that a new age of Chinese civic engagement has emerged (Teets 2009; Wang and Hong 2010). Shirk (2010) even argues that 'the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have relinquished their monopoly over the information reaching the public' (1) and fast information spread 'helps skirt official censorship' (2). Despite these techno-optimists, however, many scholars are pessimistic about the outlook for online participation in China.

The assertion that the Internet can be a political space free from state power is difficult to accept. Political participation through the Internet does not necessarily always follow a progressive course, and the level of intervention by the state does not necessarily correspond with the level of progressiveness. Admittedly, to a certain extent, the Internet has provided fertile ground for online engagement. While political communication through the Internet has limited influences on the formal political system and often yields to it (Wang and Hong 2010), the government remains consistently concerned with identifying and eliminating its side effects, including

[2] When Rosen employs the phrase 'positive force', the ideological underpinnings of his argument suggest the potential for China to develop a 'civil society', a 'public sphere', and ultimately 'democratization' through the state-sanctioned information revolution, unlike the Soviet Union's opposition to it, despite his recognition of the Chinese government's effectiveness in regulating and controlling mass media (both print and broadcast).

‘rumours’ (yáoyán) and ‘reactionary speech’ (fǎndòng yánlùn). As Rosen suggests, ‘[t]he leadership was confident enough that China’s engagement with the outside world and the introduction of the latest technological tools into China could be controlled and managed successfully’ (2010: 509). Research also shows that those in authority also collude with tech giants, such as Tencent, to censor and suppress public speech (Kim and Chen 2018; Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018). However, while the above discussions (whether by optimists or pessimists) suggest a vigilance on the part of the authorities towards civic engagement and an impetus to tighten control over the constantly evolving technology of the Internet, they also appear to underplay the dynamic nature of this technology as a new medium for mediating social and historical realities. That is, it is no longer solely the social and historical dynamics that affect the authorities’ response to digital civic engagement, but also the evolving Internet itself. The ‘consent/suppression dichotomy’ should, therefore, be replaced by a more complex analytical framework. This new framework may be a ‘consent-suppression continuum’, where the authorities can find a place as participants, engaging new modes of communication favoured by young people for mass cultural production and political mobilisation.

As mentioned above, online nationalism has been a persistent phenomenon since early forms of online communities, such as BBS and chatrooms, were introduced in China. Since 2016, young nationalists in China have gained a generalised name, ‘Little Pinkos’ (‘Xiǎo Fěnhóng’). People have noticed this term and its widespread use across social media to refer to young nationalists in general (e.g., Fang and Repnikova 2018; Liu 2019). In fact, the term ‘Little Pinko’ refers to an inclusive category of young people who either self-identify as, or are perceived by the public to be, nationalists on social media. They tend to be active across Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, Bilibili, and Douban. Many of them are also skilled in the use of proxy tools to circumvent the Internet censorship of the Great Firewall and are active on global platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Typically, they act independently, offering vehement responses to foreign criticism on China's controversies, especially

those related to China's regional policies, ethnic policies, human rights issues, and freedom of speech. Within the 'Little Pinko' category, there are more inclusive sub-categories of young nationalists differentiated by their beliefs, values, and motivations. For example, the 'Industry Party' ('Gōngyè Dǎng') refers to industry- and technology-advocated nationalists; 'Fifty-cents' ('Wǔmáo') are online commentators (either actually or suspiciously) hired by the government to speak on the Internet to influence public opinions.

The event of '*Diba* Expedition' ('Dìbā Chūzhēng') in 2016 marked the first significant mobilisation and collective action by the loosely affiliated group of citizens known as the 'Little Pinkos'. In 2016, tens of thousands of young individuals from the popular message board, *Diba*, inundated the Facebook page of Taiwan's President-elect Tsai Ing-Wen, demanding that the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) abandon their pro-independence stance and recognise the 'One-China Principle'.[3] Researchers observe that the 'Little Pinkos' devised new modes of political communication during their participation. For example, this expedition has also been referred to as 'the war of emojis and memes' ('biǎoqíng bāo dàzhàn') (de Burgh 2017). Participants, demonstrating remarkable organisational capabilities, were divided into teams for various tasks, one of which was responsible for creating and disseminating emojis and memes as 'visual weapons' to virally occupy the targeted profile pages of pro-independence politicians in the DPP. Most emojis and memes employed a playful and bantering tone, such as 'I'm the communist successor, who the hell are you?' As Yang Guobin (2017) suggests, the first *Diba* expedition was 'a huge success in terms of the domestic and international media coverage it generated' (71). Regarding the contentious actions of these young nationalists, many social media network users generalised their image into two polar opposites – 'mobs' or 'glory patriots'. 'Mobs'

[3] *Diba*, the largest message board affiliated with Baidu, the prominent technology company specialising in search engines and other Internet-related services, is a predominantly male online community. Its origins lie in the message board of Li Yi, a retired Chinese football player who once joked that his playing style resembled that of Thierry Henry. Since Henry was dubbed the 'King of Football' by his fans, Li Yi's supporters jokingly referred to him as the 'King of Football' in China. From its inception, *Diba* has been renowned for its distinctive subculture, characterised by humour, parody, taunting, and ridicule. Currently, *Diba* boasts 32 million users who have generated over 100 million posts, rendering it the most influential Chinese online message board.

were perceived as hostile and destructive, whereas 'glory patriots' were viewed as courageous and heroic. This dichotomy was employed to characterise young nationalists and to help people make sense of the situation. Amidst the negative commentary, this formerly nationalist public was criticised for their arrogant and irrational expressions of nationalism, despite their claims of 'civility' ('wénmíng') and 'rationality' ('lixìng'). Among the prevalent criticisms directed towards the 'Little Pinkos', 'Pink Maggot' ('fěnqū'), 'Stench' ('èchòu'), and other derogatory terms were frequently used by the critisisers. Furthermore, a comparison is often drawn between the 'Little Pinkos' and the 'Red Guards' ('Hóng Wèibīng'), the latter primarily consisting of student groups who dedicated themselves to the radical communist movement with Mao Zedong's endorsement during the 1960s and 1970s.[4]

The patriotic 'expeditions' of the 'Little Pinkos' have increased in frequency in recent years, with examples including boycotts of Virgin Atlantic (2016), APA Hotel (2017), Dolce & Gabbana (2018), and global brands associated with the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) (2021), to name a few. When these companies engaged in actions perceived as anti-Chinese or insensitive to Chinese nationalist sentiment, which can be described as 'insulting China' ('rǔhuá'), young patriots invoked their unified identity as 'Chinese' in online expeditions. The official research department of the People's Daily Online Public Opinion Monitoring Centre characterises the demographic profile of the 'Little Pinkos' as primarily comprising young women around 20 years old who are skilled in online communication and enamoured with gay literature and celebrity gossip.[5] This introduces a new complexity into nationalist rhetoric, rendering the term 'Little Pinko' a sexist label. While 'red' signifies blood and sacrifice, as well as the colour of communists with masculine features, 'pink' (presumably inferior to red) represents the stereotypical colour of 'feminine': naive, frivolous, impetuous, and sentimental.[6]

[4] The primary reason some negative popular comments associate the 'Little Pinkos' with the 'Red Guards' is that both groups are perceived as comprising students with a distinct xenophobic orientation (mainly towards 'imperialist countries'). However, the 'Red Guards' have historically been divided into various factions, including children from families of the 'Red Five' (soldiers, cadres, workers, poor peasants, and lower-middle peasants), as well as Red Guards who criticised the 'lineage theory' (referred to as 'the Rebels'), among others.

[5] See also: https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20210312A0B9M700

[6] The colour red is frequently employed as a symbol of heroism, sacrifice, revolutionary zeal, and comradeship in

However, female so-called groupies represent only a portion of the 'Little Pinkos'. A study on the first *Diba* expedition (Fang and Repnikova 2018) discovered that 64% of the participants were male. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the male-dominated 'Industry Party' is also relevant to the 'Little Pinkos'.[7]

This research investigates one of the most prominent nationalist 'expeditions' undertaken by Chinese youth. In August 2019, global news reports concentrated on a trending topic: the Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests, which had been ongoing intermittently since March. Over half a year, the protests, initially sparked by the introduction of the 2019 Hong Kong extradition bill by the central government, evolved into a large-scale mass movement throughout the city. Concurrently, in Mainland China, an online movement related to the Hong Kong issue was expanding. Pop fan communities from Mainland China asserted a nationalist claim and launched a movement under the banner of 'protecting the best China' (or 'A'Zhong', a nickname for 'China') or 'protecting our best Brother China; on global social media.

The immediate cause of this event was a contingent set of factors. In mid-August 2019, pop idols from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Korea publicly supported the Hong Kong police force's suppression efforts and were subsequently accused by Hong Kong pro-democracy protestors on Instagram and Twitter of being weak and making concessions for the sake of the Mainland entertainment market. The Hong Kong protestors also reproached Hong Kong celebrities who remained silent, accusing them of betraying the city with ingratitude and indifference. Shortly thereafter, fan communities of these idols, who declared their allegiance to Beijing's policies towards Hong Kong, set aside past rivalries and united as patriots, flooding Instagram and Twitter to engage in fierce online confrontations with the Hong Kong protestors.

communist iconography and propaganda. See references such as David Priestland's *The Red Flag: A History of Communism* (2009), Peter Whitewood's *The Red Army and the Great Terror: Stalin's Purge of the Soviet Military* (2015) and Lisa A. Kirschenbaum's *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and Suspicion* (2015).

[7] In the United States, from the 1920s to the Cold War, the term 'pinko' was widely employed to label communists or non-communists who demonstrated sympathy towards communism. Although the meaning of this term partially overlaps with 'Pinko' in the contemporary Chinese context, they possess distinct historical genealogies.

In this context, this research focuses on the group of so-called 'fangirls' ('fànquān nǚhái') within the 'fan communities' ('fànquān'), a cultural and political identity that emerged during this nationalist movement. Participants were organised into teams to gain the upper hand in online action. They collaborated with clear divisions of labour in the movement, such as identifying pro-democracy social media accounts as hacking targets, creating memes for viral dissemination, training others to use VPNs to access overseas Internet, and drafting guiding principles for actions. The public became aware of fan communities soon after these actions began. The Chinese Internet passed polarised judgments on fangirls. Critics on Weibo argued that fangirls were 'capitalist Red Guards', blindly driven by both the idol industry and patriotic propaganda, which left China isolated on the international stage during its economic ascent.

In general, fan communities to which fangirls belong and/or identify are associations dedicated to pop fans (particularly C-pop and K-pop). Within these fan communities, pan-political activities seem to be commonplace. In their regular practices, fangirls are adept at organising and mobilising online fan activism, utilising their influence across Chinese social media platforms to advocate for their pop idols and challenge rival fans. Although idol culture in China is largely inspired by J-pop and K-pop trends, Chinese fangirls' political enthusiasm challenges the common notion that fans immersed in the idol culture of Japan and South Korea tend to exhibit political apathy and be entirely entertainment-oriented. Instead, fangirls in China have engaged with nationalist movements, which have traditionally been considered realms they would not be concerned with.[8] However, during the nationalist expedition across global social media, fangirls from China revealed themselves in unexpected ways. Tactics and strategies observed in fan practices were evident. China was personified as 'the idol' named 'A'zhong', and fangirls were mobilised into dozens of online groups called 'A'Zhong

[8] In Japan's context, for example, the aesthetic of cuteness ('kawaii' in Japanese) is key to idols' image which is often associated with innocence and apolitical youth (Garlbraith and Karlin 2012: 16). Kim (2018) suggests in the research of Korean popular (K-pop) culture that 'female idols' young, amicable, sexualised bodies convey the political unconsciousness, exemplifying what is important, what to think, and how to govern oneself (25).

Supporters Groups' ('Āzhōng Hòuyuán tuán'). In their communication, the language of fandom was widely used by participants – 'support' ('yìngyuán'), 'make a finger heart' ('bǐxīn', meaning 'show one's love'), 'suck up' ('guìtiǎn', meaning 'flatter western culture'), etc. They created cultural products in the form of memes, anime, posters, illustrations, and fiction. They employed fan-like strategies to advocate for Chinese sovereignty with a sense of heroism and worship, personifying 'China' as a 'brother' capable of protecting Hong Kong and China, and comparing the relationship between individuals and the nation to that between fans and idols.

As mentioned earlier, in China, the history of the conceptualisation of online nationalism dates back to the mid-1990s when the Internet began to gain popularity. It is important to note that 'fangirls' are not the only group that has expressed nationalist views online in recent years. Even before the Hong Kong incident in 2019, there was already considerable nationalist activism linked to pop fan culture. Therefore, it is necessary to ask: Why fangirls? Why did this historical moment become so significant?

First of all, fan communities are characterised by their highly disciplined and meticulously organised everyday fan practices. In other words, compared to those who randomly participate in collective action, 'fangirls' were 'prepared participants'. Secondly, the names 'Little Pinko' or 'Fifty-cents' are usually used by others against them in a contemptuous tone rather than by themselves. Individuals to whom these names are applied do not necessarily recognise, acknowledge or have any awareness of what the terms are referring to. However, 'fangirls' usually remain highly self-conscious about this identity and refer to it themselves. Thirdly, nationalist movements involving fan communities existed even before the 2019 Hong Kong protests. In fact, the potentials, passion, and realities of fan communities participating in online nationalist movements were noted as early as 2016, after the '*Diba* Expedition'. For example, referring to 'fandom nationalism', Liu Hailong (2019) shows that new media technologies have changed not only the organisation and mobilisation of nationalist movements but have also dissolved the boundaries between political movements and

cultural participation.

Fourth, most importantly, considering the low proportion of male participants in pop fan communities, the term ‘fangirls’ was used by mass media to generalise about the participants in this movement. But in fact, fangirls are not the only participants in the expedition. Their actions constitute an integral part of a larger movement known as the Second *Diba* Expedition. The second expedition was both consistent with and different from the first one. The consistency lies in the integral role played by the male-dominated online community *Diba* in both movements, but the difference lies in the fact that in the second movement, fangirls became a visible group of actors alongside the *Diba* users. Furthermore, in the action, through visual and textual representations, fangirls attempt to use feminist strategies to negotiate complex relationships with male participants and the dominant political sphere. For instance, on the afternoon of the 17th of August, *Diba* officially issued an expedition manifesto with the slogan ‘patriotism, rationality, civility, truth-seeking’ (‘àiguó, lǐxìng, wénmíng, qiúzhēn’). Their actions had two purposes, that is, to support the Hong Kong police force and to ‘protect fangirls’. Fairly swiftly, the state propagandistic agency People’s Daily and the Chinese Youth League (CYL) issued messages to ‘protect fangirls’ in correspondence with *Diba*. In other words, the action ‘protecting fangirls’ as an incidental goal in ‘protecting China’ suggested that the agency of female participants deployed in the movement was challenged by male-dominant discourse. The investigation of ‘fangirls’ can illuminate the hidden voice of these female nationalists, making it possible to inquire into the form of their political subjectivity, seeing how they interacted with male participants and the state. More importantly, this perspective can supplement previous discussions on ‘fandom nationalism’ (Liu 2019) or ‘fangirls’ in general, which are more concerned about their cultural identity and practices as ‘fangirls’ instead of their political subjectivity as female nationalists affected by social realities and digital media.

Recent developments highlight a marked tendency among political elites to accommodate youth culture. The dynamics of popular culture compel China’s

authorities to adopt novel strategies in cultivating young people as 'socialist successors'. Youth political participation in China is neither an inherently top-down nor a bottom-up process. The relationship between participants in online nationalist mobilisation and the authorities transcends a simplistic binary of either liberation or repression. In this regard, my analysis explores the reasons why youth culture on social media can and should be deployed for political purposes. The fact that fangirls are often involved in quasi-political activities in fan rivalries is not sufficient for us to understand their formation as political subjects. Although my analysis aims to avoid polarising the political participation of fangirls as merely a result of top-down mobilisation, it is impossible to overlook the role of state power in politics. In the digital context, the Party leadership holds a negotiable attitude towards popular culture, such as idol fandom. On the one hand, the state acts with caution in sponsoring foreign popular cultural products, such as K-Pop and J-Pop, because it is believed that these products conflicts China's socialist values to some extent. The CYL and state media often provoke debates about idol fandom in case it deviates from official cultural norms, and the fan community is generally cooperative and submissive in the face of state power domination. On the other hand, propagandistic agents (mainly the CYL) aim to forge a popular culture in a similar form but with the characteristics of China's socialism.

The contemporary version of the 'mass line' ('qúnzhòng lùxiàn') in cultural policies reflects the leadership's concern about the consequences of distancing themselves from younger generations who are more interested in social media and idol culture. The Party leadership must address the emerging issues arising from the 'decentralised' and diversified media industry. Although the protagonist agents maintain their monopoly of voice in most situations, they must negotiate with other participants in the online space, sometimes even performing a cooperative and supportive role in the cultural production of young people, which they used to despise. Cao's account (2014) suggests a transition from 'closed texts' to 'open texts' in ideological management. 'Closed texts' (such as the party-state media) primarily refer to 'the conservative mode of discourse reproduction, maintaining stability and continuity with the past, even though such a

past is constantly being rewritten' (Cao 2014: 11). In contrast, 'open texts' can be found in state-sponsored propagandistic practices across social media (especially Bilibili and Weibo).

For instance, to cater to the young audience in the ACG community, the CYL sponsored a military-themed cartoon, 'Year Hare Affair' (since 2011). In recent years, propagandistic agents such as the CYL, *People's Daily*, and *Xinhua* Agency, as well as national representatives like TV presenters from China Central Television (CCTV) and artists from state-sponsored institutions, have become active across youth-based social media platforms. Thus, the tension between the political elites and young people in cultural production reflects that, in the digital context, the state can no longer dominate cultural productions in a conventional way. Instead, to ensure their cultural hegemony, the party leadership must allow space for young people to spontaneously produce their products within a dynamic boundary. The policymakers of the CCP have revised (though not entirely abandoned) the previous tendency to simply formulate cultural norms from the top down and have paid a certain amount of attention to the actual wishes and preferences of young people. As Tsipursky (2016) argues in his research on post-war Soviet Union, there has always been tension between 'spontaneity' and 'consciousness' in changing cultural policies, and it was also a question of whether culture 'should focus on ideological propaganda, on cultural enlightenment, or on pleasurable entertainment' (7).

In this research, I advocate for a relatively novel approach to studying online nationalism in contemporary China. By focusing on young female participants in the online nationalist movement, this approach allows for a departure from the problematic assumptions that underpin previous research. It challenges studies that dismiss youth agency by oversimplifying Chinese nationalism as merely a manifestation of authoritarian manipulation, as well as those that examine China's youth political participation without accounting for the broader societal and historical context.

Chapter Two provides the historical background of youth political participation in modern China, while Chapter Three presents the conceptual and theoretical framework for analysing the youth nationalist movement in relation to social media. In these two chapters, readers can recognise classic theories of nationalism contributed by renowned Anglo-American social scientists, such as Geertz (1973), Anderson (2006), Hobsbawm (1990), and Gellner (1983). Readers familiar with Chinese studies may also note the influence of 20th-century scholars who have explored the issue of nation-state building and modernity in China (e.g., Fairbank and Goldman 2006; Townsend 1992; Schwarcz 1985; Chen 2017). Their theoretical and historical contributions are indispensable to this research and will be examined in Chapters Two and Three. However, these contributions are insufficient for understanding the case of fangirls' nationalist participation.

I perceive the development of nationalism in China as a dynamic process. This implies that we can neither directly adopt Anglo-American interpretations nor rely solely on previous findings from China studies to explain contemporary situations. As Sewell (2008) asserts, 'temporal heterogeneity also implies that understanding or explaining social practices requires historical contextualization. We cannot know what an act or an utterance means and what its consequences might be without understanding the semantics, the technologies, the conventions—in brief, the logics—that characterize the world in which the action takes places' (518). Consequently, it is essential to recognise that merely analysing how fangirls contribute to the cultural diversity of civic engagement in the present is insufficient; research in the field of media and communication also requires historical context. In this regard, the narratives of theories and histories are interwoven throughout this research. The findings and conclusions drawn from this study ultimately aim to fill the gap in the historical narrative, as the younger generations in China seek to find their place within the nation's modernisation.

One may wonder why the history of Chinese nationalism is relevant, or more specifically, why the histories of nation-state building and modernisation in China are

important to the discussion of a trending topic in the field of media and communication. It would not have occurred to me that 'nationalism' (at least in China) had been revived by the advent of social media. The notions of nation and nation-state are not obsolete, nor have they become negative concepts, as opposed to progressive, global, or internationalist categories. Furthermore, nationalism has never been 'resurrected'; it has not even been 'asleep', but rather has been overshadowed by the overwhelming neoliberal discourse. In recent years, the peculiar blend of enthusiasm and pessimism regarding the resurgence of nationalism across global media seems to imply that nationalism had already disappeared, and that social media, as a new technology, has revived it. However, overestimating the technological impact of social media can be problematic. While one of the goals of this research is to analyse the ways in which pop fan practices intersect with the nationalist movement, it is not my intention to suggest that either technology or the 'fangirls' themselves are solely responsible for transforming civic engagement in China.

In the official Chinese narrative, the course of history is often likened to a 'rolling wheel'. To this day, the dominant political agenda continues propelling the wheels of modernisation forward, as evidenced by a chronology of the future that has yet to be experienced, such as the year 2035 as the projected date for achieving the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'. China's pursuit of modernity has been a long and arduous journey spanning over a century, resulting in a process marked by both consistency and inconsistency. As Calhoun (2010) notes, China persistently adapted its modernisation strategies throughout the 20th century in an effort to rival the West, even if many of these strategies were contradictory and led to devastating consequences. Today, China's modernisation achievements have been bolstered by the expansion of credit, markets, private enterprise, and cooperation with foreign capital that began in the early 1990s. The fangirls involved in this research grew up during the recent two decades and have been significantly influenced by the economic and technological boom. The connotations of nationalism and the meaning of the nation-state for citizens vary across different historical and communicative contexts. As Koselleck (1990)

suggests, ‘every reading by later generations of past conceptualisations alters the spectrum of possible transmitted meanings. The original contexts of concepts change; so, too, do the original or subsequent meanings carried by concepts’ (62). Thus, fangirls and their activities provide a lens through which to examine the reconfiguration of nationalism in contemporary China. In order to situate the cultural logic of fangirls within the historical logic of China’s modernisation process, my analysis is structured across the following three empirical chapters.

Chapter Five addresses how fangirls capitalise on the technological conditions facilitated by big data and algorithms on social media platforms to engage in productive and organisational activities within fan communities. This chapter investigates two key features of the idol industry in China. The first pertains to the data and algorithm-oriented shift that has occurred in the idol industry. The second relates to the ‘fan communities’, which comprise various fan communities associated with idol culture, primarily targeting young female audiences referred to as ‘fangirls’. This chapter examines the identity and practices of these fan communities. Within fan communities, young fans demonstrate a high level of discipline and organisation as they participate in the veneration of idols through various activities on social media platforms. Through these activities, fans experience the emotions and affections associated with their idols on a daily basis. They are also trained in various strategies to reconcile or exploit tense relationships with rival fans. These two aspects are interconnected. Data technology employed in the idol industry has influenced the production and consumption of pop music. Furthermore, the digital economy enables fans to actively and extensively participate in the idol industry, fulfilling their psychological drives, satisfaction, and emotional support through collective actions. To examine the psychological perspective of fangirls’ emotions in fan practices, I consider their psychological drives, fulfilment, and emotional support as constructs of a specific society based on certain social values.

Chapter Six investigates the formation of fangirls’ political subjectivity and examines their agency in political participation. As mentioned earlier, fangirls, classified as ‘Little

Pinkos', exhibit distinct characteristics compared to other sub-categories. They primarily identify as 'fangirls' during regular times but transform into 'patriots' and 'nationalists' in exceptional circumstances. I seek to answer the question of how fangirls transition from their cultural identity as pop fans to a political identity as nationalists. I propose that the formation of fangirls' political subjectivity is inseparable from two types of appropriation, that is, the appropriation of pop idol activities, and the appropriation of civility and rationality discourses. Concepts such as 'repertoire' and 'combination' (Jakobson 2014), 'appropriation' (Ricoeur 2016; Lefebvre 1992), and 'reemployment' (de Certeau 1980) contribute to understanding this appropriation. These concepts were developed by cultural theorists who study the interconnections between political and cultural practices in everyday life. In his influential work, for instance, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1980) suggests that individuals often appropriate dominant ideologies to suit their own purposes. On one hand, the expertise and strategies in online communication that fangirls developed and utilised within their fandom activities served to empower them in political participation. This facilitated the creation of an effective nationalist discourse, which I termed as 'brotherland' in contrast to the notion of 'fatherland' or 'motherland'. On the other hand, in their interactions with Hong Kong protesters, fangirls appropriated and repurposed the language, concepts, or ideas pertaining to civility (polite, respectful conduct, and courtesy) and rationality (logical and reason-based thought) for their own objectives. They contested and challenged the traditional perception of what constituted rational and acceptable behaviour within public spaces or forums where individuals typically convened to debate issues or express their views.

Chapter Seven explores fangirls and their political participation from a historical perspective, specifically in the process of China's modernisation. In fangirls' activism, a tension can be observed in their written and visual expressions, revealing their conflict as young individuals between reality and the ideals of national modernisation. They are perplexed that China's growing global economic importance has not been rewarded with the equivalent weight of respect from the West. According to their expression, the

West continue to be able to ‘insult’ today’s China in the same way that they ‘insulted’ the impoverished ‘old China’ more than a century ago. They are also confused by the fact that their own lives are not improving despite rapid improvements in material life and economic growth over the years, but are instead wrapped up in anxiety and hopelessness. The lived experiences of young Chinese are embedded in China’s quest for modernity. As Sewell (2008) suggests, ‘as a consequence, modernity is characterized by a pervasive restlessness, by both a desire for change and a fear of what change may bring. Endless accumulation of capital keeps everyone on edge; it has a nihilistic tendency that is alternately or simultaneously liberating and terrifying’ (524).

The deployment of social media in mobilising young people in politics in recent years is not coincidental but in line with the Xi Jinping leadership since 2013. More than under his predecessor Hu Jintao, the Xi Jinping leadership has re-evoked the specific goal of building socialism, such as the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by 2035, and within this narrative, the political elite is aware of the need to mobilise the initiative of young people and the need to transform young people who favour foreign cultures into patriots. Meanwhile, the demand to create an alternative youth culture echoes the requirements of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ as an alternative to the Western model of modernity (or even as an alternative to the orthodox Marxist-Leninist model of modernity). In this sense, the choices and decisions made by fangirls in their political participation are context-dependent in terms of a broader historical background. Youth agency constructed in the historical processes thus in turn make impacts on the historical process, a parallel to what Grossberg (1982) has found about the social impact of young people in western contexts.

In Chapter Seven, I consider the group of fangirls not merely as political subjects in the nationalist movement. The formation of their political subjectivity is significantly influenced by their unique historical experiences and practices, with neoliberal principles continuing to play a dominant role. This chapter considers fangirls as the protagonists of history in China’s modernisation. The Internet serves as the mediation

for fangirls constructing their historical view and worldview, reflecting the meaning of being Chinese, a member of younger generations, and a woman in contemporary China, within a neoliberal framework. In particular, the analysis addresses the tension between the commitment to China's socialist modernisation and fangirls' own lived experiences, amidst the pressures of neoliberal capitalism. This tension can be narrowed down into the question of how these young women experience their individuality in the face of collective interests, and experience obedience and disobedience towards social expectations that reconfigure the notion of the 'family-nation isomorphism' ('jiāguó tónggòu'). Interpreting these perspectives represented in their online communication and interviews can contribute to an extensive understanding of the moral and ethical complexities behind fangirls' motivations for participating in the nationalist movement. The interpretation is based on the premise that fangirls' lived experiences provide insights into the state-sponsored project of modernisation that young people have constructed, given that the builders of China's socialism are not only the subjects in political events but also objects of historical processes and are influenced by the global trend of neoliberalism.

Chapter One Historical Settings: Youth Political Participation in Modern China

This chapter adopts a historical approach to examining the role of youth participation in China by exploring the identity formation, thoughts, demands, and mobilisation of young people across four critical junctures spanning from the 1910s to the present day. The analysis seeks to elucidate the evolving dynamics of youth participation in China and assess the impacts of these changes on China's political, social, and cultural landscape. The four critical junctures encompass the national revolution, socialist movements, social transition in the 1980s, and the contemporary situation following the Tian'anmen Incident in 1989. It is essential to acknowledge that, although this chapter utilises a linear historical narrative of these four junctures, it does not assume that nationalism in each historical moment is homogeneous or monolithic. Instead, it recognises that diverse forms of nationalism often emerge concurrently. By highlighting some of the more prominent types of nationalism in modern China, the aim is to provide a nuanced analysis of youth nationalism in the present context, illustrating that the different variants of contemporary nationalism have historical roots. Moreover, while these four junctures do not encompass every facet of youth participation in China, they reveal important debates through the modernisation process and its effects on the complex attitudes of Chinese young people of different generations towards Western modernity, which is crucial for comprehending the role of youth in present-day China.

In the early 20th century, conceptions of Chinese modernity diverged based on convictions and attitudes towards the West. As Chen posits, '[t]he foundation of different convictions was that they all represented a vision of modernity and, unlike today, these ideas were fresh and unchallenged, at the height of their power' (2011: 133). Chinese modernity could encompass attributes such as personal freedom, a free market, a bureaucratic system, democratic politics, and widespread industrialisation if 'modernisation' were equated with 'Westernisation'. Nevertheless, these ideas and processes did not translate seamlessly or identically into the Chinese context. When

Chinese youth initiated social movements in the early 20th century, addressing modernity became an urgent issue. A major debate revolved around whether modernisation had to be synonymous with Westernisation, questioning whether modernisation could occur without Westernisation or if Westernisation was indispensable for modernisation. This debate mirrored the broader cultural and political tensions between China and the West during that period.

The debate surrounding the hybridisation of Confucian and Western paradigms in Chinese modernity is critical for understanding youth participation in China. Following the Opium War (Yāpiàn Zhànzhēng), China experienced quasi-colonial conditions, as it was forced by the British army to open up to the global market and cede extraterritorial rights. Several scholars (e.g., Li 1999; Schwarcz 1985; Wang 2003) on China's revolution argue that 'salvation' ('jiùwáng') and 'enlightenment' ('qǐméng') were the primary tasks that laid the foundation for Chinese political participation and national modernisation. The former pertained to efforts to shake off Western imperial power and establish an independent nation, while the latter aimed to introduce 'new thoughts' into Chinese society. Since the early 20th century, these dual tasks have shaped the discourse of youth participation in China, reflecting young people's political aspirations and their strategies for addressing the relationships between the individual and society, citizen and state, and China and the Western world. This chapter seeks to elucidate the concept of 'Westernisation', as well as related notions such as 'modernity', 'tradition', 'salvation', 'enlightenment', and 'democracy'. In the subsequent chapter, a deeper exploration of key concepts associated with 'youth political participation', 'nationalism', and 'citizenship' will be provided, connecting these concepts to online engagement and youth culture.

1. The Origin of 'Youth': 'New Youth' in the Early Twentieth Century

The emergence of the notion of 'youth' ('qīngnián') in modern China was related to a series of movements in the late 1910s and early 1920s, including protests, walkouts, and petitions. College students collaborated with industrial and business sectors to advocate their convictions about culture, politics, and society. The formation of youth as cultural and political subjects was a key issue in these movements, as they involved Chinese young people's self-expression in relation to modernisation and their construction of a sense of identity for the first time. In 1915, the intellectual Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) founded *New Youth* (*La Jeunesse*, *Xīn Qīngnián*), a magazine promoting Westernisation as part of the 'New Culture Movement' ('Xīn Wénhuà Yùndòng').[9] 'Westernisation' in the New Culture Movement was a construct associated with efforts to seek a new cultural and national identity by advocating critical reflection on Confucian canons, democratic values, scientific principles, vernacular literature, and individual freedom.

China's modernisation through the New Culture Movement involved a process of deliberation about Western modernity, 'Democracy' ('Dé Xiānshēng', or 'Mr. Democracy') and 'Science' ('Sài Xiānshēng', or 'Mr. Science'), particularly in terms of its adoption in China with regard to the Confucian tradition, which is rooted in language, knowledge, ethics, and values. The 'new' in 'new youth' and 'new thoughts' signifies an iconoclastic approach towards Chinese tradition.[10] Although the anti-

[9] The majority of participants in the New Culture Movement were young people in their twenties, although not exclusively. Chen Duxiu founded *New Youth* at the age of thirty-six and encouraged younger generations to care about the nation and society in a way that had never been practised by Confucianism. Beyond its typical reference to the period between childhood and adulthood, 'youth' has often been employed as a double entendre in China's political rhetoric, as a metaphor for new, Westernised, and modern. As the young intellectual and revolutionary Li Dazhao (1889-1927) wrote in 1918, 'the world that the old China is not dead, but that a new youthful China is in the process of being born' (1962: 12). After the founding of the PRC in 1949, historical literature, particularly that related to the revolutionary narrative, became imbued with rhetoric about young people's obligations and abilities to shoulder the present and the past while driving the future. This is exemplified by Mao Zedong's well-known statement at a meeting with Chinese students in Moscow in 1957, 'you young people, full of vigour and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you. The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you'. 'The flowers of the motherland' ('Zǔguó de huāduǒ') is another term commonly used to refer to young people in China.

[10] It is worth noting that the term 'tradition' ('chuántǒng') in the context of youth participation in the early 20th century refers specifically to the tradition that adheres to Confucian thoughts, doctrines, and canons, which serve as the guiding principles of Chinese society's praxis. The notion of 'Westernisation' mentioned in the same context refers to the endeavour to introduce and apply cultural practices, political and economic systems, and social values from Europe, the United States, and Japan to transform an 'old China' ('jiù Zhōngguó'), dominated by the Confucian tradition and other 'old' ideas, into a 'new China' ('xīn Zhōngguó'). The process of Westernisation aligns with the determination for social transformation promoted by intellectuals who advocate for industrialisation, democracy,

traditionalist praxis and elements laid the foundation of the New Culture Movement (Chow 1960), there was no unified opinion towards Westernisation (Lin 1979; Chen 2007; Schwarcz 1986; Rahav 2015). Lin (1979) discusses in depth three notable personalities of the New Culture Movement, all of whom mentioned iconoclasm as a feature of this movement to varying degrees. Chen Duxiu, the founder of *New Youth*, and Hu Shi (1891-1962), a student of John Dewey and a liberal, were typical iconoclasts (Lin 1979: 7) repudiating Confucianism. However, Lu Xun (1881-1936), one of the most prominent writers of vernacular Chinese literature, criticised Confucianism while retaining a strong emotional attachment to it to some extent. He could not fully accept wholesale Westernisation, as he had been significantly influenced by Confucianism.[11] This tension is evident, for instance, in Lu Xun's thoughts and writings. Intellectuals such as Lu Xun attempted to reevaluate tradition from a critical standpoint, but ultimately contradictory attitudes towards tradition manifested in their literary works and political practices. Despite appearing iconoclastic at first glance, the New Culture Movement still incorporated cultural elements from China's past.

Overall, the New Culture Movement, which began in 1915, was a cultural and intellectual movement that aimed to promote Chinese modernisation. It eventually evolved into the May Fourth Movement in 1919. This political movement was a response to the decision of the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) not to return former German colonies in China to Chinese sovereignty.[12] The May Fourth Movement was a major milestone in Chinese history, as it marked the beginning of a new era of Chinese nationalism and modernity, and it also led to the establishment of the CCP in 1921.

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republicanism, human rights, personal liberation, women's emancipation, national self-determination, and so forth. These beliefs inevitably involve conflicts with the Confucian tradition, which favours patriarchal families, political monarchy, superstitions, small-scale peasant economies, and the old worldview that places Chinese civilisation at the centre, among other things.

[11] Lu Xun's ambivalent attitudes towards Western modernity and Confucianism have been widely discussed by scholars (e.g., Lee 1985; Pollard 2002; Mitter 2005), as he represents a quintessential Chinese intellectual. Lu Xun's education was rooted in the traditional private school (sīshú) system, where he learned Confucian classics of literature, philosophy, and history. His famous collection of essays, *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* (Zhāohuā Xīshí), was replete with Confucian sentiments, in which he expressed ideas about domestic ethics such as filial duty (xiào), love for elder brothers (tì), and respect for teachers.

[12] Despite being one of the Allies during World War I, China found itself at a disadvantage in the redistribution of world power. According to the *Twenty-one Demands* (*Èrshíyī Tiáo*), former German colonies in the Shandong Peninsula would be handed over to Japan. The anti-imperialist movement emerged concurrently, as protesters opposed bureaucratic authorities that acquiesced to imperialism in initial negotiations (Chen 2007).

2. Young People in the Socialist Movement

Inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the German communist movement, the journal *New Youth* increasingly advocated for Marxist and Leninist ideologies.[13] The Shanghai Socialist Youth League, founded in 1920, responded to the call of *New Youth* editors Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao to join the Communist International (1919-1943). This effort had a profound historical impact on modern China, both before and after the journal's closure by the Kuomintang (KMT) government in 1926. In 1922, the Socialist Youth League (SYL), the precursor of the CYL, was established with support from the Communist International. Subsequently, Chinese youth were organised and mobilised by official institutions within the socialist movement. During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), youth groups such as the Chinese National Liberation Pioneer, Youth Salvation Group, and Youth Anti-Japanese Vanguard in the socialist camp played pivotal roles in the war, cooperating with the nationalist KMT party. Following the CCP ascension to power in mainland China in 1949, the CYL was formally established in 1957, further supporting young people in the socialist transformation.

Discussions of salvation and enlightenment permeated the inception of the Chinese socialist movement (Schwarcz 1985). In the wake of the May Fourth Movement, several critical questions remained unresolved. For example, there was uncertainty regarding how to comprehend and address the relationship between 'old China' and 'new China', as well as how to manage the relationship between the West and China.

[13] The systematic introduction of Marxism to China can be traced back to a special issue of *New Youth* (Vol. 6, No. 5), which published articles such as *Marx's Teaching* (*Mǎkèsī De Xuéshuō*) by Gu Zhaoxiong (1888-1972), *Critique of Marx's Teaching* (*Mǎkèsī Xuéshuō De Pīpíng*) by Lingshuang (also known as Huang Wenshan, 1898-1988), and *Brief Biography of Marx* (*Mǎkèsī Zhuàn Lüè*) by Liu Binglin (1891-1956). Subsequent issues of *New Youth* devoted greater attention to Marxism, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the German socialist movement. Geng Yunzhi's research (2014) indicates that during this period, a vast array of literature translated and introduced by *New Youth* authors covered Marxist and Leninist theories on topics such as national self-determination, women's emancipation, and proletarian politics (334). Notably, Zhen Ying's (1894-1979) translation of Lenin's work on national self-determination later became a significant theoretical influence on the national policy of Chinese socialism led by the CCP.

In the socialist transformation following 1949, the notion of 'old China' extended beyond a society dominated and shaped by Confucian ideology, encompassing the 'Three Big Mountains' (i.e., imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat-capitalism) that the Chinese people sought to overcome.[14] Breaking with the 'Three Big Mountains' signified a determination to embrace national self-determination and rebuild social structures and production relations.[15] In this context, young people were significantly mobilised as a key revolutionary force, not only to carry on the legacy of the May Fourth Movement but also to serve the new agenda known as the 'mass line' of political struggles under Maoism, a localised adaptation of Marxism-Leninism. The mass line approach was employed in the so-called 'mass movement' ('qúnzhòng yùndòng'), which included youth mobilisation. According to Mao's famous saying, this approach specifically means that 'everything is from the masses, for the masses'. The CCP leadership considered the faithful pursuit of the mass line to be crucial for obtaining power (Steiner 1951) and moving China towards the subsequent historical task of achieving communism (Womack 1996).

The masses were mobilised in military confrontations with 'imperialist powers'. During the Korean War (1950-1953), the People's Volunteer Army (PVA), primarily composed of young soldiers, was sent onto the battlefield. Heroic stories of fallen young people in the war, which were incorporated into textbooks, were ideologically used to instil a sense of dedication and sacrifice for the motherland among younger generations (Wang

[14] In China's socialist movement, the concept of feudalism did not refer to the political system practised similarly in many ancient societies, which explained the relationships among nobles, land, and people. Instead, the term encompassed old materials and ideas in a broader sense. For example, Wang (2016) suggests that the ongoing 'cultural revolution' (wénhuà gémìng) persisted from the May Fourth Movement until the Cultural Revolution (Wénhuà Dà Gémìng, or 'Wéngé', 1966-1976) in the late 1970s (101). An iconoclastic approach to tradition was evident when the Red Guards were mobilised in the 1960s to destroy ancestral shrines, genealogy books, religious buildings and statues, as well as pre-revolutionary elements of Chinese culture known as the 'Four Olds' ('Sìjiù'): old customs (jiù fēngsú), old culture (jiù wénhuà), old habits (jiù fēngsú), and old ideas (jiù sīxiǎng).

[15] Chen (2007) reflects on China's encounters with Western ideologies during the May Fourth Movement and establishes connections to the reasons why young intellectuals turned to communism. This turn to communism represented not only the desire for national salvation but also a reconsideration of Chinese tradition and Western thought (Chen 2007: 31). To some extent, Marxism offered materialist dialectics as an ideological tool to address the paradox of individual emancipation and national self-determination. In Chapter Three, I will explore the theoretical resources for constructing Chinese identity in different contexts and explain the conflict between the 'individual' and the 'national' that underlies the dynamics of nationalist narratives.

2014). Numerous stories about the PVA were included in textbooks, such as *Who are the Most Beloved People?*, a famous piece written by Wei Wei (1920-2008) and initially published in *The People's Daily* in 1951; the story of Huang Jiguang, who blocked a pillbox with his body during the Battle of Triangle Hill; and the story of Qiu Shaoyun, who was burnt to death by a firebomb. These representative stories share the common feature of ordinary soldiers making a significant difference through their dedication and sacrifice to the revolutionary cause.

The Chinese masses were also mobilised in the domestic 'class struggle' ('jiējí dòuzhēng'). According to Marxism-Leninism and Maoism, Mao divided the Chinese into two camps: 'the people' ('rénmín') and 'class enemies' ('jiējí dírén'), based on the theory of class struggle. In fact, the mass line approach offeres one of the fundamental principles of revolution proposed by Mao in 1927 after the Nanchang Uprising. 'The masses', a collective concept of a social-class category represented by the proletariat, became political subjects in a grand movement. In line with the earlier communist praxis by the CCP in northern rural China in 1939, peasants in rural China were mobilised during the Land Reform Movement of the 1950s. As a consequence of this radical campaign confronting rural elites such as landowners, squires, and rich peasants, land and property were confiscated and redistributed for the purpose of public ownership transformation (Goodman 2000: 157). Meanwhile, traditional production relations, lifestyles, values, ethics, and relations at the rural level were fragmented and reconfigured into an entirely new pattern (Johnson 2009).

However, according to the class categorisations to which young people were politically subservient, educated young people and young intellectuals falling into an ambiguous categorisation had to be 'transformed' ('gǎizào'). In the *Little Red Book* (*Hóngbǎoshū*), the quotations from Mao dealt solely and critically with 'intellectuals' without mentioning 'youth' (Schmalzer 2015: 161). In 1957, Mao Zedong claimed that

'intellectuals were all bourgeois and petty-bourgeois'.[16] On one hand, the petty bourgeoisie belonged to 'the people' other than the working class, the peasant class, and the national bourgeoisie, but was inferior to the working class and the peasant class and needed to be 'transformed'. On the other hand, the petty bourgeoisie needed to be mobilised to eliminate class enemies such as imperialists. This equivocal description of young people, especially educated young people, reflects the state's attitude towards the role of youth in political participation in a broader sense.

The top-down mobilisation of Chinese young people was exemplified by the Down to the Countryside Movement (Shàngshān Xiàxiāng) led by the CYL from the 1950s to the 1970s. Millions of 'sent-down educated youth' ('zhīshí qīngnián', or 'zhīqīng') were mobilised from cities to rural China, where they lived and worked, and 'received the reeducation of the poor middle peasants'. Most of these individuals, labelled 'educated youth', had only attained junior or high school education. However, from the late 1950s of the Anti-Rightist Campaign ('Fǎnyòu') to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), young people had been categorised into different classes according to their 'class elements' or 'class origin', rather than educational background. In the early stages of this movement, young people whose family backgrounds were classified as 'Five Black Categories' ('Hēi Wǔlèi', i.e., landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, and rightists) often found it difficult to distance themselves from their families of problematic backgrounds. In this sense, complying with the policy of the Down to the Countryside Movement benefited both their parents and these young people, as it was the only way to express their determination to distinguish themselves from their families while also protecting their parents (Honig and Zhao 2019: 31).

Youth participation in the Cultural Revolution entailed the Red Guards exerting significant influence on the political process within a social hierarchy rigorously defined by different class categories. The categorisation of social class, i.e., 'Five Red

[16] In September 1957, speaking at the 8th National Congress of the CCP, Mao Zedong declared that 'intellectuals are all bourgeois and petty bourgeois'.

Categories' ('Hóng Wǔlèi', i.e., revolutionary soldiers, revolutionary cadres, workers, poor peasants, and lower-middle peasants) and 'Five Black Categories', was based on 'blood lineage theory' ('xuètǒng lùn'). The Red Guards were initially assembled by the children of political and military elites. They called on proletarian purity by bloodline to assert their sole legitimate qualification to carry forward the Communist revolution (Wu 2014). Differing starkly from the young people who were 'born to be Red' ('Zìlái Hóng'), those categorised as 'Black' were 'enemies' of the people, or 'anti-revolutionaries' ('fǎn gémìng'). Confronting the domination of the 'blood lineage theory', some young people appealed for the development of an alternative understanding of social class. More young people without elite backgrounds, empowered and mobilised by 'political awareness' rather than bloodline, became the new Red Guards – 'the Rebels' ('Zàofǎn Pai'). These new Red Guards believed that their beliefs and activities determined the category they belonged to, rather than innate attributes such as 'blood lineage' (Jiang and Ashley 2013).

In this context, the mobilisation of young people during the Cultural Revolution was contingent on the political discourse of class struggle. The blood lineage theory, favoured by the 'Old Red Guards' from 'red' families, and the alternative understanding favoured by the Rebels represent 'two structurally distinct kinds of social interrelationships' which 'were simultaneously identified as class' (Kraus 1981: 116). The 'Red' in the Red Guards encompassed a wide range of ways in which young people understood the concept of class. For instance, Yu Luoke, a young man from a 'rightist' family in Beijing and the author of *On Class Origin* (1967) and other works, became nationally renowned, leading to charges of being an 'active counterrevolutionary'. Yu seemed to challenge the prevailing sentiment among 'Old Red Guards' that 'the son of a hero must be a revolutionary and the son of a reactionary must be a bastard'. He advocated for political conduct and performance, rather than bloodline, as determinants of social class categorisation. Yu's interpretation of social class provided young rebels with theoretical tools to demand equal treatment by the descendants of 'red' families.

The mobilisation of Red Guards and the mobilisation of 'sent-down educated youth' were intertwined, carving out the political space of the Cultural Revolution. The mobilisation of 'sent-down educated youth' reached its peak when the Cultural Revolution spiralled out of control. Sending more urban young people to the countryside became one of the measures employed by authorities to quell the chaos during the Cultural Revolution (Bramall 2007; Wu 2014). Consequently, at least 16 million 'sent-down educated youth' were mobilised to the countryside, comprising one-tenth of the urban population (Bramall 2007: 148).

'Sent-down educated youth' in the 1960s and 1970s also undertook projects of popular science and illiteracy eradication, spreading scientific knowledge and technology in rural China. They introduced agricultural science and technologies, such as fertilisation, pesticide use, insecticide application, agricultural mechanisation, and more. Science, as a new way of thinking, served as a crucial revolutionary weapon. This 'scientific experiment' was linked to the notion of enlightenment. Mao inherited this form from the May Fourth Movement and the following socialist revolution, which had 'called for young people to rise up from under the traditions that demanded their subservience and which understood science as a fresh, new system of thought struggling to sprout amidst the thick and constraining roots of tradition' (Schmalzer 2015: 155). However, young people's participation in scientific experiments was also subordinate to the political characteristics of the broader youth political mobilisation during the 1960s and 1970s.[17]

In the late 1970s, particularly from 1978 onwards, many 'sent-down educated youth' initiated strikes and signed petitions to express their fervent desire to return to cities (Yang 2016). Protests in Yunnan Province garnered the most attention nationwide. In 1978, sent-down young people working on farms in Yunnan petitioned the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) through three letters bearing over fifty thousand

[17] According to Schmalzer (2015), young people could not achieve the goal of scientific transformation in rural China without the involvement of propagandists and policy-makers. Propagandists conveyed the notion that working towards scientific transformation and material production in rural China presented a career opportunity for young people. They even celebrated the failure of scientific experiments, deeming them as contributions to the revolution, regardless of their lack of utility.

signatures, expressing their demand to return to their native cities and be 'assigned' ('fēnpèi') work opportunities. These protests were followed by labour strikes and hunger strikes in various cities across Yunnan, which then resonated through large-scale protests in other cities in mainland China. According to Yang (2016), although these youth protests might have been labelled as 'blatant economic, materialistic, bourgeois, and selfish' during the Cultural Revolution, the participants still 'unabashedly voiced these demands' (149). In 1979, the vice-premier responded to the 'sent-down educated youth' by announcing that the central government would address the crisis. In 1980, the General Secretary of the CCP, Hu Yaobang (1915-1989), proposed ending the Down to the Countryside Movement. Consequently, millions of rusticated young people returned to cities.

China's so-called 'sent-down generation' were politically active during an era of significant political division. On the one hand, these young people experienced unprecedented top-down mobilisation and political turmoil. On the other hand, in the late 1970s, they began to acquire new political knowledge that they had scarcely encountered. During the Down to the Countryside Movement in 1978, the petitions in Shanghai were intertwined with the Democracy Wall movement. They also chanted slogans such as 'We demand human rights' (Yang 2016: 150). These political actions inspired further young people to engage in political participation in the 1980s. For instance, bureaucracy intensified during the Cultural Revolution and the Down to the Countryside Movement, with the consequences of this bureaucracy reaching a crisis after the 'sent-down educated youth' returned to cities. In the 1980s, in this context, anti-bureaucracy, anti-corruption, and democracy became the main issues for youth activists, which the following section will focus on.

3. Young People at a Crossroads: Re-discovering the Legacy of Modernisation

Following the ten-year turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the new Party leadership initiated reforms to the overly centralised political and economic system. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP in 1978 devised an alternative approach to modernisation, beginning to reform by 'opening up' ('kāifàng') to the global world.[18] Mao's directives regarding the dictatorship of the proletariat were replaced by Deng Xiaoping's directives about unity, stability, and the development of the national economy (Tsou 1977: 516). The socialist orthodoxy, which positioned 'the Chinese people' as central to Chinese national identity and history, was supplanted by a form of pragmatism (Womack 1996). The expression of the continuation of the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat was removed from the Preamble of the third Constitution promulgated in 1978.[19] Alongside reforms in the economic and political realms, Zhao describes a so-called 'cultural fever' ('wénhuà rè') in the sociopolitical sphere, where 'state control over intellectual activities was loosened, allowing extensive exploration of pro-Western forms of literature and other arts. State control over public and private life was also relaxed' (2008: 43).

Defining what ignited young people's pro-democratic activism in the 1980s, which ultimately culminated in the 1989 Protests, is not straightforward. Here, I attempt to interpret young people's politics in 1980s China by elaborating on what 'participation' might have meant to this younger generation. Reflecting upon 'the transition' (Solinger 2016) in the 1980s, numerous studies situate young people's enthusiasm at the time within the contrast between their pursuit of 'Western democracy' and their renunciation of orthodox Maoism. For instance, it is believed that the previously repressed civil

[18] Although Deng Xiaoping was appointed as the leader of the Central Committee of the CCP during the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP, it was not until the resignation of Mao's successor, Hua Guofeng (1921-2008), as the Chairman of the CCP (1976-1981) in 1981 that the leadership reshuffle was finally completed. The Third Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the CCP announced Deng's rehabilitation and a series of redressed grievances from the Cultural Revolution. The April 5th Tiananmen Incident in 1976 saw crowds gathering in Tiananmen Square, mourning the death of Premier Zhou Enlai (1898-1976) and protesting against the violence of the 'Gang of Four' ('Sìrénbāng', a faction of four Party officials: Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen during the Cultural Revolution). Following the incident, Vice-Premier Deng was denounced as 'anti-revolutionary' and subsequently overthrown.

[19] In the preamble, the articles that 'All the victories in our revolution and construction were achieved under the guidance of Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought;' 'to continue the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat,' were deleted. Article 2 of the general outline writes as: 'The guiding ideology of the People's Republic of China is Marxism, Leninism, and Mao Zedong Thought.'

culture in Maoist China experienced a resurgence in the 1980s 'when the state's basis of legitimacy shifted from ideology to performance and when other channels of upward mobility opened up' (Zhao 2008: 25). In this context, the incident in 1989 is typically portrayed as a 'democracy movement' (Brook 1998) or, more precisely, the students' demands were for 'Western-style pluralist democratic politics' (Groot 2004: 143). It is undeniable that the vast array of political ideas about participatory democracy and civil society introduced to China after the opening-up inspired Chinese young people to engage in political participation and civic involvement. However, the landscape of youth politics in 1980s China was a complex mix. Rather than advancing the simplistic view that Chinese young people in the 1980s shifted their beliefs solely to 'Western democracy' after their general disillusionment with socialism, it would be more accurate to assert that this younger generation found themselves at a crossroads as they sought an alternative to Maoism while rediscovering various sources of political modernisation, including newly introduced Western ideas, the May Fourth Movement, and even the historical socialist movement.

One source of inspiration for youth political participation in 1989 was undoubtedly a rediscovery of the legacy of the May Fourth Movement. During the 1989 Protests, major cities in China, including Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, and more, responded positively to the Beijing students' decision concerning a nationwide celebration on the seventieth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, which was regarded as the birth of democratic enlightenment in modern China. At the end of May, the symbolic statue, Goddess of Democracy, was constructed in Tiananmen Square by protesters. These students showed a strong appreciation for ideas about democracy and enlightenment, the legacies of the May Fourth movement decades ago, as integral parts of political modernisation. As Calhoun suggests, '[t]hese same two issues of national strength and development infused the meaning of the slogan "Democracy and Science", which linked the students of 1989 to the intellectuals who created the May Fourth Movement of 1919' (Calhoun 1997: 243). Protesting students identified themselves with a tradition linked to the May Fourth Movement, not only claiming themselves as

the true inheritors of young revolutionary pioneers but also challenging one of the CCP's most basic myths (Saich 2019). Similarly, the phenomenon of the song *The Internationale* sung by protesting students again and again revealed the fact that students paid tribute to the May Fourth Movement and the irony of the CCP, which claims to have the authenticity and legitimacy of communism (Calhoun 1997: 237).

The May Fourth Movement indeed offered inspiration for youth political participation in 1989. However, it would be inaccurate to isolate this incident from other Marxist socialist and Maoist traditions. China's youth political participation occurring in the 1980s was not divorced from the wider post-Mao reforms. The doctrinal writings of Mao were not abandoned, but selectively incorporated into the post-Mao reforms. As Wu suggests, '...no mainland Chinese leader dares to openly admit deviating from Mao Zedong's thoughts.' (1996: 29). In academia, intellectuals' convictions about democracy were still based on a premise inherited from the grand linear worldview of Marxism and Maoism. Although many of them had cast doubt on Marxism after Mao's death, they 'had a mechanical faith in the Marxist principle of the coordination of the superstructure and the economic base' (Zhao 2008: 60). To understand how political thinking from the socialist era was adapted in post-Maoist China, it is necessary to differentiate between the two different approaches towards political mobilisation.

Calhoun's (1997) study analyses the 'grassroots' dimension of political mobilisation in the Tiananmen Incident and expands on its resemblance to the mobilisation in the socialist era. Protesting students used analogous modes of mobilisation inherited from the socialist era in the 1960s and contrasted the current leadership with earlier ones. For example, students in 1989 used the term 'to line up' ('chuànliàn') in mobilisation, which was the same word used in the nationwide activity of young Red Guards to make contacts with each other in the 1960s (Calhoun 1997: 48). They also contrasted the current party leaders' refusal to accept the petition with the willingness of earlier party leaders Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969) to come out even in the middle of the night to talk to a member of the Red Guards (49).

Meanwhile, a top-down approach also played a significant role in youth mobilisations of the 1980s. As Mitter suggests, the 1989 Protests 'took on the mantle of the earlier movement at a grassroots level' (2004: 230). However, in terms that the student organisation was not the only agency involved in political reform, protests were not entirely grassroots actions but actually took place in cooperation with the liberal faction of the CCP. There were roughly two factions within the CCP leadership in the 1980s, namely, the conservatives such as Chen Yun, Li Peng, Hu Qiaomu, and Li Xiannian, and the liberals and the reformists such as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Student movements in the 1980s were integrated into the conflicts between the two factions within the CCP leadership surrounding the 'combating bourgeois liberalisation'. In 1980, following a campaign to 'bring order out of ultra-left chaos' ('bōluàn fǎnzhèng') after the Cultural Revolution, Deng gave a speech titled 'Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership' inside the Politburo, unveiling the five obstacles to clear in the political reform: bureaucracy, over-concentration of power, patriarchy, lifelong tenure of the CCP leadership, and privileges. In the mobilisation, students were in line with the government's stated aim (Lim 2014: 179). The five obstacles set up a corresponding relationship to the conspicuous slogan in the 1986 Chinese student demonstrations 'democracy, freedom, human rights, anti-bureaucracy, and anti-corruption'. This ambitious programme of reform was endorsed by leading liberals and reformists in the CCP, in particular, Hu Yaobang, then General Secretary of the Party, and Zhao Ziyang, then Premier of China. The liberals and reformists promoted these reforms in the manner called 'bourgeois liberalisation', advocating the implementation of a democratic system similar to that seen in Western countries. However, the liberal agenda posed a threat to the Four Cardinal Principles of the CCP that China must 'uphold the socialist path', 'uphold the people's dictatorship', 'uphold the leadership of the CCP', and 'uphold Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism'. Accordingly, although Hu and Zhao were praised for their ambitions for political reform amongst the protesters, they were ultimately forced to resign after the 'mismanagement' of the 1986 student demonstrations.

The memorial for the Secretary of the Party, Hu Yaobang, which ultimately ignited the 1989 revolt, also embodied the desire for clean politics in line with the Party's appeal. As Zhao elaborates,

> because China in the 1980s had a less fragmented state and weaker intermediate associations than had existed during the May 4th and the December 9th Movements, the 1989 Movement was unable to organise so freely and raise demands so directly. In this setting, the students sought to avoid head-on repression by twisting or hiding their real demands and goals behind legitimate forms of collective action. Many activities during the 1989 Movement can be straight-forwardly explained as strategies that aimed to create a 'safe space' to lower the possibility of repression (Zhao 2008: 283).

Consequently, the overlap between civic engagement and party reform was a necessary condition for students to participate in political action at that time. It also highlighted the limitations of comprehensive reforms, which ultimately led to the government's suppression of supposedly out-of-control students. The political enthusiasm in the 1980s proved to be transient, eventually being repressed in the renewal of authoritarianism following what was deemed a 'revolt'.

In summary, terms such as 'democracy', 'enlightenment', and 'patriotism', widely used in youth political participation during the 1980s, were influenced by the rediscovery of the dual tradition, that is, the May Fourth Movement and the socialist revolution. Young people's understanding of these terms subtly changed in these movements as they sought to integrate theories with the realities of the 1980s, subsequently impacting their political demands. For instance, protesting students developed their own definition of 'democracy' in these movements, placing greater emphasis on civil liberties and economic justice rather than free elections (Calhoun 1997: 244). They also used patriotic slogans in anti-corruption protests to appeal to or challenge the CCP by invoking the legitimacy that the CCP had been claiming. After the 1989 crackdown, the CCP has sought to rebuild its legitimacy through nationalism and patriotism. In the

following section, I will scrutinise young people's mobilisation in the post-Tiananmen context to determine how their role in political participation has changed.

4. Young People after the 1989 Crackdown

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Chinese government revised its reform plan for opening up by accelerating economic reform and halting structural reforms in the political realm. Supreme leader Deng Xiaoping gave a talk during his 1992 inspection tour of southern China, committing to shift the focus of reforms to the economic realm. Deng's successor, Jiang Zemin (1926-2022), popularised the term 'socialist market economy' during the 14th National Congress at the end of that year, describing the goals of economic reforms as preserving the sole leadership of the CCP while introducing the concept of a 'market economy'. In the political realm, the CCP faced an unprecedented crisis of political legitimacy following the 1989 crackdown (Wang 2014). The CCP remained vigilant about young people's role in political participation and initiated precautions against hidden threats driven by students towards their authority. On the anniversaries of the May Fourth Movement, the CCP attempted to grapple with explaining the role of students in political participation. The significance of democratisation was downplayed, while the roles of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and science and technology were highlighted.

The most significant sign of the CCP's attempt to reshape young people's understanding of politics was a scheme of patriotic education launched in the early 1990s. In recent years, patriotic education has been widely discussed by those interested in political propaganda and civic education (Wang 2014; Yu 2014). Here, I focus on three intertwining narratives evoked in patriotic education - the narratives of national humiliation, national calamity, and national greatness - to unveil the controversial relationship between the authorities and young people in political communication since

the 1990s.

One of the goals of China's patriotic education after the 1990s was to forge links between China's present and its past. In this patriotic education, China is described as a country with a 'five-thousand-year great civilisation' that has been 'invaded' and 'humiliated' by outsiders in modern times, with the time now ripe to restore its past glory. From 1990, all first-year university students were required to participate in military training programmes related to historical education. Primary and junior high schools regularly organised students to visit patriotic education bases, emphasising China's humiliation at the hands of Japan and Western powers, along with the Communists' role in winning national independence (Wang 2014: 96-97). In patriotic education, a 'threatening other', whether referring to certain nations such as Japan or the United Kingdom, or to 'the West' in general, is usually created to evoke or memorialise collective trauma. Contemporary threats in terms of ideological conflicts after the Cold War continued well into the 1990s. Due to the complexity of geopolitics after the 1990s, a 'threatening other' became the inevitable consequence of the CCP's efforts to rebuild its political legitimacy. The ideological clashes between the CCP and 'the West' demonstrate that liberal democracy would not be accepted as an alternative to the Party's dominant ideology. Therefore, it is widely believed that the narrative of 'national humiliation' ('guóchǐ') is a strategy of the CCP for addressing the crisis of political legitimacy after 1989 (Wang 2014). In particular, the Chinese government faced sanctions and human rights pressure from Western countries after the 1989 crackdown. A critical view suggests that for the Chinese leadership, emphasising 'national humiliation' proved to be 'a way to shift the public's attention from corruption and the lack of political reform, for which the Communists could be blamed, to external issues' (Callahan 2010: 35).

The narrative of 'national calamity' ('guónàn') has been another strategy adopted as part of this attempted patriotic education. In this context, there are some interesting overlaps between the narratives of national humiliation and calamity. For instance, the

13th December 1937, the day when the Nanjing Massacre began, has become the National Day in memory of humiliation and calamity. However, national calamity embraces a wider connotation that could be inclusive of any sudden disasters causing significant damage and distress. The 2008 Sichuan earthquake, in which tens of thousands of people were killed and lost, was mourned as a 'national calamity'. Such collective trauma was used to create 'an emphasis on victimhood and entitlement' (Miller 2013: 2). With the emergence of the Internet, the younger generations influenced by the narrative of national calamity began to redefine the rhetoric of civic culture in new ways. On its tenth anniversary, young people across Chinese social media engaged in the solemn invocation of the Sichuan earthquake, using textual and audio-visual representation as symbolic content for narratives of strong nationhood.

If the narratives of national humiliation and national calamity bridge the gap between the historical past and the present, the narrative of national greatness links the present and the future. In the last three decades, China's media have continuously highlighted economic development achievements by reporting on large-scale public events and infrastructure construction, demonstrating that high-tech manufacturing has made China a high-profile country. The authority has promoted China's international status by exploiting the reciprocity between nationalism and globalisation. For example, the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing aimed to shed the historical baggage of China being weak and falling behind (Liew and Wang 2004: 8). The 2008 Summer Olympics were also deployed to assert China as a unified sovereign state after incidents in which exiled Tibetans tried to interrupt the torch route (Fan and Lu 2014). Chinese identity is embodied by the demonstration of 'soft power' (Nye 1990), which brings a new dimension to 'national greatness' (Zhao 1997: 725).

In emphasising Chinese cultural attributes, the narrative of national greatness ascribed to economic and technological demonstrations at the national level evokes the symbolism of colour in everyday life. After the economic reforms, the CCP quickly and smoothly shifted its colours from the Communist red to the Chinese red (Wu 2007: 126).

The colour red once evoked certain connotations of the particular political context in Maoist China. In Maoist China, the meaning attached to the colour red was constructed to apply specifically to communist categories. For example, red was applied in the design of national and party flags because it represented the blood shed by revolutionaries. Political colours were also used in class struggles to distinguish 'the people', who were 'red', from 'class enemies', who were 'black'. In the recent four decades, however, the connotation given to 'red' has been elided with colour symbolism of Han culture, such as 'happiness', 'prosperity', and 'pride', resulting in extensive use of this colour in the national narrative and serving as a complement to the story of the magnificent economic reform. 'Chinese red' ('Zhōngguó hóng') has come into view, becoming a complex term that evokes the improvement in livelihoods as well as the meritorious achievements of China's development led by the CCP.

Narratives of national humiliation, calamity, and greatness mingle together in China's patriotic education. These narratives invite younger generations to share memories and celebrate the most memorable moments in modern China, to discover symbols of national pride and shame in order to articulate national identity, and to heed the promise to the public of a brighter future which embraces China's past glory. Politically marginalised young people after 1989 were mobilised in a top-down manner to exploit the conventions of dominant discourses to further imagine what it means to be a Chinese citizen. They were corralled into participation in commemoration of national events and sites. They also participated in radical demonstrations against other nations such as the United States and Japan. Echoing the antagonism between China and other countries, xenophobic patriotism and nationalism were mutually ignited over controversies in foreign dynamics, such as the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade (Greis 2004; Weiss 2014), the Tibet unrest (Wang 2014), and the sovereignty claims of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands (Weiss 2014).

By intertwining these three narratives, the 'family-state vision' ('jiāguó guānniàn', or the 'family-nation isomorphism') was brought into public view to carry on the

reconfiguration of youth mobilisation. Students were now being mobilised through the educational system and public media in a blend of nationalism and Confucianism, the latter of which offered counsel on how to prepare youngsters to serve the state as well as the family, as – 'Without the country, there would be no family'. Greis's (2004) study centres on allusions to the linkage between the rhetorical device of nationhood and the family-state emotion rooted in Chinese culture. He argues that there existed 'two Chinas' (133), one of which was China as a monolithic 'state' ('guójiā') ruled by the Party, and another was the 'motherland' ('zǔguó'), the latter of which yielded affections and attachments.

Because of this, 'spontaneity' has become a topic in the investigation of China's youth political participation, although it is usually difficult to identify in actions. For instance, a revival of diasporic Chinese nationalism has been observed due to the enlarged community of overseas students. After the incidents in which pro-Tibetan forces attempted to douse and snatch the torch relayed in Greece and France before the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, young people demonstrated not only in domestic cities but also in large cities in Western countries. Students poured into the streets in New York, Paris, London, Chicago, Vancouver, and Seoul, marching around and yelling slogans to 'defend the motherland'. This scene recalled the transnational protests after the U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. These young protesters, who were 'transnational and de-territorialised in the diaspora, are used to consolidate the identity of the Chinese nation in a particular way' (Callahan 2012: 154), had been rare in Maoist China. Wang (2014) ascribes the reasons why the Chinese younger generation, many of whom attended elite schools abroad, became so patriotic, to the development of civil society in the context of social stratification. In Wang's view, spontaneity could be deployed in the relief efforts after the earthquake (383), as well as in the transnational protests (342). However, the desire for civil society is inadequate in attempting to understand the ambiguous relation between overseas student protesters and Beijing. As Callahan (2012) elaborates, protesters 'followed Beijing's lead to criticise foreigners for sympathising with Tibet', while 'the popular demonstrations and

official statements from overseas groups in support of Beijing appeared to be spontaneous' (153).

The historical vision I have offered in this section tries to complicate the polarised view of one-way mobilisation, emphasising that there is no univocal story about young people's political participation after the 1990s. Vertical state-led mobilisations did and continue to have a significant impact on young people's national identity and their actions, regardless of whether we pay attention to conflicting mobilisations. One of the drivers that make the CCP's attitude towards young people's mobilisation ambiguous behind the conflict between young people and the authority lies in the unfolding tension between patriotic education and economic liberalism. A dramatic turn can be observed after the 1990s in that nationalism was ignited to dovetail with the apparent yearning for economic reform. The connotation of nationalism thus shifts away from a utopian ideology, and 'Mao's theories are now applied in a pragmatic way and are used in particular as a rallying point for safeguarding national sovereignty and dignity' (Wu 1996: 29). 'Pragmatic nationalism' (Womack 1996; Wang 1991) embedded in the practices of international relations and functioned as practical means toward economic transition in post-Mao China instead of philosophical ends in Maoist China.

Indeed, economic reform has been a double-edged sword for young people's mobilisation after the 1990s. Sufficient economic acceleration has enabled young people to access to new media by which new forms of political communication can take place. However, the authorities cannot allow the situation to get out of control in the context of globalisation. For example, online mobilisations and cyber-attacks were adopted after the 'Embassy Bombing' in 1999, but many of these actions were not officially consented (Greis 2004). Economic performance was more important than nationalism in dealing with the 'Sino-Japanese Diaoyu Island controversy' so that the government would not give free rein to nationalist sentiments without pursuing China's global interest (Gries 2004: 88). Therefore, although young people's mobilisation was regarded as remedial measures after 1989 that the CCP believed China needed to be

pulled back into a collective community of national in-group solidarity working for common goals (So 2016: 235), the collective concerns about foreign relations were always incompatible with the needs of economic development.

5. Conclusion

In China, the notion of 'youth' stems from a distinct historical context closely tied to the nation's pursuit of modernity since the early 20th century. Chinese young people have been purposefully mobilised as a vital force in historical and societal transformations. On the one hand, young people's aspirations for an independent and modern China can be observed throughout their entire participatory process. The concept of political modernisation profoundly influences how Chinese youth perceive the 'old China' and 'new China', as well as the relationship between China and the rest of the world. On the other hand, during critical phases of societal transition, youth, encompassing both students and intellectuals, consistently find themselves in an 'intermediary position'. They are encouraged and subsequently come to see themselves as bearing the responsibility of reforming the masses and initiating mass movements, whilst simultaneously being empowered and mobilised by higher political forces.

In this context, a concise examination of the significance of youth political participation in relation to the modernisation of China uncovers four insights. Firstly, various historical settings reveal a 'collective portrayal' of youth engaging in politics. During critical junctures (events, movements, etc.) in contemporary China, young people serve not only as political subjects but also possess the potential to emerge as historical subjects. Secondly, youth mobilisation is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up binary process; instead, it is deeply rooted in a more intricate historical dynamic. Thirdly, youth politics in the modern Chinese history has consistently witnessed specific debates, such as the degree to which a 'Westernisation' approach was embraced. Exploring

youth nationalism in both the past and the present is unattainable without considering the dialectic of China and the West (as the other), as these concepts have been incrementally constructed within the framework of an extensive historical process that surpasses particular historical events or movements. Fourthly, these three characteristics have informed the meaning of youth political participation in China's modernisation endeavour and have rendered youth nationalism a subject of historical inquiry, thereby underscoring the relevance of examining the political participation of fangirls in present-day China.

Chapter Two Conceptual and Theoretical Framework: Digital Youth Activism, Pop Fandom and the Chinese Nationalism

1. Data- and Algorithm-driven Digital Platforms

In this section, I examine the issue of social media usage in relation to pop fandom, with a focus on the contemporary trend that sees data- and algorithm-driven digital platforms occupying an increasingly significant role in political and cultural practices. The discussion begins with the contextualisation and definition of platformisation, based on algorithm and data technologies in social media platforms. It is important to note that algorithms are not merely mathematical sets of rules specifying how data behaves; they also bring about 'paradigm shifts in epistemology' (van Dijck 2014; Kitchin 2014; boyd and Crawford 2012) that have substantial impacts on knowledge and social realities (Chun 2021; Eubanks 2018; Benjamin 2019).

I also address a specific participatory mode of pop fandom on social media. Extending Jenkins' argument (2006) that the Internet reduced barriers to youth cultural and political participation at the turn of the century, data-driven social media have further lowered this barrier to such an extent that it is no longer necessary to actively engage with other participants sharing similar interests and beliefs. This digital platform-based cultural and political participation prompts critical discussions regarding its consequences, including the two aspects examined in this part. Firstly, I consider users' over-reliance on the perceived objective nature of digital platforms and the impact of platform dominance on knowledge. Secondly, I explore the reconfiguration of 'exploitation' among ordinary users as data labour within the context of Chinese pop fan culture through the practice of 'data making'.

1.1 The Myth of Objectivity and Neutrality

Several scholars (van Dijck 2014; Kitchin 2014; boyd and Crawford 2012) contend that new data technologies have precipitated epistemic paradigm shifts. By this, I refer to the notion that '(big data) reframes key questions about the constitution of knowledge, the processes of research, how we should engage with information, and the nature and categorisation of reality' (boyd and Crawford 2012: 665). Kitchin (2014) characterises big data as 'continuously generated, striving to be exhaustive and fine-grained in scope, and flexible and scalable in its production' (2). Kitchin (2014) summarises the attributes of big data as 'massive in volume; high in velocity; diverse in variety; exhaustive in scope; fine-grained in resolution and uniquely indexical in identification; relational in nature; flexible, possessing the traits of extensionality (can add new fields easily) and scalability (can expand in size rapidly)' (1-2).

As Kitchin (2014) suggests, each social media platform maintains records and information about users in a far more exhaustive and up-to-date manner than authorities traditionally achieved when conducting a census every five or ten years. Furthermore, big data derived from social media usage leads to efficiencies and savings in personal data acquisition. In contrast to door-to-door surveys with a limited number of questions, algorithmic techniques enable continuous, behind-the-scenes investigations of users as long as they remain active online. New data storage and analysis technologies accommodate the vast volumes of data sets generated.

We are data in the sense that what constitutes us are potentially quantified for different ends (van Dijck 2014; Cheney-Lippold 2017). Our personal data are 'raw materials' (Gitelman 2013; van Dijck 2014) that can be used for the prediction of future behaviour and further for different purposes - which can benefit policymakers and advertisers (boyd and Crawford 2012; Gitelman 2013). On the Internet, the 'algorithmic clouds' (Stalder 2017) allow individuals to situationally belong to a certain category of people,

to share consumption habits with some of these people when shopping, to share cultural tastes with some others when acquiring knowledge, and so on. In Stalder's account (2017), 'algorithmic clouds' are highly personalised and contextualized in that 'algorithmic clouds' bring about '… new levels of abstraction, so that the algorithm takes into account additional variables such as the time and place of a search, alongside a person's previously recorded behaviour - but also his or her involvement in social environments, and much more' (116). In a specific circumstance, those who control big data are not interested in a person in their totality, but only in extracting 'sections' of the person so that they can be categorised in a certain sub-group in a context that benefits the one who holds the data.

Gangadharan (2012; 2020) underscores the importance of addressing digital inclusion discourse in order to prevent the exacerbation of existing social exclusion and inequalities. For instance, certain minorities may be assigned higher risk assessments in public safety systems due to their community affiliation, while shopping site recommendation systems might suggest middle-class consumer goods to individuals based solely on their purchase of pet food. In data practices, given the highly relational nature of big data, establishing associations between data points, i.e., algorithmic relations, proves to be more effective than explaining the reasons behind these connections. However, if neglecting the underlying logic behind the superficial correlations in data, we may unintentionally reinforce and perpetuate social exclusion and inequality.

The advent of big data has undeniably revolutionised the approach to data analysis. Characterised by features such as abundance, exhaustivity, variety, timeliness, dynamism, messiness, uncertainty, and high relationality (Kitchin 2014: 2), big data has instigated profound changes in analytical methods. Notably, data analysis is no longer predicated on strict assumptions or specific questions; instead, it focuses on exploring available data, uncovering patterns and insights, and revealing previously unconsidered correlations and patterns. Consequently, users, believing in the neutrality and

objectivity of digital platforms, are inclined to place their unreflecting trust in them. As van Dijck (2014) expounds, 'the ideology of dataism exhibits characteristics of a widespread belief in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behaviour and sociality through online media technologies' (198). However, data collection and interpretation are far from being automatic, ideologically detached processes devoid of human influence.

As data and algorithmic technologies evolve, their increasing use in determining value and visibility based on user proliferation and business goals renders the belief in neutrality and objectivity increasingly implausible and concerning. In reality, although well-concealed, data mining is invariably affected by human bias. Big data can assist state authorities in anticipating and mitigating potential terrorist threats, but the criteria for defining terrorism and determining which individuals warrant closer scrutiny are not inherently objective; rather, they are based on historical counter-terrorism policies, social realities of violence and violent crime, and the ideology of national security, all of which predate big data. Algorithms and data-driven systems are designed and controlled by individuals or organisations with their own interests and goals. In other words, we live in an informational world where content is pre-filtered, pre-sorted, and pre-ordered, and this process is 'intrinsically selective and manipulative' (van Dijck 2014: 200). Both commercial and governmental agents may exploit van Dijck's (2014) concept of 'dataism' to determine which content is more worthy of public exposure, valuable, 'healthy', and 'patriotic'. This influences the perceptions and behaviour of Internet users in the same manner as it defines terrorism and the 'state of unemployment'.

Data technologies are not inherently neutral; rather, they are influenced by the societal biases and power dynamics in which they are embedded. Chun's work *Discriminating Data* (2021) focuses on the ways in which data technologies can be employed to discriminate against individuals and communities. Chun exposes the limitations of correlational data and its potential for reinforcing biases in both spatial and social

dimensions. By exploring the concept of 'neighbourhoods', she demonstrates how data-driven practices can perpetuate existing social hierarchies and entrench discriminatory practices. Similarly, Eubanks (2018) specifically examines how automated decision-making systems disproportionately target and harm impoverished communities. She presents various case studies that demonstrate how these systems maintain cycles of poverty by making it more challenging for the poor to access essential services, such as housing and healthcare. And by introducing the concept of 'New Jim Code', Ruha Benjamin (2019) proposes that the seemingly neutral technologies can uphold and exacerbate racial inequalities.

Thus, the myth of technological neutrality can readily conceal the ideological motivations and biases that underlie it, and misrepresent data and algorithmic technologies as unbiased and objective instruments for documenting, analysing, and interpreting social realities. Furthermore, while personal information appears to accurately predict and assess behavioural tendencies, the human element is no longer as prominently featured as it once was. However, data and technologies do not function in a transcendent manner; rather, they are grounded in the cultural, political, and commercial logic of specific social contexts. For instance, when Amazon's recommendation system tailors one's shopping list, it does not render an individual more unique than others; instead, it makes them more homogeneous, as the dataset associated with that user is presupposed to be part of a broader typological dataset from the outset. In this context, data and algorithmic technologies are likely to be the means by which a hegemonic culture maintains its position.

1.2 Data and Labour Exploitation

The use of personal data has a variety of purposes, whether or not the users are conscious, consensual, voluntary and fully informed. Personal data is used for

commercial purposes without compensation, for capitalist reproduction such as enhancing economic gains, increasing the commercial value of brands or evaluating market policies, as well as for governmental administration, such as policy decisions, public surveillance and strengthening central authority; etc. Thus, data technologies often give rise to a re-examination of the concept of 'exploitation' in the digital condition.

There are a variety of terms dealing with different aspects of data mining such as 'life mining' (van Dijck 2014) and 'datafication' (e.g., van Dijk 2014; Andrejevic 2012). As van Dijck (2014) suggests, 'big data configured as a rhetorical text, generated for specific purposes and probed by various groups of people, offers an alternative to the pervasive mining metaphor' (202). Van Dijck employs the terms 'datafication' or 'dataism' to underscore the inclination for evolving data and algorithm technology to acquire the ability to quantify previously unquantifiable aspects. Data and algorithm technology transform social actions into quantifiable data, particularly enabling the quantification of desires, emotions, and relationships. Personal data is not only 'mined, enriched, [and] repurposed into precious products' (van Dijck 2014: 199), but it also fortifies the quantification sector. In his essay on data mining and datafication, Andrejevic (2012) contends that the datafication of individual choices and personal pleasures of social relations on social media platforms turns users into digital labourers, as even mundane online activities such as searching, liking, and sharing become quantifiable for productive purposes.

While the previous section aimed to dispel the myths of technological neutrality and objectivity in data and algorithms, revealing the biases of the 'manipulators' behind the technology, this section builds upon the works of scholars on the cultural implications of data and algorithmic technologies, specifically examining the free exploitation of personal data by platforms and its impact on culture. In her study *Digital Diasporas*, Gajjala (2019) extensively examines how communities, conversations, and social movements are formed through digital technologies, specifically focusing on gendered

Indian-identified networks online and the combination of affection and digital labour in global socio-economic environments. Nakamura (2009) examines how fan-produced videos in the game World of Warcraft about Chinese player workers contribute to the racialisation of digital labour. The portrayal of Asian 'farmers' as unwanted guest workers in the game reflects the dispossession of information workers engendered by ongoing processes of globalisation. According to Nakamura, this case illustrates the problematic informationalised capitalism and the requirement for possessive individualism in late capitalism. These studies, and many more specific cases (e.g., Jarrett 2015; Franklin 2021; Nakamura 2015), emphasise that digital labour is intertwined with cultural norms, values, and power structures, and the importance of understanding the underlying assumptions and biases embedded within data and algorithmic technologies and their broader cultural contexts.

In East Asian countries, especially South Korea, Japan and China, pop fandom is a practice that is highly related to the idol industries. Pop fans are attached to the fan communities engaging in a wide range of dedicated and creative activities. For the sake of maintaining the communities centred around their idols, fans usually do a lot of work for their idols and the communities voluntarily, even paying instead of getting paid. In their daily practices, fans create fan productions (fiction, materialities, etc.), keep an emotional attachment to the idols and communities, and get psychological gratification.

Yin (2020) investigates the relationship between digital fandom, platform algorithms, and the dynamics of data contribution, arguing that fans are encouraged by the platform deliberately to actively participate in generating more data. According to her, traffic data has evolved into a novel affective element in the interaction between fans and their objects of interest, leading to the emergence of an algorithmic culture within digital fan culture. Weibo, the most active platform for fangirls in China, has developed features specifically dedicated to idol culture, such as 'idol charts', 'trending', and 'heat value'. These features share similarities, as they all pertain to the visibility of idols. Weibo is also refining its search algorithm, allowing human manipulation to play a more

significant role in the sorting and ordering processes. 'Data making' is a term used by the fan communities for the reference to data-traffic-based acts in fan practices, ranging from acts as simple as 'liking', 'sharing' and 'reposting' to strategical and tactical moves in creating a buzz or rival competitions. Considering new communicative technologies change social realities, cultural practices, and the complex relationship with mass media and consumers, fan participation becomes subordinated to economic gains and commercial values of digital platforms and pop companies. One example is the 'heat purchase' for idols, which involves exchanging money for increased visibility on social media. The widely held belief that money can influence algorithmic results encourages fan communities and companies to invest more in the platform. Additionally, Weibo's algorithmic propensity to promote 'reporting' constitutes a key manipulative element, particularly when uncovering negative news about idols, especially those related to personal relationships and attitudes towards China. In this context, platform users are driven by 'a sort of radical, short-term pragmatism' (Stalder 2017: 124) in this dynamic environment.

In this context, the investigation into 'exploitation', which underpins Marx's theory of surplus value, encounters new challenges. As Scholz (2012) suggests, it is debatable 'whether the Marxist labour theory, with its concept of exploitation of labour, remains applicable to emerging modes of value capture on the Internet' (11). Prior to the capitalist mode of production, for the purpose of 'primitive accumulation', capitalists monopolised production through violence under historical conditions, such as Enclosure, where the means of production and labour became separated (Marx 1935; 1959). With the evolution of capitalism, the concept of exploitation emerged alongside the theory of surplus value to elucidate how wages bound capitalists to labour. Labourers were compelled to exchange their labour value for basic necessities, while capitalists pursued greater efficiency by extending labourers' working hours. Consequently, according to Marx's general theory, exploitation is a structural outcome of the economic and political institutions of capitalism, which take unfair advantage of individuals forced to sell their labour to capitalists due to a lack of ownership of the

means of production.

Nevertheless, when examining digital modes of value extraction, defining 'voluntariness' solely in terms of exploitation proves to be a complex endeavour. The enduring debate around whether labour can be considered 'genuinely voluntary' has become increasingly intricate in the context of the digital sphere (Fuchs 2014; 2012; 2013; 2015; 2018). Marx's (1935) analysis asserts that labour is never truly voluntary, due to two key factors: the lack of labourers' ownership of the means of production, and the fact that their labour primarily benefits capitalists rather than their own interests. However, the digital environment has altered the fundamental conditions of exploitation, further complicating the discourse on 'voluntariness' and its implications on data labourers.

In his seminal work, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*, Christian Fuchs (2014) investigates the domain of digital labour from a Marxist perspective, addressing aspects such as exploitation, alienation, and the impact of ideology. As a prominent scholar in the field, Fuchs (2012; 2013; 2015; 2018) repeatedly illuminates the intricacies of digital labour and the seemingly voluntary nature of participation on online platforms. His researches elucidate how digital labour challenges the conventional Marxist understanding of exploitation, given that digital labourers often appear to contribute their time and efforts voluntarily and without coercion. This conundrum partially arises from the entanglement of digital labour with personal interests and entertainment, which obfuscates the boundary between work and leisure, production and consumption time. Moreover, Fuchs (2015; 2018) suggests that the ideological foundations of digital capitalism potentially contribute to the naturalisation and normalisation of exploitative practices within online platforms, thereby creating a milieu in which users seem to be complicit in their own exploitation.

2. Online Activism and Popular Culture

2.1 Fandom as Participatory Culture

'Fandom', or 'fan culture', boasts a history far predating the Internet, with its roots in the advent of popular culture during the late 19th century. In this research, Jenkins's contribution of 'participatory culture' (2012; 2006) offers a cultural lens through which to examine pop fandom. Jenkins (2012) suggests that fan practices render them both consumers and producers within the capitalist cultural production of everyday life. Drawing on the term 'textual poachers' (2012) from Michel de Certeau, Jenkins characterises 'participatory culture' in the late 20th century as an active and skilled engagement of TV fans in the 'production and circulation of textual meanings' (4), rather than a passive and ignorant form of consumption.

Jenkins's ethnographic studies of fan groups dedicated to TV programmes such as *The Professionals*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Alien Nation*, and *Twin Peaks* reveal that fans consistently negotiate self-experience through textual meaning. Fans frequently employ symbolic resources derived from texts to construct new narratives that reflect their own values and realities, thereby establishing 'intertextuality' (Kristeva 1986) with original texts. As Kristeva (1986) puts, 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (37).

Contemporary perspectives on fandom contend that cultural consumers not only consume popular culture, but also reproduce it through 'rewriting' and 'reinventing' (Jenkins et al. 2015: 14) texts. Fans commonly deconstruct existing texts and reconstruct or allude to them within their own creative works, giving rise to a myriad of potential significations. Moreover, fans often produce and disseminate their cultural artefacts in collaboration with other community members. This joint reinterpretation of textual meanings and generation of new meanings strengthens the consensus among members, framing fandom as a collective endeavour. Consequently, fandom encompasses notions of affiliation, collective identity, self-determination, and self-

expression.

Jenkins' theory of participatory culture accentuates fans' agency in their actions, as they 'move from the margin to the centre of cultural production and consumption' (2006: 12). Audiences are empowered through a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down process (18). Other scholars (e.g., Fiske 1989; Radway 1991) who contribute to the cultural shift towards 'fandom studies' in the 1980s and 1990s have also acknowledged fans' responses to social reality. Fandom, or fan culture, often fosters forms of political participation related to its subject matter. For instance, Fiske (1989) and Radway (1991) explore the potential for civic engagement emerging from fandom. Fiske's research on Madonna's fans and Radway's research on female readers of romance fiction connect fan practices to female resistance in identity politics. Fiske (1989) suggests that it is the so-called 'micro-politics' that reveal the lived experiences of minority groups. Youth engagement with popular culture inspires them to adopt alternative political identities (often as resistance to dominant ideologies) as it enables them to exert control over their 'immediate conditions of existence' (Fiske 1989). Similarly, Jenkins contends that the complexity of capitalist cultural production and social realities indicate that fandom serves as 'a vehicle for marginalised subcultural groups ... to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations' (Jenkins 1988: 88).

The advent of the Internet has facilitated novel avenues for fans to maintain social contact, as well as create and share their cultural productions. Platforms such as Facebook and YouTube exemplify participatory practices for young content creators, inspiring their peers to foster cultural production and consumption within online communities. Simultaneously, the Internet has transformed the way fans connect with one another, as well as altered regular practices in fandom and youth politics. The phenomenon of 'fan activism' (Jenkins 2006; Earl and Kimport 2009) has garnered attention due to the burgeoning enthusiasm for political participation and civic engagement within extensive fan bases.

Besides the shared identities, interests, beliefs, and ideas that consistently unite fan communities in collective action, the Internet provides unprecedented digital conditions that facilitate fan activism and enable Internet-mediated mass actions. Jenkins (2009) optimistically contends that across new media, there exists 'a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed to novices' (3). As fandom presents a low entry barrier for youth political participation (Jenkins 2006; 2009), fans establish networked publics among groups with shared interests, produce and disseminate content that resonates with one another, develop communication practices and the foundations for activism.

2.2 Fandom, Politics and Youth in Digital Activism

The juncture between fan culture and political participation is a contentious subject. Since the vast majority of popular cultural content is at least overtly non-political, fan activism is not necessarily political; and that young people often mobilise in a non-political collective identity. But in fact, this non-politicised identity appears to be a disguise in practice to hide their political purposes. Although young participants mobilised by fandom might consider themselves to be apolitical, they are used to expressing themselves in ways that are recognisably political. Popular cultural content produced from a non-political perspective can be and are used in mobilisation which are clearly a form of political communication. Japan's anime fans, for example, expressed their dissatisfaction with the government in the form of manga after the Fukushima nuclear meltdown (Moscato 2017). As Dayan argues that political publics are often intertwined with 'identity-seeking' or 'text-oriented' (2005: 44), young people cultivate their identity by linking cultural actions and online debate about what open-minded values might mean in their everyday lives, while drawing supports from popular

culture, using language directly from popular culture as symbolic capital.

In recent years, much scholarship has paid attention to the new dynamic tensions between fandom and politics. New tensions and worries are revealed in the study that fan culture and politicians have the potential to act of complicity in new ways in the promotion of particular political agenda. Politicians also have an aid of the semiotic system originated from popular culture in formal political scenarios. For example, in 2015, Donald Trump compared himself with Batman at the Iowa state fair, a messenger of justice in the dark (Cavna 2015). However, in his inauguration in 2017, Trump quoted a line from Bane, the populist villain in the sequel of Batman in 2012, Christopher Nolan's The Dark Knight Rises, 'giving it (power) back to you, the people.' Fan culture also finds its path to intervene in politics via activities that used to be unrelated to the political communication of democratic politics in the past. For example, politicians have become charismatic icons in front of their supporters or constituents. In Dean's (2017) research on the relationship between fandom and British politics, he raises the concept of 'politicised fandom' (408) to describe the phenomenon that politicians establish a new relationship with their supporters as pop singers and their fans. In return, fan communities of these politicians (such as 'Corbyn-mania') develop their agency and capacities to intervene in politics. It is noted that such a relationship is not exclusive to specific regimes, parties or camps but to extensive observations from the UK Labour Party to UK Independence Party, from Bernie Sanders to Nicola Sturgeon. In China, President Xi Jinping at the beginning of his term also appropriated fan culture in propaganda for portraying the image of a good leader and husband. He and his celebrity wife Peng Liyuan have a fan base. Peng's fan community is known as the 'Mama Peng's fan community' and there is even a song written about their love story (Ho 2018: 238).

Popular culture in the context of social media thus can be seen to facilitate and fuel new modes of communication in political participation. Modes of communication involved in fandom exchange offer a particular language to express ideas and feelings in political

participation. Face-swapped with AI photo-editing software, memes originated for merging characters from Harry Potter, Star Wars, Game of Thrones, DC Comics and Disney productions with politicians in the 2016 and 2020 US Presidential Election (Hungting 2020) - Bernie Sanders was associated with heroes Dumbledore, Gandalf and Obi-Wan Kenobi in one meme; Hillary Clinton as Danaerys Targaryen, Wondar Woman Wicked Witch; Trump as Load Voldemort; etc. However, memes do not only provide an inexhaustible lexicon in the exchange, they also gain the potential to inflect the imaginaries produced by certain political and historical subjects in particular directions. For example, in her research, Gerritsen (2019) investigates film fans from South India. Visual materials such as huge posters of movie stars on the street are posted by fans. The way in which people display their affection towards celebrities brings the images of the upper class and their moralities into the lives of the poor. This creates an ideal and aspirational subject for the lower class, as the lower class is exposed to the values and ideals of the upper class, and they strive to emulate the lifestyle of the wealthy.

The way that young people acquire political knowledge and political understanding in participatory culture and get informed by collective voices, common interests and shared values in the online community has changed greatly in the digital context. However, the challenge of studying youth online activism lies in the fact that the age of social media presents a globalised, transcending nation-state illusion. It is imperative to dispel this illusion and explore the heterogeneity of youth culture in different social contexts. The experiences and perspectives from Western Europe may not be directly applicable to those in Eastern Europe, just as the insights gained from the 'Global North' may not always be relevant or suitable for understanding the unique contexts and challenges faced by the 'Global South'. In light of this, some scholars (e.g., Banaji and Buckingham 2013; Buckingham, Bragg and Kehily 2014; Banaji and Mejias 2020) advocate for understanding the diversity of experiences and concepts in youth culture via ethnographic studies. For young people living in different social contexts, even if they are geographically close, they may have vastly different views on the intentions

and purposes of online activism due to differences in economic and political status, ethnicity, gender, and other categories. According to Banaji and Buckingham (2013), youth civic engagement is influenced by multiple factors, such as gender, class, education level, and even the timing of participation. Additionally, barriers to offline political participation may resurface in online engagement. Based on these two points, research on youth politics, whether online or offline, should not overstate the technological impact of digital global media and assume that technology has unified the conditions for youth political participation. Instead, researchers should contextualise and situate their subjects, approaching individual participants' actual experiences to obtain more comprehensive and critical insights. For this reason, ethnographic research (see Chapter Three for details) becomes an important methodology for studying youth online activism, because highly microscopic practices and relationships can only be refracted through the prism of ethnography.

For example, the anthology *Youth Active Citizenship in Europe*, edited by Banaji and Mejias (2020), comprises case studies on youth activism across eight European countries. These studies challenge widely used but unexamined concepts in youth political discourse. What does 'active' or 'activism' in youth politics truly mean? Who has the power to shape the public image of young people? For instance, young members of political action groups in the United Kingdom question the media's portrayal of them as active, youthful, and vibrant (Mejias and Banaji 2020). In a study of an Estonian case (Mai 2020), participants of the youth organisation DD Academy grapple with considerable cost pressures, facing unrealistic expectations and impostor syndrome in their pursuit of activist endeavours, revealing the reality that people often underestimate the costs of engagement while overestimating its anticipated outcomes. By proposing a typology of civic engagement through ethnography, we observe a vast array of heterogeneous 'active' types that persist within different societies dominated by liberalism and progressivism. In the case of Porto, Portugal (Cruz, Malafaia, Silva, and Menezes 2020), the ties that bind grassroots youth participants are not the rationality typically associated with the idea of public sphere, but rather emotions and

affectionsfrom which they have been excluded. They even establish ‘affective networks’ for action based on emotions and affections, which challenge to the supremacy of rationality and echoes the case of fangirls, wherein the political communication of young women actually blurs the boundaries between rationality and irrationality (see Chapter 5). Overall, active youth citizenship is a context-dependent and evolving concept, varying amongst individuals and countries. Culture and its engagement in youth organisations influence the kind of citizens that young activists develop into, while their comprehension of societal roles remains to change over time.

3. The Chinese Nationalism

3.1 Nation as Nation-state

The formation of a ‘nation’ is constituted by inherent factors such as a territorial or geographic basis, language, and common ancestry, as well as by non-inherent factors such as people’s cognition and emotions about their nation (Kellas 1991). Furthermore, Morris notes that national identity is ‘an individual’s sense of belonging to a collectivity that calls itself a nation’ (Morris 1995: 14). The ‘nation’ under discussion today is a component of modernity. People’s cognition and emotions about their nation also imply the political proposition of ‘sovereignty’ in terms of being a government that governs this territory and the citizens within it. Consequently, ‘national identity’ also signifies such a relationship, that is, the interaction between the individual and the nation-state. The concept of the ‘nation’ has consistently been ‘reconstructed’ in a dynamic process, referred to as the ‘invention of tradition’ by Hobsbawm (2012), or more broadly, as a phenomenon of modern society (Gellner 1983; Anderson 2006; Nash 2010).

The framework provided in this chapter embraces the core idea that the nation and other related concepts are modern phenomena. Although the nation, national identity, and nationalism can be described as separate concepts by scholars from the fields of history,

sociology, anthropology, and political science, they generally regard these three concepts as crucial to the construction of modern societies. One common definition of what constitutes a nation is politically and institutionally associated with the building of a nation-state. In this context, I consider the rise of the nation and nationalism as a process facilitated by factors corresponding with modernity and endeavour to elucidate the concepts of 'legitimacy' (Gellner 1983), 'sovereignty' (Anderson 2006), 'nationality' (Hobsbawm 1990; 2012), and the nation-state.

Firstly, in *Thought and Change* (1964) and *Nations and Nationalism* (1983), Gellner proposes a sociohistorical approach for addressing nationalism manifested in modern political units. According to Gellner (1964; 1983), nationalism is a potent element in the legitimacy of political principles. He distinguishes the nation from pre-modern units such as small tribes, city-states, and feudal entities (1983: 152). Gellner considers 'the secret of nationalism' to be that 'high culture pervades the whole of society, defines it, and needs to be sustained by the polity' (1983: 18).

In *Imagined Communities* (2006), Anderson attributes the origin of the nation-state to the social, economic, and cultural changes brought about by modern life. His term 'imagined communities' or 'an imagined political community' is used to describe the modern unit that connects people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The nation is 'imagined' because 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them' (Anderson 2006: 6). Furthermore, the nation is assumed to have a fixed geographical territory, which stands in opposition to the Christian idea in the Middle Ages of mankind as a 'community'. As a result, the nation or the nation-state can claim sovereignty over a bounded territory (6-7).

To Hobsbawm, 'nationality' is another political subject, in addition to the nation, in national construction. He finds that the modern meanings of both the terms 'nation' and 'nationality' were invented and used after the Revolutions of 1848. The period between

1848 and the 1970s focused on the creation of European nation-states (Hobsbawm 1990: 104). Before 1848, the nation simply meant 'the aggregate of the inhabitants of a province, a country or a kingdom', and also 'a foreigner' (Hobsbawm 1990: 14). After the Revolution of 1848, the word was given a new meaning as 'a State or political body which recognises a supreme centre of common government' and also 'the territory constituted by that state and its individual inhabitants, considered as a whole' (14). The state and the nation inhabiting the territory constitute the basis of the relationship between citizens and the country in a modern sense.

There are two elements for the construction of the nation, according to the narrative of 'the principle of nationality' (Hobsbawm 1990; 2010). The first element is that the nation is a product of political mobilisation in the revolution (1990: 18-45). In this context, public interests such as civil rights, welfare, and personal liberties are represented by the newly emerging civil community, rather than any other units of ethnic or local interests. The second element of the narrative of 'the principle of nationality' is that the 'nation' as a whole is usually identical to the 'people' in the revolution. The solidarity formed in the political mobilisation as a kind of belongingness, termed 'proto-nationalism', distinguishes 'us' and 'others', 'the nation' and 'the foreigner' on the basis of beliefs, knowledge, and emotions (Hobsbawm 1990: 46). This ideology efficiently mobilises the 'country people' to protect the community with which they identify. 'The principle of nationality' provides a revolutionary and bottom-up approach to understanding national identity and nationalism. This perspective aligns with Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities', positing that the emergence of civil culture is a prerequisite for national identity, which will be expanded upon in the next section.

3.2 Beyond Nation-state: a Civic Perspective

I have examined the political perspective of nation and national identity above, which is embedded in the building of the modern nation-state. In this section, I discuss the extent to which the nation is identical to the nation-state. This discussion prepares us for further exploration of Chinese nationalism in the subsequent two sections.

Although the nation can be identical to the nation-state in its narrow sense (Habermas 1995), the political perspective of interpreting national identity and nationalism is not sufficient for analysing the phenomenon of nationalist sentiment in contemporary China, as will be explored in this study. As Hutchinson (1987) states, 'while political nationalists understand the nation primarily as a political and territorial unit, cultural nationalists regard the nation as an "organic" community based on its unique history, culture, and genealogy, or the product of a unique civilisation' (30). National identity has never been inherent to human beings, but is in fact based on artificial boundaries drawn by 'visible biological differences' and 'invisible cultural and ideational distinctions' (Nagel 1994: 167-168). I hereby assume that the civic perspective constituting Chinese nationalism is not inferior to its political perspective. I attach the importance of semiotics in the construction of national identity to Gellner's theory of 'high culture' (1983) and Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities' (2006). Without the civic perspective, there would be no means to begin further exploration of national identity at the civic level in the following sections.

Both Gellner and Anderson contend that language and culture are instrumental in the formation of national identity. The process of constructing and reconstructing national identity hinges upon the utilisation of cultural traditions to foster national unity, responding to the evolving requirements of new populations. Gellner (1983) introduces the concept of 'high culture' to characterise the emergence of a semiotic system that had not previously materialised before the European transition from agrarian to industrialised societies. In the 19th century, literacy rates among Europeans experienced a significant increase to accommodate the demands of industrial production, commerce, and urbanisation. Consequently, people residing within the

nation began to share semiotics comprised of abstract, universal, formal, and standardised signs and symbols through mass communication. By learning and employing 'high culture', individuals were able to recognise their cultural identity, participate in civic activities, and safeguard their communities from potential harm inflicted by external forces, including other nations and political entities. As Gellner suggest:

> Rather, when general social conditions make for standardised, homogeneous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations and not just elite minorities, a situation arises in which well-defined educationally sanctioned and unified cultures constitute very nearly the only kind of unit with which men willingly and often ardently identify. The cultures now seem to be the natural repositories of political legitimacy.
>
> Under these conditions, though under these conditions only, nations can indeed be defined in terms both of will and of culture, and indeed in terms of the convergence of them both with political units. (Gellner 1983: 55)

Anderson (2006) also attributes the origin of national consciousness to the evolution of language, tracing its roots back to the Reformation. During this period, the diminishing use of Latin in everyday life prompted a cultural transformation in which vernacular languages were extensively adopted throughout European countries. These vernacular languages created barriers within Christian countries, affecting not only communication but also emotions and sentiments. The invention and application of printing technology had a profound impact, enabling vernaculars from various regions to be unified and standardised. However, it was the rise of so-called 'print-capitalism' (Anderson 2006: 37) that truly facilitated the emergence of 'imagined communities'. Vernaculars became the languages in which people read, wrote, and communicated, while dialects were gradually eliminated. Mass communication through books and newspapers allowed individuals to learn and share information in their local languages, uniting people who had never known each other into a sense of conjoined identity as co-nationals. Thus, language as a medium not only expresses collective identity but also (re)constructs it.

3.3 Multiple Facets of the Chinese Nationalism

This section, which focuses on the genesis and formation of nationalism in China, is premised upon the assertion that 'nationalism' is not a singular phenomenon, nor is it the inevitable outcome of 'print capitalism' (Anderson 2006) or industrialisation and urbanisation (Gellner 1983). In fact, the meaning of nationalism can be quite distinct in different historical contexts. For example, although nationalists in various countries often concern themselves with similar issues, such as sovereignty based on authenticity, those campaigning for national autonomy in colonial countries and those asserting national cultural peculiarities in imperialist countries cannot be reduced to the same nationalist model. As Duara (1988) suggests, the Hegelian roots of the modern nation within linear history cannot explain the 'nation' and 'nationalism' constructed in specific histories. The issue of nationalism in China has sparked extensive debates over the past century. A long-standing debate, for instance, revolves around whether nationalism is a modern phenomenon in China. Many scholars (e.g., Harrison 1968; Townsend 1996) deny the self-identification of a national sense in pre-modern China until the intrusion by the West as the Other at the end of the 19th century; they argue that rather than being a nation-state, China was a 'civilisation' based on a Confucian moral and political-cultural order. In contrast, Duara (1988) challenges the emphasis on 'civilisation' or 'culturalism' and claims that nationalist sentiments existed in pre-modern China.

This section aims to address the multiple facets of Chinese nationalism through such debates, which have been (re)articulated and assumed by various actors in the process of China's modernisation. Today, rather than disappearing from history, these facets of Chinese nationalism provide an exploitable aggregate of cultural and ideological resources for the actors in the nationalist movement, particularly the mobilisation of online nationalism under the influence of pragmatism in the context of economic reform.

As Hall (1996) suggests, 'national culture is a discourse – a way of constructing meanings which influence and organise both our actions and our conception of ourselves' (613). In a multi-ethnic nation like China, the definitions of 'nation' and 'nationality' are given a variety of meanings. In Chinese, the word 'China' can refer to state formation (Zhōngguó) and cultural formation (Zhōngguó; Zhōnghuá; Huáxià). Likewise, 'Chinese' can refer to the Chinese nation (Zhōnghuá Mínzú), the Chinese people (Zhōngguó Rénmín), and overseas Han Chinese (Huárén, or the Chinese diaspora). Chinese nation (Zhōnghuá Mínzú) is a modern concept that defines 'Chinese' as an ethnic group inhabiting China's territory, united by a common history, culture, and language (Leibold 2007). However, the connotation of the 'Chinese nation' is never an immutable fact in the historical context. These different meanings, derived from various theoretical resources, align with different political agendas.

This section identifies various types of Chinese nationalism based on the premise that nationalism is a modern invention (Gellner 1964; 1983), does not feature in premodern units (1964: 152), and serves as an ideological element of political legitimacy in the process of nation-state building (1983: 134). It is important to note that the dynamic discourse of nationalism in today's China is not solely dominated by any single type explored in this section; rather, it is a hybrid of different types, ranging from xenophobic forms to more moderate forms of cultural nationalism that cooperate with one another. Each type of China's nationalist discourse has emerged from specific theories and contexts. They are inspired by various theoretical resources and function as 'a collective and ongoing process of creation and recreation, construction and identification' (Nash 2010). For instance, although so-called Maoist China (1949-1976) ended more than four decades ago, the strategy of the 'mass line' still appears in top-down mobilisation with considerable frequency.

Han Nationalism

Since the Han Dynasty, the term 'Han' has been adopted as a self-identifying label for

the inhabitants of central China, referred to by various names (Qínrén; Hànrén; Tángrén; Huárén, etc.). Nevertheless, the emergence of the 'Han race' as a contemporary notion is inextricably linked to the late 19th and early 20th-century revolutions against the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) – China's last empire, governed by a branch of the Manchu people - and the revolutions against imperialist forces.[20] Han revolutionaries promoted the idea that the 'Chinese' identity has consistently relied on its historical and cultural connection to the 'Han race' (Hàn mínzú) as the dominant position. Constructing the 'Chinese' identity involves two aspects: envisioning Hans at the centre of the Chinese nation and (re)integrating or assimilating other races considered subordinate to Hans within the national narrative. During the Republican (1912–27) and Nationalist (1928–49) eras, following the Qing Dynasty, the 'Chinese nation' was founded on the notion of republicanism involving one dominant race (Han) and four subservient races (Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan). This concept is also known as the Five Races Under Union (Wǔzú Gònghé).

As a foreign concept introduced to China in the early 20th century, the notion of 'race' ('mínzú') serves as a bridge between the ancient Chinese experience of identity and the modern concept of nationality in envisioning China as a contemporary state. At this stage, 'race' was officially translated and inappropriately used as 'mínzú' ('ethnicity') rather than 'zhǒngzú' ('race'), a more accurate translation in today's Chinese. Generally, Han nationalism (Hàn mínzú zhǔyì) is an ideology that combines primordial (Spencer and Wollman 2002) and modernist (Geertz 1973; Anderson 2006; Hobsbawm 1983) conceptualisations. It is a belief that the 'Han race' lies at the centre of the narrative, based on biological characteristics, language, historical traditions, and cultural affiliations, which trace the common ancestry of the Chinese back to the Yellow Emperor (Huángdì), the legendary ruler of the initial confederation of agricultural tribes residing along the Yellow River (Huánghé) around 3000 BC. Simultaneously, this idea

[20] Imperialist forces especially refer to the 'Eight-Power Allied Forces' (Britain, the US, Germany, Japan, Russia, France, Italy and Austria-Hungary), a multi-national troop set up in 1900 for suppressing the anti-imperialist rebels in China.

relies on modern conditions such as citizenship, the principle of political legitimacy, and modernity in the imagining of the Chinese nation-state.

One theory associated with the experience of identity in ancient China, which ultimately contributes to the concept of the 'Chinese nation' adopted in the Republic and Nationalist periods, features 'Han nationalism' and is known as the 'Sino-barbarian dichotomy' ('huá yí zhī biàn') (Dikötter 2015). This idea, derived from the concet of *Tianxia* (or 'Under Heaven') is a cultural and political worldview concept that traces back to the Zhou Dynasty (1041-771 BC). It regards the Han in Central China as the people of civilisation, rites, and etiquette, while treating the populations inhabiting the surrounding areas as the 'Four Barbarians' ('Sìyí', i.e., Dí, Róng, Yí, Mán). This theory ultimately evolves into an integral aspect of the notion of the 'Chinese nation', a community that conjures up a long-lasting cultural and political commission centred around the Sinocentric system from ancient China onwards (Fairbank and Goldman 2006; Dikötter 2015; Townsend 1992). Consequently, Han nationalists value the 'authenticity' of China's national identity, viewing Chinese civilisation as 'the most successful of all systems' (Fairbank and Goldman 2006: 52) and 'the only true civilisation' (Townsend 1992: 98).

The Emergence of Socialist Nationalism

In 1901, Liang Qichao (1873-1929) introduced the concept of 'Chinese nation' (Zhōnghuá Mínzú) for the first time in his *Introductory Essay on China's History* (*Zhōngguóshǐ Xùlùn*, 1901). In this essay, Liang described the 'Chinese nation' as a community that shares a common territory, history, and worldview. In 1905, Liang developed this idea further by clarifying that the 'Chinese nation' comprises different ethnic groups, including the Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui (one of the Muslim groups), Miao, and Tibetan. Liang emphasised that the 'Chinese nation' represents a hybridisation of 'nations' but shares the same Chinese identity. This idea formed the embryonic concept of the 'Chinese nation' based on the principle of Five Races Under

Union after the founding of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1911.

In reality, however, political elites at the time held differing opinions on the Five Races Under Union. The first president of the ROC, Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), proposed the 'Three Principles of the People' (Sānmín Zhǔyì). The first principle, called 'Minzu' or 'civic nationalism', emphasised that all five racial groups (Han, Manchu, Mongol, Hui, and Tibetan) should unite equally as the 'Chinese race' to develop a 'national consciousness'. However, the non-differential treatment of different 'races' gradually evolved into the 'Sinicization' ('Hànhuà' or 'chúnhuà', or 'assimilation') of non-Han groups from the late 1910s to the 1940s. Sun repeatedly advocated that the 'Han' and 'Han culture' formed the basis of the principle of Five Races Under Union. The first chairman of the KMT (Chinese Nationalist Party), Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975), also treated the 'Chinese race', composed of the five races, as a whole. Nevertheless, Chiang's nationalist ideas in the 1930s and 1940s were based not only on cultural and historical pride, with Confucian philosophical principles such as 'loyalty' ('zhōng') and 'benevolence' ('rén') adhering to them, but also on the political principles of Sinicization of non-Han groups. This practice, known as Han Chinese nationalism (Dà Hànzú Zhǔyì or Dà Mínzú Zhǔyì), was later criticised by Marxist-Leninists such as Mao Zedong, Fan Wenlan (1893-1969), and Jian Bozan (1898-1968).

In this context, socialist nationalism emerged as an alternative approach devised by Marxist-Leninists to address China's nationality. Marxism-Leninism served as the theoretical foundation for China's socialist revolution, and Mao Zedong, building upon this foundation, developed Maoism, which advocated nation-state construction based on this ideology. Since Chinese nation-building is closely linked to its state-building (Duara 1988: 2), China's socialist nationalism also constituted a form of state nationalism, encompassing three objectives for the Chinese people or masses - anti-imperialism, anti-federalism, and opposition to bureaucratic-capitalism. Gellner's theory illuminates the role of nationalism in legitimising the Chinese state and the reasons behind nationalism becoming an indispensable element in China's modernity.

Despite the Chinese state's claim to legitimacy, asserting that China as a modern nation is collectively governed by various ethnicities, another discursive system emerged during Maoist China, one which emphasised the identity of the Chinese people. In this regard, ethnic policies were incorporated into the ideology of class struggle in the socialist state, leading to the creation of the terms 'people' (rénmín) and 'masses' (qúnzhòng) as new political subjects.

Drawing on Marxism-Leninism and Maoism, the idea of 'self-determination' ('zìjué') emerged from the socialist revolution, reconciling the demand for a unified nation with the disparities among ethnicities.[21] As the theoretical foundation of the CCP, China recognised nationalism as a crucial element in nation-building (Liew and Smith 2004: 4). Unlike the identity of the 'Chinese nation' during the ROC period, the unification of the Chinese nation in Maoist China treated 'people' and 'masses' equally, based on class identity and anti-imperialism. Although the Chinese state upheld its legitimacy as a modern nation through its multi-ethnic composition, another discourse of nationalism emerged, one that centred on the identity of the Chinese people or masses. This discourse was deeply rooted in the commitment to proletarian liberation and the legitimacy of the CCP's political principles. Through this discourse, the Chinese people

[21] According to the 1954 Constitution, China was described as a multi-ethnic nation composed of fifty-six groups, all equal before the law. In practice, the Chinese nation (or Chinese people and masses), regardless of the ethnic groups they belonged to, shared the collective purpose of achieving communism in the future. Proponents of socialist nationalism at the time learned from the Three Districts Revolution (Sānqū Gémìng, also referred to as the Ili Rebellion, 1944-1949) in three Uyghur districts of Xinjiang and the independence of Outer Mongolia (1946), incorporating non-Han groups into the mission of socialist revolution. When discussing 'nation' at this time, it referred only to the 'Chinese nation', a term equivalent to Chinese 'people', 'masses', and 'communist revolutionaries', rather than Han, Uyghur, or other ethnic categories that existed during the ROC period. The process of ethnic integration was no longer considered 'Sinicization' or assimilation but 'transformation to socialism'. This strategy provided a solution to the nation-building process of China as a multi-ethnic nation, meeting the demands of 'self-determination' according to Leninist doctrines on national issues because the connotation of 'nation' had changed. For more on the history of the Three District Revolution, see also Michael Dillon's work *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest* (2003). See more on the minority rights of the PRC, refer to Article 4 of the 1954 Constitution.
The CCP established 155 Autonomous Administrative Divisions (shǎoshù mínzú zìzhì dìfāng) in areas with concentrated ethnic minority populations. Based on the area, these divisions were divided into three levels: regions (provinces), prefectures, and counties (counties and banners). Five autonomous administrative regions exist, namely, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (founded in 1947), Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (founded in 1955), Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (founded in 1958), Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (founded in 1958), and Tibet Autonomous Region (founded in 1965). 'Autonomous' ('zìzhì') in Chinese means 'self-rule' or 'self-determination'. However, in today's China, these autonomous regions possess even less political autonomy than other regions. Governments of autonomous regions must obtain advance permission to enact legislation, which governments of non-autonomous regions do not require. Units of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are also heavily stationed for national security purposes.

or masses, encompassing both Han and non-Han groups, were transformed for revolutionary purposes.

Pragmatic Nationalism

The overwhelming reform that began in 1978 in China paved the way for the emergence of pragmatic nationalism, which has been shaped by three interconnected ideologies: developmentalism, culturalism, and cosmopolitanism.[22] These ideologies have worked in tandem, adapting to the pragmatic goals of economic reform. Pragmatic nationalism, characterised by a range of rhetorical formulations such as metaphorical and exaggerated expressions, has dominated the language used in policy-making, propaganda, and mobilisation. This phenomenon has filled the ideological vacuum left behind by the decline of communism, reshaping the nation-state narrative. In contemporary China, pragmatic nationalism is manifested in the schemes of 'Harmonious Society' (Héxié Shèhuì) and 'Chinese Dream' ('Zhōngguó mèng'), which articulate a set of beliefs and values intended to realise the so-called 'Chinese model' ('Zhōngguó mòshì') in recent years. These schemes will be explored through the lens of nationalism theories.[23]

The transition from the Deng leadership and the Jiang Zemin-Zhu Rongji leadership to the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao leadership marked a significant shift in the modernisation narrative. This transition moved from a grand narrative of a 'socialist market economy' to an emphasis on social development and justice. The Harmonious Society scheme,

[22] Although Mao Zedong had died in 1976, the reform in political and economic realms did not officially start until the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in 1978.

[23] China's modernization as a historical process witnessed a turn after the Tiananmen Incident in 1989. Political reforms have been plodding ahead and the CCP has decided to shift the focus of national development to economic growth. Since then, China has been exploring the 'Chinese model' distinguished from both of the 'Western model' and the previous socialist model. The ideology of 'Chinese model' is named 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' (Zhōngguó Tèsè Shèhuìzhǔyì), and the economic system related to it is named 'Socialist market economy' (Shèhuìzhǔyì shìchǎngjīngjì). The 'Chinese model' has been developed by four sessions of leadership, namely, the Deng Xiaoping leadership (1983-1993), the Jiang Zeming-Zhu Rongji leadership (1993-2003), the Hu Jintao-Wenjiabao Leadership (2003-2013) and the Xi Jinping-Li Keqiang leadership (2013-). Every leadership promoted the political and socio-economic vision of development as the ruling philosophy and guiding principle within their terms of office. For the Hu-Wen Leadership, it is 'Harmonious Society', and for the Xi-Li leadership, it is 'Chinese Dream'.

promoted by the Hu-Wen leadership, aims to address the mounting conflicts in Chinese society, such as social injustice, income inequality, environmental pollution, and inflation. These conflicts have been acknowledged by the CCP as the challenges facing China's modernisation at the dawn of the 21st century. The term 'harmonious' ('héxié') is derived from the Confucian philosophy of 'harmony' ('hé'), which seeks balance in interpersonal relationships and the relationship between humans and the nation. In this context, the philosophy is employed as an administrative strategy by the Chinese government to cultivate a prosperous, sustainable, stable, dynamic, and united society.

The concept of the 'Harmonious Society' reflects the CCP leadership's self-examination of unrestrained development. Simultaneously, the leadership is eager to demonstrate their revival of collective morality and humanism amidst the excesses of material and human desires. However, ideas rooted solely in Confucianism cannot actually support the 'Harmonious Society' and promote social wellbeing. In this regard, the CCP leadership introduced the notion of 'scientific development' ('kēxué fāzhǎnguān') as another rhetorical device, which suggests that improved development can be achieved through 'scientific methodologies', identifying 'disharmonious elements' ('bùhéxié yīnsù') and eliminating them. Yet, the term 'disharmonious elements' remains ambiguous in practice. For instance, conflicts between the rich and the poor or humans and nature can be considered 'disharmonious elements'. Critical perspectives and dissenting voices may also be deemed disharmonious and subject to dismantling. The leadership's anxieties about conflicts of any kind have been transformed and promoted as social values in everyday life, encouraging citizens to live by 'the middle course' (zhōngyōng or 'the Doctrine of the Moderate' in Confucianism) instead of raising criticism or engaging in debate. Consequently, the 'Harmonious Society' has become a euphemism for political and social repression. The concept not only influences visions of economic development and social justice but also establishes a reference for the censorship system, legitimising it in a seemingly rational manner.

The developmental objectives associated with the 'Harmonious Society' subtly persist

from the Hu-Wen leadership to the Xi-Li leadership. However, the 'Chinese Dream' promoted by the Xi-Li leadership exhibits a stark difference in the dialectical unity of culturalism and cosmopolitanism. China's cosmopolitanism is driven by both 'the century of humiliation' and its ambitions to explore the global market, realised through the expression of national sentiments. These sentiments refer to the doctrine of Three Confidences (Sāngè Zìxìn) on 'the road to national revival' ('qiángguó fùxīng zhī lù'), encompassing confidence in guiding theories (dàolù), the political system (zhìdù), and culture (wénhuà). The combination of nationalist and cosmopolitan sentiments has previously been characterised as 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (Werbner 2006), described as 'an oxymoron that joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment' (496). In the next subsection, I will scrutinise the confluence of nationalism and cosmopolitanism within the milieu of neoliberal China in recent years. This complex social landscape serves as the precise backdrop against which the fangirls, who are central to this research, have grown up. Amidst this setting, a multitude of nationalist ideologies profoundly shape the fangirls' understanding of nationalism and their approach to civic engagement.

Towards Cosmopolitan Nationalism in Neoliberal China

Drawing from the above analysis of various facets of Chinese nationalism, I conclude this section by introducing and elaborating on the concept of 'cosmopolitan nationalism'. In contemporary China, the diverse aspects of Chinese nationalism, within the distinct historical contexts mentioned earlier, collectively give rise to what I term cosmopolitan nationalism. I argue that nationalism and cosmopolitanism are not mutually exclusive choices; instead, they are integrated effectively to the point where the political agenda can be advanced at both domestic and global levels. The term 'cosmopolitanism' as an attribute in this concept signifies that China's contemporary nationalism possesses a substantial worldview with cosmopolitan characteristics. I do not approach cosmopolitanism from a relativist standpoint, as that is not my focus. Nor do I employ the term cosmopolitanism in a universalist sense, because the seemingly

contradictory phrase ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ is deeply embedded in the discursive structure of China’s modernisation.

In part, my aim in proposing this concept is to address the inescapable paradox of the enlightenment-salvation dichotomy (see Chapter Two) that was constructed in discussions of the Chinese nationalist movement in the 20th century. It was believed that the imbalance between the dual tasks of salvation and enlightenment hindered China’s mobilisation during and after the May Fourth Movement (Li 1999; Schwarcz 1985). In Schwarcz’s study (1985), she critiques the excessive demands for salvation that suppressed enlightenment. Her criticism echoes the renowned article by Chinese philosopher Li Zehou (1999), in which Li observes the side effects of nationalism in modernisation concerning the tension between enlightenment and salvation. From Li’s perspective, the enlightenment of freedom and democracy from the Western world, as one of the conditions for the realisation of salvation, was overshadowed by the enlightenment of nationalism and socialism. In this study, I attempt to transcend the enlightenment-salvation dichotomy and demonstrate that the two (at least partially) can act in concert. My narrative is informed by the theoretical contributions of predecessors, such as Wang Hui (2003), who notes that Li focuses on the opposition of the dual tasks in form without differentiating specific political positions in nationalist movements. Cheah addresses the issue of enlightenment universalism versus nationalist particularism in *Spectral Nationality*, albeit not explicitly in the case of China:

> …the putative antithesis between cosmopolitan universalism and nationalist particularism misleadingly obscures the fact that both philosophical nationalism and cosmopolitanism articulate universal institutional models for the actualization of freedom and are underwritten by the same organismic ontology. … (Cheah 2003: 2)

> These dichotomies pathologize nationalism either by opposing it to Enlightenment universalism, from which it is allegedly a fall, or by distinguishing a ‘bad’ chauvinistic cultural nationalism from a ‘good’ universalistic nationalism centered on constitutional structures that enshrine humanistic ideals. The first position fails to recognize that nationalism is also

> a universalism because both it and cosmopolitanism are based on the same normative concept of culture (8).

Consequently, I regard the fangirls' nationalist foray into global social media as an 'event' (Badiou 2005), refraining from abstracting the motives, positions, and lived experiences of different agents as opposing sides or objects entirely subservient to the dominant political agenda. In no way do I seek to deny the historical narrative encompassing over a century of Chinese efforts in decolonial struggle and anti-imperialism; however, it is worth attempting to find a breakthrough by amalgamating cosmopolitanism and nationalism in the analysis of youth nationalism in contemporary China.

As observed in numerous examples from the Global South, 'national self-determination' (or 'self-determination') occupies a pivotal role in China's nationalist movement. As early as Kant (1964, see also Kedourie 1993), 'self-determination' emerged as the moral cornerstone of new nation-state governments following revolutions (such as the French Revolution), fostering the belief that people should obey laws crafted according to their own will, purposefully and consciously. Greenfeld (1992) suggests that nationalism possesses 'an indigenous development' while being fundamentally 'an international process' (14). As mentioned in Cheah's account earlier, nationalism has been closely associated with a certain cosmopolitan vision from its inception, and early nationalists, such as the writers and artists of the *Sturm und Drang* (Goethe and Schiller, for example), exhibited a cosmopolitan streak. Otherwise, Goethe would not have become one of the first proponents of a 'world literature'. Nevertheless, both 'cosmopolitanism' and 'nationalism', which I intend to explore in the contemporary Chinese context, bear a distinctly neoliberal imprint. In this sense, the term 'cosmopolitan nationalism' discussed in this research can often be used interchangeably with 'neoliberal nationalism'.

Overall, I trace cosmopolitan nationalism back to three main theoretical sources

mentioned in the previous narrative. The first theoretical source serves as the foundation for the cultural imaginary. The modern version of culturalism is characterised by the cultural dimension of the 'great integration of the Chinese nation', which allows individuals from different regions and ethnicities within sovereign territory to develop a collective identity with 'Chinese culture', without necessarily overlapping or conflicting with the cultural identity of overseas Chinese. The second theoretical source, social nationalism, contributes patriotism and internationalism under Maoist doctrines. Today, the patriotic movement of the Maoist era has left behind residues of mass lines and class struggle that still influence youth political participation. On the other hand, the ideological legacy of internationalism is taken over and rearticulated by its alternatives, embodied in China's global causes, driven by the third theoretical source that emerged in the recent three decades - neoliberal developmentalism. In the rhetoric of hegemonic political discourse, the cosmopolitan nationalism shaped by these three theoretical sources has many different yet closely related facets, particularly the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind' ('Rénlèi Mìngyùn Gòngtóngtǐ') and the 'Belt and Road Initiative' ('Yídài Yílù'). Cosmopolitan nationalism provides the ideological basis for China to address practical political and economic issues in the international arena, while also influencing how young people understand themselves in relation to China and the world.

In this context, where cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not antithetical but rather collusive, China's current modernity project can be interpreted in at least four different ways. Firstly, culturalism has bridged the past, present, and future of China. In other words, the historical myth of China as a powerful country is utilised to inform current policies and future plans. Secondly, 'Chinese culturalism' and 'the global spread of the Chinese Dream' can be considered as a 'historical process' through which the 'Chinese model' is transformed into a universal principle. Culturalism, cosmopolitanism, and developmentalism collaborate to construct a new vision between China and other nations. As the experience of globalisation is considered an 'imaginary experience' in Appadurai's (1996) account, this ideological combination, embodied in specific

schemes such as ‘The Belt and Road Initiative’ and the so-called ‘Community of Shared Future for Mankind’, embraces a cultural implication of a powerful China and promotes the idea that China’s developmental success will benefit both the national populace and the international community, sharing China’s reimagined identity, social values, cultural elements, and aspirations. Thirdly, with the inception of the ‘Chinese Dream’, the idea of developmentalism within China’s pragmatic agenda has added one more layer of interpretation - the emphasis on ‘personal struggle’ (‘gèrén fèndòu’), particularly among younger generations. The personal dimension of the ‘Chinese Dream’ represents the smallest unit of developmentalism. As the state agitates for individual struggle on one hand, and the dysfunction of social security on the other makes it difficult for individuals (in this study, particularly young women born into middle and working classes) to feel secure from the public good and wellbeing typically promised by the nation-state, Chinese nationalism thus raises questions about how individuals should navigate the relationship between citizen and state, and what exactly constitutes ‘a good life’.

4. Conclusion

Although digital platforms facilitate youth engagement in activism, they also exacerbate power imbalances and inequalities. The dominance of data-driven platforms may unintentionally reinforce pre-existing hierarchies and hegemonic culture, perpetuating disparities in representation and influence. This framework acknowledges the significant role that power bias consistently plays in shaping the discourse and objectives of youth online activism, and it is crucial to recognise that youth culture is susceptible to co-optation by various political forces. For example, the allure of fandom can be employed to mobilise young people around hegemonic political agendas, potentially exploiting their desire for belonging and identity.

In this context, this framework investigates the affinity between fandom and political participation, extending the discussion to contemporary China, and unveiling the reconfiguration of the concept of nationalism. By examining the relationship between fandom and political communication, this framework provides insights into the ways in which youth culture, nationalism, and digital platforms intersect and influence one another, highlighting the importance of understanding the complexities of these interactions. In the Chinese context, fandom across data-driven social media platforms, enables fans to participate in mass mobilisation, leading authorities to view fandom as a cultural form meriting outreach and appropriation for political communication purposes. In the case of fangirls as political participants, I will employ an ethnographic approach to investigate their transition from fangirls to nationalists, thereby contributing another piece to the puzzle of the heterogeneous nature of youth culture and politics in the context of global media.

Chapter Three Methodological Framework: Doing Digital Ethnographic Research in Fan Communities

This chapter outlines the qualitative methodological approach employed in this research. I begin by providing the rationale for adopting digital ethnography as the main methodology in the contemporary context, explaining why it is ideally suited for investigating fangirls and their political participation. The second section introduces the research design. Specifically, compared to ethnographic studies conducted in the real world, digital ethnography addresses a constantly evolving and changing environment mediated by the Internet, rendering the definition of the field site a matter for discussion. Additional data collection strategies, including semi-structured in-depth interviews and archival research, are detailed in this section. I describe the recruitment of informants and my interactions with them in both online and offline contexts. Moreover, documents such as posters, memes, statements, and others directly related to fangirls' participation in fandom and online nationalist movements were collected and analysed. The combination of interviews and online archival research serves to gather first-hand accounts along with a large volume of online data, in order to comprehend the context and ideology in which socio-political practices and realities are embedded. The third section delineates thematic analysis as the primary analytic approaches. The framework concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations.

1. Background

Prior to delving into further detail, I wish to present two illustrative scenarios that emerged during the pilot phase. In the first scenario, a fangirl who partook in an online nationalist expedition in 2019 showed me the social media applications on her smartphone. She informed me of the apps she needed to use daily and those directly connected to her fan practices. She dedicated time and money to these apps for carrying

out daily activities, enhancing her idol's algorithmic ranking on social media, and securing her position within the fan communities. In the second scenario, during our subsequent conversation, she revealed that she generally had little interest in politics and had never engaged with any online political communities or movements. She was of the opinion that she did not belong to the same category as those male-dominated online community members who acted collectively, such as those in military-themed BBS and *Diba* message boards. She mentioned having no such male friends in her life, and would even actively avoid them, as she felt they were 'mansplainers'. This fangirl gave the impression that her involvement in the nationalist outpouring was purely driven by a coincidental event – when Hong Kong protestors on social media chastised her idol for being too apprehensive to support the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, or even for openly backing the Hong Kong police in suppressing protests. Relying solely on her initial statements, one might be misled to believe that she herself concurred with the notion that her participation in such political incidents was attributable to random factors, as she repeatedly stated that she 'never cared about politics'. Accepting this explanation at face value would hinder the attainment of deeper insights into why Chinese nationalism, a domain traditionally perceived as masculine, became distinguished by a female-dominated popular cultural community towards the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

What insights can we gain from these two scenarios before determining an appropriate methodology? Firstly, it is evident that this fangirl engaged in multi-platform fan activities. Her actions were not confined to a single platform but spanned a network of interconnected social media. Despite the existence of various social media platforms with similar characteristics and purposes, she skilfully identified and utilised the most crucial ones to amplify her idol's public visibility. Additionally, her actions were not necessarily grounded in a specific constellation of platforms but demonstrated adaptability in employing social media based on her idol's needs and the shifting influence of platforms. Some BBSs, once favoured by fangirls, were rapidly abandoned due to the rise of mobile Internet and social media; there were also social media apps

forsaken because of changes in business strategy, rendering them irrelevant in the realm of idol culture. Secondly, individual fangirls cannot exist in isolation from their fan communities. Even fangirls who perceive themselves as unsociable would use social media to view news about their idols under the 'topics' relating to their idols, which must be sustained by the fan communities daily. In this manner, even if they do not directly communicate with their fan peers, they remain connected to them through the mediation of social media. Thirdly, revisiting the earlier question, I would argue that the involvement of fangirls in a nationalist expedition is far from coincidental. As previously mentioned, historicising the generation of Chinese women born at the turn of the century is instrumental in comprehending their political understanding of the nation-state, national identity, and nationalism, and it inevitably presents a two-fold methodological challenge. The first challenge is to establish a connection between fan practices and online nationalist movements, as this is key to understanding the transformation of fangirls from cultural subjects to cultural and political subjects. The second challenge lies in the fact that, in the face of the myth of 'contingency', merely exploring the organisation and mobilisation of fangirls through textual archives is insufficient. We must ask ourselves, why fangirls? And why at this particular moment?

In response to these considerations, I selected digital ethnography (Hine 2000; Kozinets 2002) as my research method. As Geertz (1973) explains, ethnography portrays people's lives and experiences while interpreting cultural practices. It serves as both a research process and method, as well as a means for cultural interpretation. Beginning in the late 1990s, scholarship started to employ anthropological and sociological ethnography to examine virtual communities on the Internet. For instance, Hine posits that virtual (digital) ethnography involves research conducted within virtual worlds, utilising and targeting these worlds. Kozinets (2002) contends that digital ethnography is a method for studying communication within and between Internet communities. Digital ethnography is the process of conducting ethnography within a virtual, online environment, employing various platforms and tools for data collection. Generally speaking, the 'field' of digital ethnography is situated within the online community.

Modes of communication among individuals extend from offline face-to-face interaction to online exchanges mediated by virtual media. The context in which the object of study is observed expands from the physical realm of a specific range of reality to a virtual domain that transcends the real world. Consequently, 'the travel to a field site is itself virtual, consisting of "experiential rather than physical displacement"' (Hine, 2000: 45). Nevertheless, I aim to bridge the binary of online and offline by adopting a mixed-method approach (Sade-Beck 2004), which is mediated through the Internet, blurring the boundaries between online and offline fieldwork while interacting with informants in face-to-face situations. By doing so, I am dedicated to exploring the online identities and behaviours of fan communities, as well as the motivations that arise in their offline contexts.

My methodological approach is partly inspired by the work of Yang Guobin (2009; 2015; 2017). In his study of Chinese netizen activism, *The Power of the Internet in China*, Yang (2009) concentrates on online civic engagement and political movements in China during the first decade of this century. He endeavours to elucidate the dynamics between political participation and social change in China, and proposes potential methods for examining 'online activism'. In his subsequent edited volume, *China's Contested Internet*, Yang (2015) systematises this approach as a 'deep approach' for investigating online activism, drawing upon Arthur Kleinman et al.'s (2011) anthropological work, *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*. This approach encourages researchers to examine social practices in relation to individuals' lived experiences and history (the 'deep' dimension). He emphasises the concept of 'historicity' to differentiate it from historical processes, as well as the history of the Internet itself:

> … the historicity of the Chinese Internet, that is, its distinct features in a historical process marked by both constraints and contingency. It is important to study the many facets of the Chinese Internet, be they institutional norms or social practices, as 'processes of becoming rather states of being'. Emphasizing 'becoming' is to recognize history and historical struggle. (Yang

2015: 2)

Consistent with ethnographic methods widely employed in interdisciplinary research within the social sciences, communities and individuals are brought to the forefront of attention. In this study, my focus is on the fan communities and individual fangirls, rather than technology and platforms. Although technology and platforms are crucial in any investigations of such Internet-mediated communication, this study is more concerned with the cultural dimension than the technological aspect. Within the historical context of Chinese modernisation, I concentrate on the cultural dynamics of fangirls' engagement in fan actions and nationalist-oriented activism. In other words, my assumption is that while Internet-based idol culture is necessary, it is not a sufficient condition for fangirls' political participation.

As my research involves 'fangirls' who are young females, my ethnographic inquiry is also inspired by scholarly investigations in the field of youth studies and teen studies. This includes a particular emphasis on examining youth politics and civic engagement across diverse sociocultural contexts. The aim of delving into youth political participation is to rigorously interrogate and problematise, via direct observation, involvement, and immersion within the quotidian experiences of specific social groups or communities, certain pervasive notions, particularly the binaries often seen in civic engagement. For example, in Banaji and Mejias's edited volume, *Youth Active Citizenship in Europe: Ethnographies of Participation* (2020), scholars from various European countries generally explore how, and to what extent, young individuals might characterise political participation as 'active', thus defining youth participants as 'activists'. And, how can the binary between agency and structure concerning youth participants be reassessed and rearticulated? Similarly, these inquiries demand comprehensive examination when researching fangirls' political participation in the Chinese context.

2. Research Design

2.1 Recruitment of Informants

Between the winter of 2018 and the winter of 2020, I conducted four stages of fieldwork—the pilot, the first stage of offline interviewing, online interviewing, and the second stage of offline interviewing. In total, I interacted with 64 informants, including gatekeepers, interviewees, and individuals who initially responded to contact but ultimately did not participate in this research for various reasons.

During the winter of 2018, I searched for potential informants across China. At that time, my intent was to conduct a study related to youth nationalism, focusing on the political participation of a wide range of youth communities, such as the fan communities, the 'Industrial Party' (industry- and techno-advocated nationalists), and ACG communities (fans of anime, comics, and games). I reached out to administrators (gatekeepers) of several online communities (primarily active on Weibo, Bilibili, and Douban) through personal connections and social media, which allowed me to connect with individuals willing to participate in this study. In the winter of 2019, as the formal fieldwork commenced, I visited the cities where the informants resided to meet them. In the earlier pilot, demographic and geographic features were not considered factors in informant recruitment. However, the results of the first stage of fieldwork revealed a high degree of heterogeneity among informants in terms of economic status and educational background. Informants resided in over twenty cities of varying tiers across China. Different informants from the same city were likely to come from diverse family backgrounds, ranging from middle-class families to working-class immigrants. More than half of the informants were from middle-class backgrounds. The educational backgrounds of informants varied significantly, from those holding world-ranked undergraduate degrees to those who had entered the workforce in factories without even attending high school.

My interactions with these informants centred around various topics related to nationalism and nation-state identity. Subsequently, I transcribed the recordings. However, I encountered difficulties in categorising the highly heterogeneous informants under the arbitrary and homogenous label of 'young nationalists'. I could not even devise a reasonable taxonomy to identify the different types of nationalists among my informants. The primary obstacle to doing so was that nationalism manifested itself distinctly and even competitively in different individuals' discourse. Individual differences often surpassed those between groups. For instance, one informant, a fan of the *League of Legends* video game, shared a typical Han chauvinist and xenophobic story, while another informant vehemently opposed this view and believed that China should adopt the most aggressive approach to integrate into the global market. Consequently, it was challenging to assert the extent to which their cultural identities and practices were sufficient conditions for establishing their nationalist positions. Secondly, political participation was not central to their daily activities or to those of the cultural groups to which they belonged. Many of them had never engaged in any nationalism-oriented activism online. Although some nationalists happened to use ACG's cultural form to create nationalist fandom works, such as those videos based on the nationalist anime *Year Hare Affair*, we cannot conversely conclude that nationalists comprise the majority of ACG fans. In fact, according to the early fieldwork, nationalism was never the dominant value of contemporary Chinese ACG culture. Therefore, we cannot regard the ACG community as a single, homogeneous nationalist community. Furthermore, I encountered another issue during the fieldwork that ultimately led me to abandon investigating the 'Industrial party'. I discovered that researching the 'Industrial Party' contradicted the scope of my study on youth political participation, as the industrial party was partly composed of middle-aged individuals (particularly senior Maoists) who had been active in online communities such as the *Tiexue* BBS (literally 'iron and blood', now closed) since the pre-social media era.

Ultimately, I retained only one specific community, the fan communities, with whom I

had already established rapport since the pilot and obtained valuable data from the first stage of fieldwork. Upon further reflection over the past two years, I am now convinced that narrowing the scope of the study to fangirls offers a more nuanced understanding of gender, as well as the political and historical contexts of youth political participation in contemporary China.

Defining the 'site' always poses a challenge for digital ethnography. Unlike offline ethnographic research, digital ethnography focuses on online activities. While members of online communities may also extend their online activities offline, many online communities, including the fan communities, do not occupy (only) physical space offline. Furthermore, their online activities are cross- and multi-platform and timeless. My digital ethnographic research begins by identifying the social media platforms (primarily Weibo and Bilibili) where fangirls are most active. Although other online communities that I interacted with during the pilot, such as the 'Industry Party', also have regular online platforms, they lack the qualifications for the network that Burrell's (2009) ethnographic approach suggests, which incorporates physical, virtual, and imagined spaces.

Compared to typical online platforms, conducting digital ethnography within fan communities presents several unique aspects. Firstly, fan communities engage in regular activities and have clear goals for action. They form exclusive communities around their idols, with universal principles, etiquette, and taboos applicable to all fangirl groups, as well as agendas and rules specific to individual fangirl groups. Solidarity, contribution, and mobilisability are universal characteristics within fan communities. Secondly, the emphasis on big data and algorithmic ranking on social media platforms has led to the development of a set of strategies and tactics for fangirls' daily activities. Thirdly, fangirls' identities are continually reaffirmed in fan practices, and gender issues cannot be overlooked. Fourthly, the terms 'fangirls' and 'fan communities' gained public recognition not only due to their cultural identity and practices but also because of their political identity and practices. Unlike other sub-

categories of nationalists, fangirls are the only youth cultural group that has thus far stood out as a result of a single political event. It was only since the nationalist expedition against the Hong Kong protests that the media began using the term 'fangirls' to refer to these young women. Consequently, the fangirls researched in this study are anchored in the 'event'. As a researcher of youth political participation, my fieldwork covers both Weibo and Bilibili, where fangirls' routinised activities take place, and extends to the overseas 'battlegrounds' of their nationalist expedition - Twitter and Instagram. I then detail my rationale and process for recruiting qualitative interviewees from Weibo and Bilibili. These four social media platforms also served as the sites for my archival research, which will be elaborated upon in Section 2.3 of this chapter.

In the following narrative, as it did when the term first appeared in the mass media, I define 'fangirls' as a cultural and political concept. Individuals who merely embrace idol culture but have not been involved in nationalist activism were not part of my investigation. The first fangirl that I approached during the pilot was a friend of my high school mate and one of the administrators of a fangirl group, whose idol was ranked around thirty on the Weibo idol ranking at the time. She informed me that there were numerous 'sister groups' for her idol across the Internet, potentially totalling nearly a hundred thousand members, and the group she managed was just one of them. She mobilised the group during the Hong Kong incident and was more than willing to share her stories and views with me, leading to my first informant. She also served as my gatekeeper, as I met additional informants through her, although some were not her members. Another notable gatekeeper was someone I encountered on Bilibili, a popular video-sharing platform for young people, who was a content creator with a modest following. She spent her time editing videos of her idols' performances and reality show appearances and then posted them on the platform. I noticed on her timeline that she had republished a series of videos related to the activism against the Hong Kong protests in late 2019. Deciding to give it a try, I contacted her through the Bilibili messaging system and informed her of the purpose of my research, inviting her to participate. She told me that she had not participated in the expedition herself, but she

knew people who had and could introduce me to them. I then established rapport with more informants through snowballing. Consequently, I selected 26 fangirls as informants from those I had interacted with during the pilot and the first stage of fieldwork. In spring 2020, I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 of these 26 informants for a second time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second stage of fieldwork was carried out remotely online. Additionally, through these 26 informants, I employed snowballing strategies to connect with another 9 fangirls.

In other words, by the end of the second stage of fieldwork, I had interviewed a total of 35 fangirls, some of whom I had interviewed more than once. These fangirls were born between 1993 and 2003, the oldest being 26 years old and the youngest 17 years old at the time, broadly falling into the category of young people (Refer to Appendix I for more information including demographic and geographical characteristics of informants, interview time and format, etc.). They held various social roles in their offline lives, but the vast majority were university students, with three office workers and one high school student. Among the informants, one had worked as a planner for a TV talent show, while another worked for an idol agency in Chengdu City. Both of them were also fangirls, and the information they provided enriched my understanding of the idol industry from the perspective of those working in it. Furthermore, all 35 informants had different roles in the online community, ranging from casual fans to key members. Nonetheless, most of them came from distinct idol-centred fangirl groups but were brought together by the same ‘event’.

Following the second stage of fieldwork, I had initially planned to conduct a third stage, involving interviews with staff from several official (e.g., the Weibo operator of the CYL) and unofficial institutions (e.g., guancha.cn) that played a propagandistic role in the nationalist expedition. Unfortunately, for various reasons, this did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, I managed to re-interview five informants with whom I had previously interacted in the winter of 2020, and they provided me with valuable additional information.

2.2 In-depth Interview

This research utilises in-depth interviews as the qualitative method (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Rubin and Rubin 2011; Seidman 1999) to engage with informants recruited from the fan communities. In-depth interviews are one-on-one interactions, the purpose of which is to obtain the interviewee's subjective views and experiences on specific phenomena, topics, and issues. Although in-depth interviews may substantiate and add authenticity to the data collected online, it is not the rationale for combining online and offline methods. The focus of the in-depth interview is not on hypothesis-testing but on theory-building. The rationale for employing in-depth interviews is twofold. On the one hand, interviewees often repeatedly construct and confirm their interpretations of life during in-depth interviews. Repeated encounters and verbal exchanges with the interviewees can clarify complex issues, and their views will be expressed through natural language. On the other hand, in-person qualitative interviews provide data to understand how young nationalists operate daily, helping to interrogate the rationales and social structures behind their online behaviours.

I conduct the interviews from an interpretative approach (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). From this perspective, knowledge is produced in interactions and used for interpreting informants' everyday lives and actions. The in-depth interviews are semi-structured, which means there are no strict structural restrictions on interview questions, forms, frequency, or duration. Instead of setting fixed questions, I attempt to create a dialogic situation in which both the interviewees and I become knowledge producers together. Interpretations emerge from these conversations, allowing interviewees to express their life experiences and feelings about the actions. An interviewee may be interviewed once or several times on topics worth exploring. Before the interview commences, I prepare an outline rather than specific questions. This outline covers

various aspects of the key issues of cultural and political participation, including interviewees' views on specific issues in various situations such as regular fandom activities and the nationalist expedition, as well as their perceptions on their own lived experience. The interview outline prepared in advance is adjusted appropriately according to the progress and effectiveness of the interview.

2.3 Archival Research

In addition to interviews, this research employed archival research as another strategy of data collection. The archival data I have collected takes the form of texts including memes, posters and illustrations, which often incorporate ideographic systems of images and text. These texts are produced by participants in the online activism and disseminated by the extensive audience. The process of dissemination cannot be separated from the reproduction of the text. Memes, for example, are constantly modified by participants in the actions to suit different contexts and purposes. Original texts became the 'raw material' for a variety of 'memetic trends' (Shifman 2014), such as the memes related to 'masks' and 'isolation' during the COVID pandemic (Dynel 2022). The fact that these virtual archives are numerous and scattered across multiple platforms poses a challenge for data collection.

First, the (re)productivity of online texts hints at the difficulty of tracing them back to their origins. In many cases, it is almost impossible (and unnecessary) to find out by whom and where (or in what context) the original text was created. Sometimes, texts widely used in online actions may have originated in a context that was completely unintended. For example, when Chinese nationalists and Thai pro-democracy netizens engaged in the 'memes war' on Twitter in 2020, one of the most used 'memetic trends' by Chinese netizens was the 'NMSL' (short for 'Your mother is dead.' in Chinese) as a text in corpus for repeated re-creations (Schaffar and Wongratanawin 2021) -

circulation, modification, and imitation. However, this meme was originated as a curse used by the fan communities in fan wars. 'NMSL' is a term used by rival fans of the idol Cai Xu-kun as 'NMSL' comes from Cai's own motto, 'Never Mind the Scandal and Liber.' Second, there is a risk that in collecting data, without being able to determine the context of the re-creation, the researcher may be misled by accidental data collection into considering it as primary text. For example, photographs are a type of text that can easily be cropped, spliced or even altered with high precision using computer algorithmic techniques in mass communication. Third, it is difficult for researchers to find an 'anchor point' when collecting data online, as texts are stored across time and space in all corners of the Internet and are difficult to summarise. This makes it difficult to find a huge number of texts through search engines and to identify which of these texts are actually directly relevant to the community involved in the ethnographic study, rather than the result of reproduction by some others using the corpus. For this reason, some people have settled on a 'community' and collected texts from their active online platforms.

In this study, I base my archival research around the 'event' rather than the fan communities. The 'event' here refers specifically to the online nationalist movement against the Hong Kong protests that the fan communities were involved in late 2019. I have chosen the event rather than the fan communities as the 'anchor point' for several reasons. First, events never exist in isolation, but rather as a link between different actors, texts, and ideologies. As I will argue in Chapter Six, fan activism both developed the agency of the fangirls and suggests that this action was an integral part of a larger action known as the 'Second *Diba* Expedition'. Fangirls were therefore just one node in a larger web. If I were to collect only the texts produced and disseminated by the fan communities, I would be ignoring the relationships and tensions within the discursive structure between these texts and those produced and disseminated by other participants in the movement, especially the male participants. Moreover, the range of texts produced by the fan communities was not exactly the same as the range of texts they disseminated as many of the texts they disseminated were produced by official media,

the Communist Youth League (CYL) and *Diba* users.

Of course, the focus of this research is on fan activism, so those texts that are not related to fan communities have also been excluded. Secondly, the word 'event' implies a relatively brief time frame. The expedition took place on 17 August 2019, so I have collected archival data for this date and the days after. For this reason, the platforms on which I collected the archival material are also the main platforms for the fan activism, including Weibo for domestic mobilisation and propaganda, and Twitter and Instagram, two main destinations for the expedition. Therefore, when I refer to archival material in my research, I do not mean information that has been held in or retrieved from actual archives; rather, I treat the Internet and related fan pages and websites as an archive. In 2019, I experienced and tracked the entirety of the event, so there is no need to go back through the online archives of each platform to mine data in the timeline of that time. I attempt to combine four ways to determine whether the producers and disseminators of texts in the actions were associated with the fan communities, that is, to locate:

a) supporters in the comments section of the idols' posts on Instagram.
b) participants in the political communication using the language customarily used by fangirls (also see Chapters 5 and 6).
c) participants who are explicitly or implicitly fangirls in terms of their user ID on social media
d) the official accounts of the fan communities on Weibo (the user ID is usually in the form of 'support group of XXX' ('XXX' is the idol's name). Each idol may have more than one fan communities, but must have one of the largest or official accounts as their representative on Weibo. The aspiration is twofold: as they discussed their action plan publicly on Weibo to attract as many participants as possible, it was easy to track their trajectory from Weibo to Twitter and Instagram (which target accounts to go to, what strategies to implement, what texts to use); also, I collect texts produced by other actors (such as official media, the CYL and *Diba* users) that are reposted by the official Weibo accounts of their fan communities.

Based on the ‘event’, the texts I collect implied the political understanding of nationalism among fangirls, as well as the ways in which they aspired to express the understanding. These texts take the form of:

a) Emoticons.
b) posters.
c) Illustrations.

Memes were the most common texts in the movement - widely used before that in 2016 the ‘First *Diba* Expedition’ (Yang 2017) against the Taiwanese separatists; and after in 2020 in the ‘memes war’ between Chinese nationalists and Thai pro-democracy netizens (Schaffer 2021). To some extent, memes are visual texts with a low threshold for creation, allowing a wide audience of popular culture to use their familiar references to produce texts for political communication. As the sheer number of memes makes it impossible to explore each one individually, I simply make a generalised effort to categorise the memes in the actions into different ‘memetic trends’ according to their style, such as cartoon-style memes, memes drawn from film frames, etc. (also see Section 6.3). The line between posters and illustrations is sometimes blurred, but in general, posters are defined here as works of political mobilisation that accompany written texts. By analysing the content and aesthetic style of these posters and illustrations, I intend to interpret the participants’ nation-state imaginaries and the historical dynamics of nationalist discourse. I used three strategies to collect posters and illustrations:

a) Focus on the ‘moment’ within the ‘event’. For example, focus on the moment when Hong Kong police officer Lau Cha Kei (the ‘bald sergeant’) confronted the protesters in Kwai Chung. This moment was captured by a journalist by photo, and this photo went viral because it was used as the ‘raw material’ for the creators of posters and illustrations in mainland China during those two months.

b) Follow the posters and illustrations created by the fan communities themselves.
c) Follow the posters and illustrations created by participants outside the fan communities, but distributed by the fan communities.

3. Thematic Analysis

Between 2019 and 2021, I devoted a portion of my time each summer to transcribe audio recordings of interviews conducted during the most recent phase, which spanned the four previously mentioned stages and involved 64 informants. Then, I narrowed down my research focus from the broader category of 'Little Pinko' to the more specific group of 'fangirls', selecting 35 informants from the original 64 who closely aligned with the research objectives. Upon assembling the data, I embarked on a comprehensive thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006), utilising a manual coding process 'for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data' (Braun and Clark 2006: 79). Given the constraints imposed by the limited length, it is not feasible to include all life stories as narrated by the informants. Nonetheless, efforts are made to achieve an equilibrium between thematic analysis and narrative in the composition, integrating numerous extensive excerpts from the interviews. To maintain an ethnographic essence, I seamlessly integrated substantial excerpts from the interviews into the analysis. This strategy not only preserved the integrity of the data but also ensured that the insights derived from the study remained grounded in the fandom practices and lived experiences of the fangirls, thereby contributing to the overall robustness and credibility of the research findings. In addition, the interviews constituted merely one component of the data sources employed in this study. In conjunction with online archives, a thematic analysis is also applied to relevant content gathered from social media platforms, as previously mentioned.

Themes	Categories	Codes

Pop idolatry	Commodities	Material and digital distributions; performance tickets; fan creations; K-pop and J-pop's influence
	Persona (data-related aspect)	Data making; free labour; regular use of social media; repeated labour; 'heating and cooling'; visibility and the politics of attention
	Persona (intra- and inter-community communication)	Fan sovereignty; Rival; trolling; 'refuse to share'; 'never-provoke-dispute'; public moralities; the involvement of authority and the collaboration with authority; supporting; online opinion management; the use of multi-platform communication; policing; patriotism as the bottom line; fan creations; idol as a 'house'
	Organisational structure	Hierarchy; circle structure; mass mobilisation; loyalty
	Feelings and emotions	imagined heterosexual relationship; imaginary of brother-sister relationship; tension between satisfacation and anxiety
Online activism	Idolisation	Risk and certainty; idolisation of national icons; extensive use of idolisation to non-human objects including artifacts; China as the Idol;
	Formation of political	Civility; rationality and irrationality;

	subjectivity	meaning-making; power structure; historical and/or socio-political context
	Internet access	Women citizenship; ambiguous views on China's online censorship; right to speak for the majority; empowered by fandom
	Political communications	Creation and spread of visuals (memes, posters, illustrations, etc.); In line with the principles of fan practice ('no debates', etc.); visibility
	Nationalism	The 'brotherland' discourse; imaginary of brother-sister relationship; territorial integrity; economic success; 'the Western forces'; historical references
	Gender aspects	Patriarchal ideology in nationalism; gender tensions with authorities and male participants
Historicity	Economic reform and neo-liberal agenda	Experiencing individuality; livelihood; 'untimely birth'; gender inequality in realities; reconfigured relationship between the capital and the nation-state;
	Contemporary citizenship	'Historical missions'; privilege to speak for the majorities; geographical and topographic imagination of online world

	Moralities and ethics	Transgenerational relationship; the 'family-nation isomorphism'; cynicism

Table 1: Thematic Analytical Framework

4. Ethical Considerations

The boundaries of free speech concerning nationalist topics on the Chinese Internet remain ambiguous. User agreements on social media platforms provide little guidance for users to discern which nationalist subjects may be safely discussed, in which contexts, and under what conditions. State-level regulations governing the Internet influence censorship across all social media platforms within the territory. Despite the uncertainty surrounding censorship, broaching specific nationalist topics in the online public sphere carries potential risks. These risks may manifest as account closures, or in more severe cases, translate to offline consequences, such as warnings or detentions by the authorities. This potential risk extends to discussions of specific nationalist topics in private offline spaces. Consequently, the risks associated with addressing these 'sensitive topics' must be considered when conducting in-depth interviews (both online and face-to-face) as part of the data collection strategies employed in this study. In light of this, I have identified the following potential risks.

The first risk arises from discussing any topics that authorities have unequivocally prohibited from public discourse, such as the 1989 Tian'anmen Incident, questioning minority policies' legality, challenging martyrs, disputing events officially identified as national shame or tragedy, and so on. Consequently, I refrained from incorporating these subjects into the interviews, particularly those conducted via video-conferencing software and in public spaces, such as cafés. Secondly, according to the pilot study, given the censorship's ambiguity, my informants frequently self-censored when

addressing topics, they perceived as risky. In fact, the self-censorship threshold was often higher than the actual operational level of the censorship mechanism. As a result, there was a risk that the interview might leave the informant feeling endangered. If I do not discontinue the topic or rephrase it at this point, the informants may become distressed, leading them to withdraw from the research. Based on the pilot study, I believe that the potential risks of censorship in my research are manageable. Patriotic nationalism directly related to fangirls' political participation typically fell outside the purview of censorship, unless their excessive activism undermined national interests or manifested in offline protests. Nationalism veiled as xenophobia and racism was also seldom a focal point of censorship. This study does not directly address the aforementioned 'sensitive topics'.[24]

It is important to note that my informants generally perceived self-censorship to function within the ambiguity of censorship, rather than in explicitly 'sensitive' areas. Although patriotic nationalism is scarcely impeded by authorities or platform regulations on social media, fangirls still exercise caution when discussing relevant topics, as demonstrated by their use of *pinyin* phonetic abbreviations and emoji symbols. This transcription mastery partly stems from their adoption of similar practices in fan activities (see also Chapters 5 and 6). Semantic depoliticisation through indirect expressions was also evident in my oral interactions with informants, allowing me to gauge their willingness to continue discussing specific topics. However, I would decide whether to pursue the topic based on further communication, rather than discontinuing all conversations that were self-censored by informants.

Furthermore, I identified a third potential risk during interviews – the risk of exposing

[24] It is worth noting that during my fieldwork, I gradually came to understand that initiating conversations with informants regarding their views on politics and political participation by focusing on events and policies deemed significant by intellectuals often proves unproductive. We cannot, and should not, expect informants to display intellectual empathy towards 'sensitive topics'. For instance, the Tiananmen incident was unknown to many informants, as nobody had ever discussed it with them. Consequently, it is not reasonable to assume that it is a historical event influencing the political actions of all individuals. In other words, a multitude of concepts and categories that are meaningful to intellectuals might not hold the same relevance for lay informants. Meanwhile, we cannot assume that informants who cannot empathise with intellectuals are cowardly. Their actions may be bolder, because they lack the reference of the consequences of historical events and have less burden.

informants to severe mood swings. As mentioned earlier, when interviewing fangirls, I not only asked them about their engagement in cultural practices and political movements, but I also inquired about their lived experiences, as I believe this is crucial for understanding the reality underpinning their emotions, behaviours, and actions. Cultural practices, political movements, and lived experiences can all serve as catalysts for emotional fluctuations. If, for any reason, informants experience significant mood swings during the interview and cannot continue their involvement in this research, they are always free to withdraw.

In summary, I thoroughly informed informants about the research's objectives and the potential risks of participation before commencing the interview process. I communicated my research intentions to gatekeepers and informants via messages. All individuals contacted for interviews were provided with an Informed Consent Form written in Chinese (Appendix II). In addition to ensuring consent, I also guaranteed confidentiality by taking and recording interview notes only with permission, and by refraining from using real names in the analysis. Moreover, informants were assured that they could withdraw their participation at any time they wished.

Chapter Four Data-based Pop Fandom in China

This chapter investigates two critical issues within China's idol industries. Firstly, it examines the data and algorithm-oriented shift that has transpired, and secondly, it delves into the phenomenon of 'fan communities' primarily targeting young female audiences, known as 'fangirls'. This chapter scrutinises both the identity and practices of these fan communities. In fan communities, well-disciplined and well-organised young fans participate in the veneration of idols through various forms of activities on social media platforms, deriving emotional fulfilment and affection from their idols in regular practices. They are also equipped with strategies for reconciling tense relationships with other fan communities, adhering to the principle of not antagonising other idols. These two issues are interconnected, as data technology utilised in the idol industries influences the production and consumption of pop music. Furthermore, the digital economy enables fans to actively and extensively engage in the idol industries, reflecting their desire for fulfilment and emotional support through collective actions. To investigate the psychological perspective of fangirls' emotions in fan practices, this chapter considers their psychological drives, fulfilment, and emotional support as constructs of a specific society rooted in particular social values.

1. Persona in the Pop Idolatry

The Chinese iteration of the idol industry finds its origins in the Japanese and South Korean models, which exert significant influence on the production and consumption of pop music in China. In post-war Japan, the idol culture experienced rapid development, becoming a key component of the East Asian pop music industries, characterised by boy bands and girl bands promoted by talent agencies and their ardent followers. The Mandarin Chinese term for 'idol', *ǒuxiàng*, aligns with its Japanese connotation, *aidoru*. An alternative, endearing term for 'idol' in Mandarin Chinese,

àidòu, is homophonic to the Japanese term *aidoru*. In the context of East Asian pop music industries, 'idol' assumes a specific meaning, referring to 'youth performers' (Brasor and Masako 1997). For example, Johnny Kitagawa, a founder of the talent agency Johnny & Associates, Inc., and a monumental figure in the post-war Japanese idol industry, discovered and nurtured numerous boy bands during their adolescence, such as Johnnys, Hikaru Genji, and SMAP, all of whom achieved considerable success in the final three decades of the 20th century.

In spite of the fact that idols feature boys and girls who sing and dance in the public media, release albums and hold concerts, idols differ from other performers and bands in many ways. For example, the concept of 'persona' ('rénshè') is one of the most critical concepts in pop idolatry because of its importance in evaluating the idols' careers (Galbraith and Karlin 2012; Brasor and Masako 1997). Usually, idols project themselves as clean, upbeat, career-concentrated and encouraging figures in mass media. They are trained as well-behaved 'goodies' in public, even to ingratiate themselves with fans. Fans keep eye on their idols' everyday deeds and expect them to fulfil good moral character and reputation beyond the stage. As one of the pioneering scholars noticing the significance of star image in media industries, Richard Dyer (1979; 2004) believes that the symbolic meaning of stars could be far more profound than their images in the works. As Dyer suggests,

> A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life. Further, what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech (Dyer 2004: 2-3).

Under these circumstances, the relationship between fans and idols becomes rather ambiguous. Fans support and worship idols due to their persona and performance. As Dyer suggests, 'audience's ideas about a star can act back on the media producers of

the star's image' (2004: 5). Consequently, maintaining an idol's public image emerges as the central task of fan practices, as fans are unwilling to let their idols fall short of their dedication and expectations. The fame and reputation fostered by a positive idol image are exchanged for increased sales of albums, concert tickets, and endorsed goods and services. Simultaneously, idols are shaped by the very goods and services they promote (Galbraith and Karlin 2012: 8).

This dynamic encompasses certain features of contemporary idol industries that were already present in the early days of the idol era. As Brasor and Masako (1997) note, 'before the idol era, the word "star" referred to personalities beyond common reach' (59). However, the idol industries have made it possible for virtually anyone to potentially 'grow' into a star. Fans who have not, or may never, achieve fame project both their emotions and career aspirations onto their chosen idols. Idols perform for fans in live shows where they are evaluated by panels of professionals. Those who ultimately win the competitions secure contracts from record companies. Initially, idols were judged solely by professional composers and musicians. However, with the evolution of communication technologies, fans' expectations of their idols have materialised through extensive engagement. For instance, in the early part of the 21st century, a new voting system was introduced in multimedia interactions, enabling fans to support their idols via text messages (Galbraith and Karlin 2012).

For Japanese idols, their 'persona' is of paramount importance in the eyes of their fans (Galbraith and Karlin 2012; Brasor and Masako 1997). The persona, often associated with positive qualities such as being upbeat, innocent, and embodying encouraging ideals, is meticulously crafted and promoted by talent agencies. Consequently, not only an idol's on-stage performance but also their private life is crucial in assessing their career trajectory.

The Chinese idol industry can be traced back to the early 2000s when pop music was influenced by Korean idol culture, known as *Hallyu* ('Korean wave' or 'hánliú') (Zhang

and Negus 2020), which itself was inspired by the Japanese idol culture of the 1990s following the military dictatorship (Kim 2018). In discussing the Chinese idol industry, it is vital to recognise that its development has never been an isolated phenomenon but rather subject to the political, economic, and cultural dynamics between China and South Korea.

Super Girl (*Chāojí Nǚshēng*), one of the earliest idol talent TV shows influenced by South Korean counterparts, was a series of female singing contests that aired live on television in 2004 and gained nationwide popularity in China. Some scholars attribute the early success of idol culture in China to the 'normalisation' of China-South Korea relations after 1992 (Zhang and Negus 2020), as the expansion of trade enabled the South Korean government to make strategic investments in the global promotion of K-pop industries and facilitate the growth of television ownership in China (Sun and Liew 2019; Kwon and Kim 2014). Indeed, the prosperity of idol culture can be partly attributed to the Korean television industry shifting its commercial focus towards the Chinese market, particularly in 2015 when the two governments signed a Free Trade Agreement. Subsequently, producers affiliated with large television stations, such as Hunan TV Station and Zhejiang TV Station, as well as emerging Internet conglomerates, have established partnerships with Korean TV stations and co-produced a plethora of transnational TV shows adapted for the Chinese context.

The transnational cooperation between TV producers and shows was disrupted in 2016 after political relations between China and South Korea deteriorated. In 2016, the South Korean government deployed the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) in collaboration with the US military, a move regarded as a threat to China's national security. This led to widespread anti-Korean sentiment and censorship of Korean cultural productions. In the realm of pop culture, more stringent censorship was imposed on K-pop music, ranging from the disappearance of controversial Korean stars

and songs to the cancellation of concerts, termination of contracts, and visa bans.[25] However, as Zhang and Negus (2020) suggest, the disrupted cooperative relationship did not truly hinder local producers from developing the idol industry in China. Rather, to meet consumer demand, the local digital economy has expanded in recent years, with more idol shows produced domestically and circulated throughout China and Southeast Asia.

Indeed, the expansion of the idol industry in China has benefited from multimedia communication in the digital economy, facilitated extensively by Internet conglomerates such as Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu, which feature data-based aggregation of TV production, streaming platforms, social media, and certain criteria. As early as 2004, fan practices in *Super Girl* demonstrated that contemporary idol culture was dependent on multimedia communication between fans and idols, mediated by mass media, although at that time, only phone calls and text messages were used in the voting system. Considering the evolution of the idol industry in China, there has also been notable consistency in terms of routine practices within fan communities, particularly organising and engaging in offline activities, purchasing commodities, voting, and rival fan competition. As usual, service providers, typically referring to Internet companies and TV stations, produce and deliver reality shows on Internet streaming platforms. Management companies present their signed idols to producers. However, contemporary idol culture in China has evolved and is now driven by numerous 'reality TV shows' ('zhēnrén xiù') produced by Internet giants such as Tencent and iQIYI (affiliated to Baidu), streaming across the Internet and attracting Chinese audiences from various countries.[26] Compared to previous methods, new idol TV shows create an Internet-based context that enables fans to deepen and broaden their

[25] See also: Kil, S. (24 August). China's blockade of cultural Korea marks troublesome anniversary. Variety. https://variety.com/2017/film/asia/china-ban-on-korea-culture-anniversary-1202537823/.

[26] An idol agency operator based in the city of Chengdu informed me that in recent years, as the acceptance rate for senior middle school entrance examinations has declined (to 50% in some areas), numerous 15- and 16-year-old students are unwilling to work in factories or attend vocational schools after discontinuing their studies. Consequently, they opt for (sometimes at their parents' behest) a new media-dependent career path, becoming social media influencers who are trained and packaged by agencies. Meanwhile, some 'better qualified' young men may have the potential to be favoured by reality shows produced by major Internet companies and television stations.

participation through multi-platform interactions. As Cunningham and Craig (2017) suggest, TV programme producers in the streaming context have extended their services to collaborate with productive fans, requiring them to work in tandem with the fan community. New communicative modes introduced via fan practices have increased the complexity of routine work. Idol fandom, relying on reality shows in the Internet-based context, furthers fan engagement since fans have deepened and widened their roles in the process of idol production through multi-platform interactions. Alongside the development of the mobile Internet and the prevalence of smartphones, the use of social media has increased direct interactions with idols. Fans form large communities on social media to maintain their activities, territory, identity, and support for their chosen idols. 'Data traffic' ('liúliàng') has become the yardstick for fan contributions and idol popularity. Even a hashtag or any 'communication' that an ordinary fan might have with the idol on social media can be tracked and recorded by the Internet company. In offering their unwavering support for the idol, fans do not hesitate to generate data traffic.

2. 'Data Making'

This section defines a new type of idol fan called 'fangirls', whose activities primarily take place on multiple social media platforms. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 35 fangirls, I demonstrate that they exhibit five distinct characteristics compared to idol fans of the past.

First, their fan practices are data-based. In online activities, they tactically employ social media platforms with an awareness of algorithmic logic, particularly when they aim to make certain content more visible, even though they 'may not have a comprehensive understanding of how algorithms work' (van der Nagel 2018). According to my informants, all of them are conscious of their status as data labourers,

and ‘female data labour’ (‘shùjù nǚgōng’) is a term widely used within the community for self-deprecation. This finding is instructive for understanding the ‘voluntariness’ of fangirls and further exploring their identity, psychology, and practices. The term ‘female data labour’ metaphorically compares the everyday activities of fangirls to those of assembly line workers. It necessitates that fangirls acquire basic techniques to conduct the general practices known as ‘data making’ (‘zuò shùjù’), a term used by fangirls themselves to describe a wide range of activities deployed online to ensure the popularity and commercial value of their idols, regardless of the extent of their engagement. Fangirls also need to cope with collaborative efforts in data teamworking, as they typically cooperate with a division of labour across different teams. This is why a fangirl might jokingly refer to herself as a data female labourer, as every action contributes to the idol’s data traffic and fosters their career. Data-centred supporting activities align with fangirls’ hopes of making a difference by doing small things – ‘many hands make light work’.

A nascent lexicon related to such ‘data fandom’ (Zhang and Negus 2020) is called ‘data traffic stars’ (‘liúliàng míngxīng’). As one fangirl suggests, ‘all of today’s idols are data traffic stars.’ Her assertion is based on the fact that data circulating across social media has become an integral part of idols’ visibility and success. In Zhang and Negus’ research (2020), they draw on researchers in the U.S. and European countries where social media constantly exploit users as free labour (Morris 2014) and as ‘sponsors, co-creators of value, stakeholders, investors, and filters’ (Galuszka, 2015). However, this research has not mentioned how users are aware of and compliant with their roles. According to Galuszka (2015), social media users are inadvertently exploited during their leisure time outside of their jobs. In contrast, my fieldwork data analysis reveals that the foundation of fangirls’ beliefs lies in their growing realisation of their status as unpaid labourers. They voluntarily engage in this ‘exploitation’ and derive a sort of ‘pure satisfaction’ from it. Some fangirls even view fandom as a job equal to their primary employment, despite receiving no monetary compensation:

> [A fangirl leader]: The ‘sister’ (‘zhànjiě’, another name for ‘head fans’) is responsible for most of the work of tracking the official itinerary of the idol and taking pictures, retouching pictures and publishing them. … even publishing photobooks on her own money. … She has to do this on her own. … most ‘sisters’ are never paid.
>
> [Another fangirl]: We fans are free labours. We are promoting their celebrity.

An individual fangirl’s position within the fan community is determined by evaluating their dedication to data work on social media, mainly based on money, time, techniques, and social resources, which constitute the hierarchical order of the entire community. The hierarchy within each fan community is represented by different categories, such as ‘professional fans’ (‘zhí fěn’) and amateur fans, ‘inner circle’ and ‘outer circle’, and so on. Since fan communities were initially established by young women working in their spare time within the PR and/or creative sectors of the idol industry, these ‘inside’ fans had a high likelihood of becoming ‘professional fans’, or even ‘heads of fans’ (‘fěntóu’ or ‘zhànjiě’). According to a young woman working in the promotional occupation at a TV station, who is now an influencer within a fan community, ‘each fan community is a pyramid’ - at the top of this pyramid are the ‘heads of fans’, who are the most prominent influencers, having the opportunity to speak on key issues and make decisions. In contrast to the high mobility of the fan base, the leadership is much more stable. Although there are limited opportunities for ordinary fans to ascend to leadership positions, the ‘inner circle’ is composed of a large number of ‘loyal fans’ (‘sǐfěn’). A fangirl who is primarily active on Weibo candidly states:

> I’m not fulfilling my responsibilities as a fan, so I’m in the ‘outer circle’ (‘wàiwéi’, or ‘sǎnfěn’, literally meaning peripheral fans) of my community. ‘Fangirls’ in its narrow sense mean a lot of participation, but I’m not. … I’m not a ‘loyal fan’. … (A loyal fan) can spend a lot of money on her idol. … Many idols have fans renting displays in Times Square for them on their birthdays to celebrate.

Apparently, the path from a fangirl from the ‘outer circle’ to become a loyal fan requires a long-term commitment of ‘a lot of participation’. This path is an ‘upgrading system’

in which fangirls amass their contributions to their personal history as a fan:

> Your 'points' can be added up and converted to your scores. They can be also converted to specific gifts related to your idol. Some exclusive gifts are only offered for high-level fans. … In spite of the routine online engagement, loyal fans need to support ('yìngyuán') the idol by donating money, buying products or gifts for idol's activities and the community. … (Loyal fans) use their money and energy to work for idols and our community. They have high prestige and influence in the community.

The pyramid structure of fan communities inevitably involves fan politics, whether one likes it or not. Loyal fans have strong ties with the community due to their complete devotion, identification, and the emotions and affection they derive from it. Compared to peripheral fangirls in the outer circle, loyal fans in the inner circle are active in fan politics and possess a strong awareness of power structures and relations, particularly the manifestation of privilege. Numerous activities and materials are exclusively offered to loyal fans. At the same time, loyal fans maintain a stricter perception of fan principles compared to ordinary fans. They are cautious about adhering to these rules because they understand that taking risks which jeopardise the collective interests could ruin their idols' careers and the entire community. Fangirls engage in fan practices, and regardless of the extent of their involvement, they must abide by certain rules and principles, which are subordinate to the requirements of data quantity and quality. These rules and principles regulate the identities, obligations, and taboos of fangirls.

Lastly, despite their organisational identity within the community, fangirls also virtually and emotionally establish personal identities through their admiration for their idols. They tend to 'privatise' the virtual connection between the idols and themselves by emphasising various fan identities, including 'mama fans' ('māmā fěn'), who regard their idols as their children even if they might be of a similar age; 'girlfriend fans' ('nǚyǒu fěn'), who regard their idols as their boyfriends and may abandon the idol after he falls in love or becomes engaged; 'CP fans' ('couple fans', 'CP fěn'), who pair up two idols as an imagined couple; and 'career fans' ('shìyè fěn'), who regard idols as

role models in their careers and admire their idols' drive. In other words, fangirls often derive individual fulfilment from voluntarily performing data work, and generate a variety of subdivisions of identification based on their self-perceptions.

According to the fieldwork, being a fangirl can signify different things for different individuals. One might immerse oneself in fan identity and activities, treating fandom as a serious part of everyday life, contributing money, time, and energy to the community, tracking the idol's activities, and playing a leadership role. Alternatively, one might be satisfied with superficial engagement by purchasing idols' albums and concert tickets, not even participating in regular activities or engaging in rival battles.

Next, I explore the fundamental and significant aspects of fan communities, focusing on fangirls' routinised activities and the formation of their identities. I specifically examine two issues of primary concern to fangirls when generating data: the quantity and quality of data. Fangirls' regular practices embody ritual consumption, which is comprehensively expressed through the main tasks of 'supporting' ('yìngyuán') and 'opinion management' ('kòngpíng'). The exertion of fangirls' duties (supporting, public relations, communications, materials, etc.) is closely tied to well-organised teamwork. In this context, I investigate the identity formation and regular practices of fangirls by focusing on two standing teams commonly operating within each fan community: the 'supporting team' ('yìngyuán zǔ') and the 'opinion management team' ('kòngpíng zǔ'). I examine how meanings have been situated and reproduced in consumption and crisis management, two key tasks of fan practices related to these teams. Fangirls' values and pan-political acts are illuminated by exploring how they establish boundaries and represent their identities.

In this regard, the transcendent aspect of fangirls' practices refers to the ritualised forms of cultural consumption, which fulfil a void in the faith system. Participants find themselves within a new collective associated with idol fandom. Fangirls and their idols embody 'a great oneness' (Rappaport 1999: 380), a totality that blurs the distinction

between self and other. As a fangirl shares her motivations for joining the community, 'It's simple and pure. I become a fan of my idol … for seeking hope and the significance of life. … a sense of accomplishment.'

2.1 Supporting

In general, the supporting team constitutes the most fundamental and largest team within each fan community. Every 'ordinary' fangirl can be a 'supporter' at the grassroots level, led and mobilised by higher-level fangirls in a wide range of activities. Fangirls' consumption experiences are constructed and illustrated through their ritual consumption, demonstrating how it is connected to the meaning production of fan practices. Activities to support idols take place both online and offline. In offline settings, fangirls congregate at live concerts, where they interact with their idols, fostering solidarity and mutual support. These concerts are occasions where idols express their 'repayment' ('huíkuì') to fangirls through performances and close interactions, while fangirls showcase their support and love.

Regularly attending concerts serves as a medium for extending fangirls' sociality. The presence of fan communities generates 'materials' ('yìngyuán wù'), including LED displays bearing idols' names and purchased or homemade gifts. Fangirls chant slogans, wave LED displays, and clap to the rhythm during performances. Each idol's fan community has a specific 'image colour' or 'member colour' ('yìngyuán sè'). For fangirls, idols' concerts represent much more than performances and occasional breaks from everyday life; they are arenas for the representation of cultural symbols (Figure 1).

Figure 1: At one of Zhang Yixin concerts, fans hold up purple LED displays with his name. Purple is Zhang Yixing's 'image colour'. At a band live, fans of different members hold LED displays of different colors and chant to each other, a practice known as the 'LED battle' ('dēngpái dàzhàn').

These symbols (re-)constitute fangirls' identities and social relationships on a daily basis. As a fan leader suggests, fangirls are trained as organised teams in communication with peers and competitors, igniting gossip, creating symbolic 'materials', and developing a unified pattern of reaction to performances. These daily activities occupy much of fangirls' spare time. Numerous actions, requiring various degrees of financial, emotional, skillful, and time-based dedication, can be taken by fangirls in support of their idols:

> …Jackson Yee, [one of three members of TFBOYS], is going to hold a live concert. The whole fan community will be mobilized to donate money online. They raise money … to 'support' him. This money may be used to buy 'materials' ('yíngyuán wù'), like gifts for fans, even water or food for their idol to express their love. … or [fans] make their own materials to the concert, only to make the scene better-looking.
>
> Fans follow the dancing pace and singing rhythms to beat or sing in a chorus. Sometimes they chant slogans as well.

These scenarios illuminate the current practices that have emerged since the early 2000s, combining online and offline activities mediated through the Internet. However, the

increasing significance of social media and data in China's music industries has placed greater emphasis on the online aspect. The key work of 'supporting' involves maintaining 'heat' and 'visibility' on the Internet, both of which are shaped by the production and consumption of pop music.

The relationship between record labels and artists has evolved due to the Internet. Internet conglomerates play multiple roles as providers of music streaming services (integrated with algorithmic recommendation), record labels producing music, and producers of talent shows (such as Alibaba's Ali Music and Tencent's QQ Music). In contrast to the pre-digital era when labels and artists profited from album sales, artists are now being redefined as 'content providers' rather than 'creative producers' (Negus 2019). As a result, digital oligarchs are more inclined to incentivise artists to produce greater quantities of content, not necessarily of higher quality. After all, music recordings have transitioned from 'albums' to 'content', which can be more easily quantified, valued, and utilised extensively, thereby emphasising the productive significance of the data itself in catering to profit goals and market demands. As these communities hold a monopoly on various segments of the music market, the need for fan communities to 'make data' on the charts provided by these platforms is evident.

The formal channel for 'data making' entails voting for one's idol during talent show competitions, a practice reminiscent of the early days of idol culture, when fans could vote by phone, even on site. Nowadays, fans can purchase ballots online or obtain tokens from other products and use them online:

> Zhai Xiaowen was from the reality show produced by Tencent called 'The Coming One' in 2018. One of its sponsors was 'Chunzhen Yogurt' of Mengniu Dairy. … We bought yogurt and used the voting code on the wrapping paper. You could vote as much as you bought. There was usually an electoral system in such a reality show. Idols will be finally ranked by votes. Xiaowen ranked sixth in this show. For that result, our fan communities paid 4.3 million yuan (60 thousand USD) for buying voting codes. Zhou Zhengnan, the idol ranked the first in the final, received votes that worth over 6 million yuan (85 thousand

USD).

> Fans have to buy milk because (the program) is cooperating with a dairy group, and there's a voting token in the milk package. We call 'voting' as 'buying milk' ('măinăi'). ... There're free ballots sometimes, but the weight is extremely low.

However, these programmes are not provided year-round, and the augmentation of an idol's visibility necessitates a constant process of maintaining high data traffic on the Internet. In this sense, there is a 'normalisation' of data-making referred to as 'chart beating' ('dăbăng'). 'Chart' can mean different things on various social media platforms. On music streaming services such as Tencent's QQ Music, the chart tabulates the popularity of pop songs on a weekly, monthly, and annual basis. Here, 'chart beating' means manipulating statistics through repeatedly listening to songs. It is worth noting that the largest music streaming services (QQ Music, NetEase Music, KuGou, etc.) in mainland China all employ a freemium model, which has altered the copyright and ownership of songs. All subscribers (or 'premium users') who pay a monthly fee can listen to an unlimited amount of copyrighted music on the platform for free. In this case, 'chart beating' becomes easier, safer, and more efficient, as fans no longer need to purchase copies of songs or even use bots for fraudulent activity.

Pop idols are distinguished from other singers in the music industry in that not only their stage presence but also their daily life matters in evaluating popularity and commercial value. Consequently, Weibo, the largest comprehensive social media platform in mainland China, has become another site for 'data making', and its prominence is not lesser than that of music charts. As informed by three fan leaders, the fundamental step to transform a 'passer-by' ('lùrén') outside the community into a new fan is 'signing in' ('qiāndào'), or 'punching in' ('dăkă'), under the 'Super Topics' ('Chāohuà') on Weibo – a trending chart related to specific topics about idols. This is the easiest way to contribute to the community, as a fangirl can simply click the idol's profile or say something about the idol with a hashtag under 'Super Topics'. As the fan leader suggests:

> Signing in under the ‘Super Topics’ on Weibo is the basic thing you can do every single day. … We also call this ‘punching in’.
>
> Your calendar will be marked on the day as you’ve ‘signed in’ or ‘punched in’ on Weibo. This’s your easiest way to be a fan. … If we compare the fan communities to the sea, Weibo is the shallowest and most visible layer.

2.2 Opinion Management

The issue of ‘opinion management’ (‘kòngpíng’) serves as a complement to ‘supporting’ via ‘data making’, while it assumes a status as significant as ‘supporting’ in actual practices. In each fan community, the opinion management team, responsible for the deliberate management of public opinions, is affiliated with its PR sector. However, the opinion management team focuses more on the quality of information released and circulated on the Internet. ‘Opinion management’ often requires always-on monitoring and control over ‘negative’ information related to the idol. Therefore, the opinion management team has a large fan base dedicated to working across social media platforms. In this section, I investigate the arduous task of ‘opinion management’ in the fan communities from the perspective of risks and responsibilities related to the public credibility and image of the idol, focusing on what could be identified as a PR crisis and how fangirls would strategically manage negative opinions towards their idols.

Through various forms of cultural practice, fangirls have developed strong interpersonal bonds and established common reference points through their collective allegiance to the community. The career of idols, embodied in commercial values such as the sale of concert tickets, albums, photobooks, public image, and reputation, is deeply intertwined with the solidarity of fan communities. The rise and fall of an idol’s career practically have a significant impact on the scale and influence of fan communities. Public image is essential to an idol’s career. As a fangirl says:

> If you love your idol and belong to his or her fan communities, you have to by all means obey the rules and defend your idol's public image. …

In this case, the issue of public relations remains the nucleus of all aspects of fan communities. This is not only because well-maintained public relations can generate commercial values that boost an idol's career and fan communities, but also because public opinion is often used as a tool for pernicious competition in fan politics involving sensationalised social media. Consequently, the opinion management team is the largest team in a fan community aside from the supporting team, and only loyal fans are eligible for a position in it. Being the leader of the opinion management team requires a discerning mind in identifying potential PR risks and providing sharp solutions to handle them. Other team members are mobilised to execute the solution to address PR risks or crises in Internet politics concerning broad communicative interactions. The complex tasks in different circumstances relevant to opinion management involve a sophisticated division of labour. To clarify for my readers what the opinion management team is engaged in, I intend to draw analogies and compare the two main tasks of opinion management to 'vacuum cleaners' and 'air conditioners' in a house – 'house' ('fáng') is also a metaphor for the persona of the idol in fandom communication.

'Vacuum cleaners' execute the most basic work of opinion management. Weibo, Bilibili, and Douban are three platforms where 'vacuum cleaners' are typically active. They inspect and report 'negative information' on social media – according to fangirls, this term is defined as content in any format that can damage the persona. 'Negative information' primarily falls into three categories:

A) Content containing 'malice' from anonymous Internet users. These posts and comments make up the largest portion among the three categories;
B) Instances where an idol's name is mentioned 'improperly; and
C) Breaking events.

‘Vacuum cleaners’ do not judge the sources of information or the intentions of the speakers. All such information is considered an intrusion into the ‘house’. Their primary concern is assessing the impact of the information and whether it could potentially damage their idol’s persona. The significance of these seemingly trivial tasks lies in representing and making public the exclusivity within the ‘house’. For instance, fangirls (not all, but usually) claim to have the exclusive right to mention their idol’s name in online participation. Outsiders are unwelcome to mention the name under any circumstances, be it with kindness, malice, or inadvertence. In this sense, ‘vacuum cleaners’ act as guardians of the physical and psychological realm of the ‘house’. This practice is somewhat inspired by the idea of ‘refusal to share’ (同担否拒, どうたんきょひ), widely recognised within Japanese fan communities. According to the principle of ‘refusal to share’, fans of the same (real, virtual, or fictional) idol are obliged to deny outsiders the opportunity to share in the psychological expressions, identities, responsibilities, and arenas of opinion. In practice, whenever the name of their idol is mentioned, or even alluded to in the form of *pinyin* abbreviations, the opinion management team within the fangirl community carries out the task of policing and reporting posts, on-screen comments (*danmaku*), and below-screen comments. In fact, the principle of ‘refusal to share’ is based on what Dyer (2004) describes as the individuality of stars: stars are popular because they should be unique (possessing a unique charm as individuals), and they embody the commitment and challenge of this individuality simultaneously. One of my informants, who works for an opinion management team, explains how the principle of ‘refusal to share’ operates on Bilibili:

> Not only do we watch videos related to (Ma) Jiaqi (the idol’s name), but we also watch videos of other people related to Jiaqi, including those who debuted with him in the Teens in Times (TNT). We don’t want Jiaqi’s name mentioned in other video comments or in danmaku, and we don’t actively mention other people’s names on our turf. There’re a lot of rival fans pretending to be fans of Jiaqi, ... with the aim of whipping up a war. ..... This will ruin Jiaqi’s reputation. We won’t allow this to happen.

Another fangirl who was also a Bilibili creator says:

> We shouldn't mention the names of other celebrities. For example, in a video about Anita Mui, you should not mention Leslie Cheung's name although you're a fan of Leslie Cheung and they're in a good relationship when they're alive. … You just contribute the video by speaking something positive. … Although melancholy is what we are experiencing in such a time, don't spread this emotion to other people.

It is worth noting that Bilibili, as a platform, also implicitly supports the principle of refusal to share in its rules regulating user behaviour. Without such endorsement, this principle would not be possible through the power of the fanbase alone. Every newly registered Bilibili user is required to pass a so-called 'etiquette test' before being allowed to speak. The test includes 141 questions, serving as a mere formality, and only those who answer 60 percent of the questions correctly are considered to have passed. The majority of the questions pertain to what content and attitudes should be encouraged and what will be censored. Users typically take at least fifteen to twenty minutes to complete the test, and some have even paid others to take it for them. Amongst these questions, 'manners' are classified as follows:

A) Never instigating quarrels;
B) Never mentioning irrelevant people or rivals;
C) Never evoking controversial topics;
D) Reporting suspicious comments and *danmaku*;
E) …

It is evident that the platform wants users to be fully informed of the rules, rather than simply relegating them to a 'terms of service' document that few people read. Bilibili makes it clear that users are strictly forbidden to 'provoke disputes' or 'mention unrelated persons', although the platform does not clarify the precise meaning of 'disputes' and 'unrelated persons'. 'Provoking disputes' or 'mentioning unrelated

persons' also constitute two of the options users can choose when they decide to report. It is worth noting that there is an absolute success rate for reporting a *danmaku*, as the system defaults to a valid report and no follow-up human interventions occur. Therefore, as a video-sharing arena for wider audiences, Bilibili (at least tacitly) supports the principle of 'refusal to share' as practised by fangirls and enables this principle to become normative in other categories.

Although 'vacuum cleaners' can cope with most of the 'negative information', when faced with a PR crisis (breaking events), they are typically not in charge and require the intervention of 'air conditioners'. 'Air conditioners' refer to a provisional action team designed to make information less visible – cooling down the 'house' and allowing the idol to remain out of the public eye for a few days. There are usually two methods to achieve this cooling down effect during breaking events. One approach is to employ professional PR agencies to remove keywords from trending topics on Weibo and Bilibili. Another, more budget-friendly method relies on the algorithmic ranking system, mobilising a large number of fans to 'thumb-down' or 'dislike' heated content across the platform and 'thumb-up' or 'like' alternative content that they post virally. For example, the fangirls of Zhai Xiaowen once organised a provisional team called the 'video management team' to handle PR issues associated with videos, aiming to 'heat' or 'cool' videos on social media:

> Zhai Xiaowen had a video on Bilibili, bringing about negative impacts. This video had been maintained a high click-through rate and spread rate for a long while. We had to set up a temporary team, made up of members who had the ability to create videos. They clicked the 'thumb-down' button on the negative video. While, they created a new 'positive' video, and finally 'squeeze' the 'negative' video to a place where users cannot easily find it because of the algorithm ranking system.

Since the audience for news about an idol comprises not only those within the communities but also the wider public outside the communities, taking the initiative to gain public support becomes an increasingly important task for fans involved in opinion

management. In essence, the goal of opinion management is to redirect public attention from scandals to other news, employing various methods and strategies to achieve this. The main task of their proactive work involves identifying and addressing unfavourable information about the idol, or obscuring such information with favourable content. Within fan communities, consuming gossip and tabloids is referred to as 'eating melon' ('chīguā'), and the readers, whether they are fans or not, are called 'melon eaters' ('chīguā qúnzhòng').[27]

Viral campaigns are among the most common methods employed by fan opinion management teams. Although these teams rapidly and widely circulate favourable messages on various social media platforms in defence of their idol, adopting different strategies, it is worth noting that fangirls never claim their clear fan identity when igniting debate or engaging in heated exchanges with rivals. For instance, they might pretend to be impartial 'passers-by', such as: 'I'm not a fan of xxx, but I'm going to uphold justice and say it's not their fault.' Or, 'don't be directed against xxx, no one is clean.' However, they never assert, 'I'm a fan of xxx...' or 'don't blame xxx, xxx is not clean either' because an aggressive attitude may tarnish the idol's image. It is not permitted within fan communities to publicly 'support' ('lā') one's own idol by 'combating' or 'suppressing' ('cǎi') rivals, at least for the sake of maintaining an appearance of politeness. Under most circumstances, viral campaigns are effective when new content supersedes old content on social media.

What, then, should be considered PR crises or breaking events? Informants claim that 'moral issues' ('dàodé wèntí') always take priority and are addressed by the opinion management team. From these statements, it is evident that the opinion management

[27] The terms 'eating melon' and 'melon eater' have gained considerable popularity on Chinese social media in recent years. However, their origins are seldom discussed in the literature. In fact, 'eating melon' can be traced back to the lyrics of songs created and performed by the Rainbow Chamber Singers (RCS, Cǎihóng Héchàng Tuán). In December 2015, Jin Chengzhi, conductor of the RCS, held a concert featuring his own compositions at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. This marked the first commercial performance that brought fame to the RCS, a group of students from various universities in Shanghai. During the performance, the RCS presented a series of songs written by Jin Chengzhi that portrayed childhood and rural life in Southern China. In many of these songs, there is a child eating watermelon, living a leisurely and carefree existence. Shortly thereafter, the term 'eating melon' rapidly gained traction on the Internet as a way to describe those who consume gossip and tabloid news.

team faces the daunting task of identifying PR issues within a broad scope, encompassing personal and public moralities. For example:

A) ‘In general, ‘private fans’ (‘sīshēng fàn’) will be identified and excluded from the community.’
B) ‘Getting married or falling in love with someone.’
C) ‘Roy Wang was found smoking at public spaces. He might begin to smoke when he was a teen.’
D) ‘Offensive or trolling contents on social media.’

First of all, evaluating personal morals with regard to a public figure is a challenging task. Nevertheless, the close and frequent interactive communication between fan communities and fangirls enables them to gain insight into their idols’ personal lives and apply universal moral norms to judge their actions. Two typical situations involving personal moral issues frequently attract the attention of opinion management teams. In the first situation, ‘private fans’ are criticised for being overly involved in their idol’s personal life, whether driven by kindness, romance, curiosity, or financial motivations. These private fans maintain personal contact with idols and track their personal schedules, revealing messages and photographs. As a fan leader of the idol Zhai Xiaowen’s community states:

> After his debut, Zhai Xiaowen exchanged his WeChat with a ‘private fan’. Somehow their private messages on WeChat were disclosed. This kind of news is obviously negative for idols, because idols should not exchange personal contact information with fans. … Their disclosed conversation should not take place between idols and fans. This incident was used by all parties behind the stage and had a great impact on Xiaowen … It’s the fan’s mistake and Xiaowen was used by others...

As fan communities grow, the strong identification of fangirls with their idols leads to a blurring of the lines between the idol persona and reality. Ordinary fangirls may feel a sense of betrayal when they believe that some individuals have been given undue

privilege to invade their idols' personal lives. Furthermore, romantic and marital stories involving idols can lead to fangirls feeling betrayed, as they have invested both financially and emotionally in their idols. In comparison to the issue of private fans, fangirls often view an idol's involvement in dating, romance, or marriage as a moral weakness. They believe that idols should not engage in romantic relationships during the rise of their careers, let alone have affairs. Moralising the private lives of idols is a common phenomenon in idol culture. For example, in Korea:

> [A fangirl once worked for the idol industry]: …, Kang Daniel, ranking the first in the Korean reality show Produce 101, slumped in his career immediately after his love story was disclosed by local media. Before that, Kang Daniel was one of the most popular idols in South Korea.

In Japan, covering up new life events such as dating, marriage, and childbirth is typically unacceptable. However, female idols are sometimes strategically transformed by their management companies into 'mother idols' (*mamadoru*) as a symbolic reincarnation of the 'good wife or mother' (Prusa 2012: 59). This is not the case in China, as for both male and female idols, career priorities always come first:

> Idols must not date with someone with fan's money. … only after they reach the pinnacle of their career. At that time, idols make money without fans. Generally, … over 25 years old.

In China, scandals involving idols often involve a mixture of accusations concerning both personal and public morality. This is exemplified by the case of Roy Wang being found smoking in public spaces. Roy Wang's smoking behaviour in smoke-free public areas violates public morals. Rival fans add that 'judging by his skilful smoking poses, he must have been smoking since he was a teenager'. Although there is no direct evidence, a single photo is enough to arouse fans' suspicions. Roy Wang, a member of the band TFBOYS, who is known for his upbeat and optimistic image, lost a significant number of followers and commercial opportunities after this scandal for a period of time, despite the efforts of his management company and fan community to mitigate

the situation.

3. The War of Persona

In the previous section, I emphasised the centrality of 'persona' in idol culture, as fan communities persistently question whether an idol leads a moral and consistent life. In this section, I delve further into the extensive use of 'persona' in what could be termed political cancel culture, which aligns with the common-sense view in fan communities that 'patriotism is the ultimate morality'.

Compared to the earlier example of Roy Wang being criticised for smoking before adulthood, the consequences could be far more severe if he were seen making a mistake in regard to politics. Take, for instance, the case of Qu Chuxiao, an idol who was cast as the male protagonist in *Wandering Earth* (2019), a highly successful Chinese sci-fi film that garnered international acclaim and celebrated China's space industry achievements. Rival fans claimed to have proof that Qu was morally corrupt and had a sadomasochism fetish before his debut. Qu was even reproached by rival fans for allegedly supporting a conspiracy theory that questioned the authenticity and originality of China's space technology. Out of consideration for the collective interests and solidarity of the fan communities, fangirls exhibit little tolerance for moral flaws in their idols. According to one fangirl, loyal fans within the opinion management team are primarily 'career fans' ('shìyè fěn'):

> 'Career fans' of course hope their idol's career will flourish. They never allow... idols to do things destroying their future. … This's the supervision of fans to idols. … They're our models.

Apparently, regardless of the extent to which fan communities monitor themselves and one another, certain aspects remain challenging to control. For instance, private lives

and personal speech, which are closely tied to idols' personas, could pose a risk to their careers and, consequently, their fans' efforts. Moreover, as Goffman (1959) suggests, fragments of our 'self' are presented to various individuals within our social network, where information about our self-performance may be deliberately or inadvertently recombined and misinterpreted by others. A well-maintained public image can not only generate commercial value, but public opinion also often serves as a tool for antagonistic communication in fan politics involving tabloids and social media. Idols must contend with the possibility of being pushed aside, even in the absence of concrete evidence, simply due to the smear tactics, fabrications, and embellishments employed by rival fans. Consequently, one of the most fundamental principles within fan communities is never to retaliate against a former idol:

> If you've been a loyal fan of your idol, then you're never allowed to become trolling fans. You can be a passer-by, but you cannot be a trolling fan, because you have more secrets about this idol than outsiders.

As the common slogan in fan communities proclaims, 'there's no idol before the nation!', the absolute limit that idols must not breach is inciting political disputes related to national controversies. These disputes and controversies often pertain to governance, specifically the manner in which the state exercises authority with respect to geopolitical and ethnic issues (such as national-state sovereignty and territorial integrity), which are deemed unquestionable within fan communities and across social media platforms. For instance:

> [A fangirl:] (The Taiwanese idol) Chou Tzu-yu has been blocked by mainlanders for expressing the Taiwan independence on social media. Although she apologized, people did not accept it because she's not honest and sincere.

And:

> Every patriot post posted by the CYL on Weibo will be reposted by the official account of every idol. Fans will then repost the reposts. …Idols who didn't

> repost or repost in time will be policed by fans. Lin Yanjun, a Taiwan idol from Idol Producer, … was cancelled for not reposting 'One-China Principle' posted by the CYL during the Hong Kong riot. Fans think Lin Yanjun's political stance is questionable.

Political disputes centred on the issue of national-state sovereignty and territorial integrity are primarily linked to the Taiwan and Hong Kong issues. These issues are far more sensitive and prominent than any other national issue in fan communities, owing to the inseparable connections between mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan within the entertainment industry. In the 1980s and 1990s, the burgeoning celebrity culture in mainland China, at the onset of the opening-up reforms, was profoundly influenced by Hong Kong and Taiwan. During that period, Chinese TV stations emulated the likes of TVB, CTi Variety, and other Hong Kong and Taiwan-based stations in producing programmes. In recent years, however, numerous celebrities from Hong Kong and Taiwan have ventured to the mainland to broaden their careers and markets. Concurrently, fans are vigilant about the political standpoints of these non-mainland celebrities, grounded in the belief that patriotism is the fundamental principle for all. In the eyes of fans, political issues and incidents serve as a means to discern whether celebrities who profess to be Chinese and express love for China are genuinely sincere or merely hypocritical in their pursuit of the vast mainland market:

> (Zhou Ziyu's) management company, JYP Entertainment, one of the three largest South Korean management companies, stated in public relations that neither Chou Tzu-yu nor her team could make a choice between Taiwan and the mainland. This had a very serious impact, and also affected me to continue my interests in the idols signed with JYP Entertainment. It is obviously unwise for an idol to make money on the mainland and say that he cannot choose between the mainland and Taiwan.
>
> Your (Lin Yanjun's) company is from Taiwan, you're a Taiwanese, and you do not recognize the 'One-China Principle' when you make money from mainland China. … He's the only idol in his community who hasn't reposted. Idols have obligations to inform their political stance and give fans peace of mind.

Fangirls are acutely aware that their efforts can be rendered futile overnight if a dispute

remains unresolved, as, unlike 'moral issues' such as an affair, authorities, including official media and other institutions, are likely to intervene and cancel the idol. 'The house has collapsed!' is the common phrase used within fan communities when they discover that their idol's persona has crumbled. A fangirl occupying a higher position in the community revealed to me how fan communities are conscious of the power of cancel culture and how they leverage it in fan wars. Based on her information, I summarise two main strategies as follows:

Proactive actions. If necessary, the leadership of fan communities may mobilise members to excavate the past of rival idols, disclosing detrimental information to the public on platforms such as Weibo and Douban. A fangirl candidly told me, 'the Internet never forgets.' Persistent efforts often yield success in uncovering a 'scandalous past', as it is inevitable that idols will have public appearances with other celebrities who may become embroiled in events deemed 'insulting to China'. Resorting to misinformation and disinformation in fabricating transgressions, fangirls construct or reconstruct narratives related to targeted idols, which may be entirely fictitious. For instance, it is not uncommon for fangirls to search for incriminating photos. One idol was cancelled for taking a photo with a friend at the Hong Kong protests. Another idol's tourist photo on the streets of Hong Kong was extracted from his earlier social media archives and posted online alongside unrelated images of the Hong Kong protests. Delving into the family backgrounds of idols often unveils controversies:

> 'Idols' friends, families and teammates are found to have suspicious political standpoints. … For example, Ouyang Nana's father was related to the Democratic Progressive Party (the pro-independence party in Taiwan).

Reactive actions - Patriotism as 'Negative Capital'. Broadly speaking, fans actively participate in the production and dissemination of information on social media, provided that the information can be exploited to increase the exposure and commercial value of their idol. I refer to this type of information, which is directly related to the idol, as 'positive capital'. In contrast to 'positive capital', there is a type of information

not directly related to idols in terms of content; however, fans and idols respond to it in ways that can profoundly influence (or even determine) the idol's fate. Much of this information pertains to patriotism, particularly when released by government propaganda departments (such as the CYL and *People's Daily*) on specific occasions (e.g., war anniversaries as 'national humiliation days'). It is unlikely that idols and their fan communities can gain additional benefits from reposting and responding to such information.

However, if fangirls do not take it seriously, there is a risk that the idol's commercial value could be undermined by accusations of being unpatriotic. In this sense, I refer to this information as 'negative capital'. The propaganda department constructs narratives about significant events such as wars and disasters through social media and directs fan communities to mass-propagate the information. Consequently, the focus lies on the reproduction of patriotic information by fan communities on social media and the perceptions within fangirl communities of this 'exceptional' fan practice. In other words, the interaction between the propaganda sector and fan communities in the social media field is revealed through the (re)production and dissemination of 'negative capital' as patriotism.

The presumption of guilt against idols from Hong Kong and Taiwan, in fact, represents a self-protection mechanism for fan communities. Being prepared to scrutinise idols' political orientation towards principal issues during key events helps the community minimise the cost of handling PR crises, unlike the situation where Chou Tzu-yu's involvement led to her withdrawal from the mainland.[28] The impulse to scrutinise idols also stems from the policies and regulations of the Publicity Department of the CCP, primarily involving its sub-institutions, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China, and the China Film Administration. In 2020, the Ethics Committee

[28] In 2015, Chou Tzu-yu was reported to carry the flag of Republic of China (ROC) in a Korean TV program called *My Little Television*. Her controversial act was criticized by mainland civilians and finally boycotted by the authority, even though she issued a video statement on the Internet.

of Celebrities (Míngxīng Dàodé Wéiyuánhuì) was put on the agenda. This committee, affiliated with the Propaganda Department of the CCP, evaluates the moralities and ethics of celebrities in the name of tightening supervision over money laundering in the entertainment industry. Celebrities embroiled in political controversies will be labelled as 'stigmatised celebrities' ('lièjì yìrén'), and no television station or crew will be permitted to hire them. Other individuals who may be labelled as 'stigmatised celebrities' include those involved in drug abuse. All of these 'stigmatised celebrities' will no longer appear in public view, let alone perform.

Since fan communities tend to exploit this strict censorship system to police each other as a means of toxic competition, fangirls are constantly vigilant of their idols' words and actions to avoid being reported by rivals to the authorities. As credibility yields heat and visibility, and political disputes can result in an impasse where all previous efforts are wasted, it is easy to reach a tacit understanding of not fathoming the depth of the water. However, since reporting is a time-tested method in cut-throat competition, 'trolling fans' never tire of discovering anything suspicious about idols' backgrounds and relationships. As a result, programmes have become more cautious in selecting non-mainland idols.

> [A fangirl leader]: In the Tencent reality show Produce 101, a Taiwanese idol was proposed to be the lead singer and dancer of the theme song. However, soon before the broadcast, fans from Douban discovered on the overseas social media of the idol that his mother was the pro-Taiwan independence. … In the end, Tencent completely rubbed out the idol by editing. From this lesson, … the producers of reality show, have been extremely cautious when inviting idols from Hong Kong and Taiwan. They will check everyone's background as carefully and strictly as possible. Tencent almost stopped broadcasting Produce 101 because of this incident.'
>
> 'Some idols Hong Kong and Taiwan post personal photos on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. If other people in these photos, whether or not their friends and family, might be separatist, then they're done.'

As this fangirl leader suggests, they did not know who reported this, but if there were

no fans policing idols, they would never uncover those with ‘problematic backgrounds’. In this sense, fangirls harbour a rather complex attitude towards censorship. On the one hand, they are pleased to witness a ‘pure environment’. On the other hand, they are also concerned about the consequences of power abuses. Their idols must confront the possibility of being elbowed out even in the absence of solid proof, solely due to the smear tactics of trolling fans, fabricating and embellishing stories.

In summary, fangirls adeptly construct their collective identity by establishing ‘fan sovereignty’. Since the primary objective of opinion control is to maintain the idol’s credibility with the public, they endeavour to enhance the visibility of their idol with a positive reputation, while diminishing the visibility of rivals and unlinking any association between the idol and potential ‘toxic’ elements. In discussion threads, rivals’ names should not be mentioned unless using abbreviations or nicknames. Names of ‘stigmatised celebrities’ are considered taboo. Fangirls’ identification demonstrates sensitivity to categorisation and engagement, enabling them to embrace potent exclusionary processes in order to preserve the purity and solidarity of community members.

4. Conclusion

The term ‘fan communities’ refers to the numerous groups that have formed around pop music idol culture, driven by reality shows, social media, and mass participation, which have shaped the cultural, gender, and civic identities of young Chinese women. The widespread use of social media has propelled China’s reality shows and idol industry into a new era, in which fandom has become an integral part of fangirls’ daily lives. Fan communities possess a hierarchical structure, with fangirls’ positions and roles determined by their dedication to their idol in terms of time and money. These communities, along with the surrounding idol industry, enable fangirls to ‘support’ their

idols through cultural production and consumption. ‘Peripheral fans’ can ‘upgrade’ within the promotion system across social media, algorithmically measured by their personal contribution to data related to idols through routine activities such as ‘signing in’ and using hashtags. They are also encouraged to engage in offline activities, particularly live concerts, as a platform for showcasing their solidarity and creativity through a harmonious blend of idol and fan performances.

Pop fandom, based on routinised activities centred on idols, unites fangirls within well-organised and disciplined communities. Within these communities, fangirls occupy different positions in the inner or outer circle, depending on their dedication to the community. Those in higher positions within the inner circle may have the opportunity to run for leadership roles. Leaders are granted the authority to make strategic decisions concerning community development and to mobilise members for fan activities, including mass wars against rivals. Furthermore, leaders (particularly those from larger communities) have access to resources from the idol industry and media partners. However, it is important to note that contemporary Chinese pop fandom is not entirely apolitical, as some informants may claim. In fact, whether fangirls are aware of it or not, fan practices provide daily political exercises. They are also empowered by technical skills for circumventing Internet censorship. Fan communities equip themselves with these practices and skills as prerequisites for the possibility of mass nationalist expeditions.

Chapter Five From Fangirls to Nationalists, and the Birth of ‘Brotherland’

This chapter explores the political participation of fan communities during the Hong Kong protests in 2019, analysing the intersection of fandom and nationalism. Through social media activism, the political discourse expanded into a novel domain, whereby fangirls transformed into nationalists. In 2019, following the denouncement of Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and South Korean idols by the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement, accusing these idols of remaining silent due to concerns over losing the market in Mainland China (Figure 2), fan communities rallied to defend their idols against perceived defamation and slander across global social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. In a relatively brief period, the initial aim to ‘protect idols’ evolved into a widespread online movement centred on ‘protecting China’. A series of actions culminated in the dissemination of the slogan ‘there’s no idol before the nation!’ (‘Guójiā miànqián wú ǒuxiàng!’). Fangirls became vigilant, scrutinising, reporting, and cancelling idols for any perceived improprieties in their public opinions and appearances. This led to ‘purification’ actions within the idol industry, involving idols, management companies (idol agencies), fans, social media platforms and television producers.

Figure 2: Instagram users in Hong Kong denounced the Hong-Kong-born idol Jackson Wang Ka-Yee keep silent in the protest and reproach him as a ‘locust’ (a derogatory name for the mainlanders) active in the mainland. Every comment like these attracts hundreds of replies from mainland fangirls.

Given the integration of political experiences into fan practices, it is essential to extend

our examination of fan activities beyond the realm of fandom, encompassing a broader analysis of collective actions. I contend that idol fandom in China is inherently political. Although fangirls may not explicitly articulate a political agenda or frame their activism in political terms, their fandom nonetheless encompasses a wide array of political activities both within and beyond their communities. These activities span subtle expressions of political opinions to more overt forms of political participation. Consequently, idol fandom in China should not be dismissed as mere entertainment but rather acknowledged as a distinct form of politics in its own right.

A vital concern of this chapter is the emergence of the 'brotherland' discourse within the movement, as fangirls associated nationhood with the term 'brother' ('gēgē'), a familiar term of endearment for idols or one of their self-proclaimed 'family members' ('jiārén'). This development saw fangirls applying their affection for pop idols to nationalist activism, personifying China as 'the Idol'. The 'brotherland' discourse not only enabled fangirls to repurpose and adapt their skills and strategies from fan activities for nationalist mobilisation but also demonstrated their newfound dedication to the nation. To this end, I examine the ways in which fangirls re-employed the skills and techniques acquired through fandom communication in their political participation, effectively transforming themselves into fangirl-nationalists. Even though their fangirl identity typically took precedence in everyday life, during extraordinary historical moments, this identity was subordinate to a nationalist sensibility.

Fangirls' political participation challenges contemporary China's reoriented path of nationalism, offering a reflexive understanding of a gendered homeland. In contrast to the 'Motherland' discourse, which also emerged within this movement, the construction of 'brotherland' uniquely highlights the capacity of young women immersed in pop fandom to engage in politics in an unprecedented manner, thereby enriching the meaning of Chinese nationalism. Moreover, the 'brotherland' discourse expands upon the connotations of Chinese nationalism by evoking two intertwined dimensions: it echoes the rhetoric of fan practice, in which idols are affectionately referred to as

‘brother’, and it lends contemporary significance to the concept of the ‘family-nation isomorphism’ within the narrative of China’s nation-state. Before delving further into how fangirls construct ‘brotherland’ in their political participation, it is crucial to situate their actions within a larger context and address three related issues: widespread implementation of ‘idolisation’ (‘ǒuxiàng huà’) strategies, visual representation of heroisation, and subjectification of civility and rationality among these female participants. All three are more or less influenced by pop fan practice, but they have taken on new forms in the nationalist movement.

Firstly, I re-examine the concept of ‘persona’ within idol fandom, the media representation of the idol that was discussed in the last chapter. As previously discussed, a primary task for fangirls, particularly those within opinion management teams, involves cultivating their idol’s persona on social media by emphasising ‘positive’ content and suppressing ‘negative’ ones. An appealing persona increases the likelihood of success in competition against rivals, leading to enhanced commercial profits and social satisfaction. Consequently, battles between rival fans often revolve around struggles over persona, whether by attempting to maintain and improve their own idol’s image or by inspecting disparaging information about rivals to publicly expose or even report to authorities. Given that politically inappropriate statements by an idol could potentially end their career, the role of persona in idol culture also exposes the inherent uncertainty that carries high risks of wasted effort and the potential for fangirls to turn to nationalism for some semblance of certainty through idolisation strategies. Introducing the term ‘idolisation’, I propose that the ‘persona’ pattern developed in fan practices can be appropriated, adapted, and reconfigured for broader political participation. I elucidate the significance of emphasising ‘persona’ in both fan practices and nationalist political participation, as well as the reasons for doing so. The persona pattern functions as a means of idealisation, enabling the personification and adaptation of human or non-human objects for nationalist purposes. These objects, which serve as representatives of the nation, may include national heroes, influential figures, artefacts, or the nation itself, all of which are transformed into ‘Idols’ embodying nationalist and

patriotic sentiments. In this context, I capitalise the word 'Idols' to denote 'national idols', which differ from pop idols in terms of their perfected representation.

Next, I draw upon existing literature to highlight the consistent use of creative production for mass mobilisation in major political movements in contemporary China, from the Cultural Revolution, and the Tian'anmen Incident to recent nationalist movements within a digital context. Central to this discussion are the creations produced by fan communities in the nationalist movement, particularly memes, posters, and illustrations. I examine the reasons behind creators' selection of these elements in their productions and how these works resonated both within and beyond fan communities. Unlike mass mobilisations in Maoist China, no centralised power structure orchestrated the actors involved in the expedition. Rather, power was dispersed among various institutions, groups and individuals, including fan communities, propagandists, and other cultural groups such as *Diba*. In this movement, fan communities emerged as an additional node of mobilising power alongside others. State-endorsed propagandists, inspired by fandom's material culture, create their own materials for broader mobilisation on Weibo. These propagandists enlist the support of other participants to oppose the Hong Kong protesters. Meanwhile, fan communities provoke and mediate inter-community rivalries, instigating and mobilising state organs to join the fray as judges determining whether 'problematic' idols should be cancelled.

Thirdly, I propose that we consider fangirls as new political subjects, rather than solely through their fandom-related cultural identifications. I concentrate on two aspects in the formation of fangirls' political subjectivity as 'new women of civility and rationality'. On one hand, as discussed in the previous chapter, fangirls conformed to civility and rationality according to the rules imposed by their regular practices and their communities. On the other hand, fangirls 'internalised' civility and rationality as virtues and values in the nationalist movement. Fangirls made concerted efforts to avoid exposing emotions in the political communication and condemned others who did so. They viewed emotions as embodiments of irrationality, which in turn 'degraded' the

civility of their communities, their idols, and China. In this sense, the notions of rationality and irrationality are reconfigured within fangirls. This assists in conceptualising fangirls as rational, independent and autonomous 'new women', while simultaneously revealing the tensions between female participants and the prevailing masculine ideology. It is noteworthy that the slogan of 'civility' and 'rationality' was initially put forward by the male nationalists of *Diba*; fangirls were not the target of mobilisation with this slogan, and they were even regarded merely as the weaker individuals who needed to be 'protected by men' during these actions. However, later on, fangirls themselves adopted the same slogan and even found a way to integrate it with the rules governing their regular fan activities.

1. Idolisation of National Icons

As we could observe, different stakeholders in the idol industry were increasingly cautious in their words and actions, as they faced considerable risk. As mentioned earlier, fangirls often referred to their idols as 'houses', which they diligently maintained in regular activities. When an idol was cancelled, fangirls said that 'the house is falling down'. This dramatic expression highlighted the frustration and despair that fangirls experienced in such circumstances. It was also common for fangirls to transition from 'conformists' to 'iconoclasts' immediately following PR incidents directly or indirectly related to their idols who breached unspoken but 'essential rules'. However, what if the 'idols' were solid and unbreakable? Then who would be in charge?

The reality was that even the most discreet words and actions or the most innocuous backgrounds would not withstand scrutiny. To resist feelings of impotence in the face of such uncertainty, fangirls turned to the idolatry of personified national icons. For example, Hong Kong policeman Lau Cha-kei, who clashed with protesters, was refigured as a Chinese national hero in photos, posters, and illustrations. Subsequently,

Weibo enabled Lau's 'Super Topics' so that his fans could 'support' him and his Hong Kong police colleagues. Lau's fans also produced related materials, such as posters, illustrations, memes, and T-shirts, as part of the movement. This was indeed not an uncommon sight in Chinese fandom practices of the time.

Despite the specific historical moment, such as the expedition against Hong Kong protesters, I shall commence by examining the concept of 'idolisation', a term that I put forth to characterise the adaptable form and connotation of idols within the fan communities, which extends to iconic veneration beyond their sphere. By interpreting 'idolisation' in an expanded context, I endeavour to shed light on the roles of not only fan communities but also other stakeholders, specifically propagandists and social media platforms, in facilitating this phenomenon, thus highlighting the efficacy and expediency of idol culture in mass mobilisation. Broadly speaking, there are two primary approaches for implementing 'idolisation'.

The first approach involved in this process is the idolisation of non-human entities, typically artefacts. China's idol culture is influenced by post-war Japanese culture concerning the consumption of 'cuteness' (or *kawaii* in Japanese) (Galbraith and Karlin 2012: 16). The aesthetic of cuteness in China's idol culture is commonly represented in the materials and language employed in fan practices - creating cartoon images of idols, utilising reduplication in nicknames, and so on. In China's idol culture, the concept of cuteness embodies representations of innocence, playfulness, and unadulterated joy, aligning with the Japanese 'cute culture'. In fact, the reproduction of cuteness can result in an obsession with both human subjects (who are objectified) and non-human objects. As a modern and commodified version of animism, non-human objects can possess a spiritual essence that appears to fulfil consumers' emotional and psychological needs. These objects might include animals, imaginary or mythical creatures, or even mundane items in everyday life, such as a fluffy toy or a pencil sharpener.

Instead of considering cute culture as a standard example of escapism or nostalgia in

the postmodern era of crisis (Elias 2018: 115), I propose that both non-human and human 'objects' in the nationalist movement in contemporary China are created and deployed to mediate the relationship between fan communities and propagandists. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, People.cn and China Central Television (CCTV) live-streamed the construction of two emergency specialty field hospitals, *Huoshenshan* Hospital and *Leishenshan* Hospital, on Bilibili. This streaming aimed to showcase the high efficiency of infrastructure construction and mass mobilisation. In the construction site, forklifts and cement mixers were given affectionate nicknames such as *Cha-chan* ('Chā Jiàng') and *Ouni-chan* ('Ǒuní Jiàng'). '-*Chan*' is a common suffix of endearment in Japanese, typically used in girls' names. They even encouraged viewers to form 'couples' consisting of a blue forklift and a red forklift, because according to fandom, 'blue and red are the best match'. The incorporation of cultural groups into the dominant discourse in political participation is articulated as a process transitioning from closed texts to open texts. While the mode of discourse reproduction maintains stability and continuity with the past, this past is continually rewritten as it progressively incorporates them, allowing for increased participation in bottom-up discourse through an emerging pattern of communication driven by public participation (Figure 3).

Figure 3: (Left) The 'power list' on the CCTV live-streaming page is similar to the 'check in' mechanism on the idol page on Weibo, where you click 'add oil' to support your favorite engineering equipment. (Middle) fan's work 'garage kits' ('shǒubàn') of forklifts; (Right) meme 'two cement mixers whispering'

The second approach entails the idolisation of individuals working in official institutions, assigning them titles such as the 'national team' ('guójiā duì'). The

characters identified as the ‘national team’ come from various fields. In addition to the original reference to the ‘national team’, which directly relates to Chinese sports stars who have won honours in international competitions, the term now also encompasses artists working for national institutions or the army, spokespersons for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hosts and hostesses of China Central Television (CCTV), and professionals recognised by the state (scientists, doctors, etc.). On Weibo and Bilibili, fan communities exist for the ‘Diplomatic Group’ (‘Wàijiāo Tiāntuán’), which includes three main idols in 2020: Foreign Ministry Spokespersons Hua Chunying, Wang Wenbin, and Zhao Lijian. According to a fangirl of the Diplomatic Group, ‘almost all of the active users in the community are young girls, and they are probably fans of pop idols as well.’ As she suggests, they admire these officials with their impressive carriage for their presence at press conferences and their courageous stance in responding to provocations from Western countries. Meanwhile, official media have been receptive to the term ‘Diplomatic Group’ in their coverage.[29]

In her research, Jefferys (2012) examines idol production in China’s entertainment industry in the late 2000s. She discovered that the party-state’s involvement in the propagandistic manufacturing of socialist idols had gradually been supplanted by Western-style media-manufactured celebrities as idols of capitalist consumption. Although Jefferys notes that traditional media, such as state-owned websites, museums, broadcast television stations, and more, still advocated socialist heroic idols for the purposes of patriotic or ‘red education’, heroic idols produced during the socialist period have lost their dominance in contemporary idol culture. This observation holds true even though Jefferys’ research took place in a context predating the widespread use of social media in China. A dramatic shift occurring in recent years is the state’s attempt to recapture and capitalise on these new modes of communication associated with digital media, employing young people to devise new models for publicising their political agenda while also catering to the tastes of the younger generation.

[29] For example, see the article by CCTV to introduce the Diplomatic Group: http://m.news.cctv.com/2020/07/18/ARTI2D68v6qQH20ZJwMoMau4200718.shtml

Indeed, it is now hard to trace the origins of the situation in which communities and state institutions collaborate so tangibly to manufacture national idols. However, the aprroaches of idolisation reveal that propagandists have recognised the necessity of transforming themselves to create an affinity with young audiences. To this end, they extract practical resources from pop fan practices, which were still held in contempt in the early 2000s. In doing so, the state demonstrates its motivation to transform the idol industry to be 'healthier'. On the one hand, given the proliferation of young fans who are mentally and financially over-obsessed with engaging in fan practices, the government has introduced a series of policies to restrict the idol industry. For instance, in May 2021, the government eventually introduced a policy banning the bundling of ballots and milk sales after reports of fans purchasing excessive amounts of milk and having to dispose of the expired milk, as this contradicted the moral imperative of not wasting food.[30] Simultaneously, the government guides fans towards 'correct values' in promoting idols, so as to avoid unnecessary risks of running afoul of the government. Management companies and TV producers tend to incorporate values suggested by the government, such as patriotism, masculinity, and optimism, into the selection of talents for idol-building.

On the other hand, across social media platforms, propagandists are relentless in their efforts to disseminate their message. They employ various tactics, such as manipulating public opinion through language and engaging in activities inspired by fan communities. Social media platforms maintain a subordinate and cooperative relationship with the state, rather than competing against it. In the past five years, Bilibili, the most popular platform for ACG culture, has invited propagandist agents such as the CYL, *People's Daily*, People.cn, the Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, and others to establish their own online channels. In collaboration with the CYL, Bilibili produced and released a

[30] People.cn took the opportunity to criticise the idol industry's practice of encouraging individuals to spend money endlessly in three articles in quick succession. See:
http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0507/c204041-32097083.html;
http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0508/c223228-32097922.html;
http://opinion.people.com.cn/BIG5/n1/2021/0509/c223228-32098093.html.

propagandistic video called ‘The Back Wave’ (‘Hòulàng’) on Youth Day in 2020 to inspire young people. Shortly thereafter, *People’s Daily* responded by stating that young people should become an essential force for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.[31] Icons of these institutions, such as Kang Hui, the well-known host of *Xinwen Lianbo* (literally News Simulcast) on CCTV, also have their own fan communities on Weibo and Bilibili. Fans are responsive to Kang Hui’s videos, creating cartoon images of him, supportive slogans, and thousands of videos featuring his TV appearances, specifically using fandom editing techniques and formats.

One notable example of utilising social media for propaganda involved the CYL promoting two virtual idols named ‘Jiangshan Jiao’ and ‘Hongqi Man’ (Figure 4) with manga features on Bilibili and Weibo. The names of these two characters are inspired by Mao Zedong’s poems. ‘Jiangshan’ signifies the landscape of the country, while ‘Hongqi’ denotes the red national flag of China. This was not the first instance of authorities using virtual figures for propaganda. In 2017, the CYL released a song celebrating China’s achievements in manufacturing and ‘invited’ virtual singer Luo Tianyi (Figure 5) to perform on the Bilibili livestreaming. The China rising narrative, embodied by its accomplishments resulting from economic reforms, has been produced and presented by authorities working in tandem with market mechanisms and Internet PR techniques.

[31] See the article: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA4OTIyMjUyOQ==&mid=2654650370&idx=1&sn=9e9eed7fb3a78ba2ed7b148b4c057ca0&chksm=8bd05cecbca7d5faa61873cf55544ed99706245f825362c5b94b6f378effc19e376be7fb3686&scene=0&xtrack=1

Figure 4: 'Jiangshan Jiao' (left) and 'Hongqi Man' (right)

Figure 5: Luo Tianyi, a virtual singer developed by the Japanese company Yamaha, and was created in collaboration with Shanghai Henian Information Technology

As a fangirl suggests, 'you can be a fan of anyone, even anything,' but what is the difference between being a fan of a national icon and of a pop idol? Two fangirls share their worship of the national characters who are figured as upright, impartial, patriotic and professional:

> If you search for keywords 'national team singers' on Bilibili, you'll see a lot of videos edited by fans. You can see today's 'national team' singers, such as Gong Lina, Han Hong, Tan Jing, as well as the older generation of 'national team' singers (at their 70s or older), such as Guo Lanying and Li Guyi (from the socialist period). There is a boy in our group who is fans of Huahua (Hua Chenyu, born in the 1990s) and Yan Weiwen (aged 63), but they are not the same kind of idols at all.

> We don't follow celebrities. We follow national heroes. … I love Wu Minxia's (one of the Chinese diving athletes with the most Olympic gold medals) channel on Bilibili. She shows off her life as a wife and mother (on Bilibili). It's very cordial of her.

In their view, there is a 'sanctity' that exists in these national icons, absent in pop idols, which provides a sense of 'certainty' to ensure that their 'house' never 'collapses'. Despite policies aiming to guide pop idols on the 'right path', fangirls still perceive their idols' careers as uncertain ('The house could collapse at any moment.') and tend to attribute this to the greedy nature of capitalism, which acts as a catalyst in the idol industries. Thus, the fangirls are generally self-conscious about the fact that pop idols are not 'absolutely' and 'coherently' reliable.

In fact, fans do not object to, or even acquiesce to, capital as a driving force in the industry's development, as it was not their concern when they initially became groupies. However, 'capital' ('zīběn') was still a term frequently mentioned in the interviews, and it was predominantly mentioned in a binary structure opposed to the 'state' ('guójiā'). When my informants critiqued capitalism, they frequently drew upon examples from their own daily experiences, such as workplace exploitation. In doing so, they tended to invoke a binary structure in fangirls' perceptions, juxtaposing state and market, certainty and uncertainty. Many fangirls, typically disengaged from political and social issues, gain political knowledge from the idolised characters they admire. While pop idols provide fans with a fantastical escape from reality, the state-endorsed 'idolisation' serves as a counterpoint, prompting those who are politically indifferent to re-engage and contemplate topics aligned with the state's political objectives. By 'improving' pop idol culture and developing an alternative idol culture, the state has, to some extent, absolved itself of responsibility for the ills of Chinese capitalism. In other words, Fangirls frequently express disillusionment with pop idols who are 'products of capital', yet they derive satisfaction from the idolatry that emerges when the state collaborates with capital. This partnership enables the state to partially evade responsibility for the negative aspects attributed to the commercial production of pop idols, as perceived by

fangirls. Meanwhile, as Schmalzer (2016) argues, 'youth often actively embraced elements of state propaganda in ways that were meaningful and empowering to them' (15). Rather than resisting or conforming to mainstream ideology, fans embrace a familiar form of participatory practice that has been appropriated and reconfigured by official propagandists for the sake of the nation, as the fangirls seek solutions to their desires and anxieties.

As Farquhar and Zhang (2012) caution, it is unwise to assume that 'a desire to challenge institutional power is natural and inevitable', or to 'romanticize resistance' (310). In their daily practices, fangirls exhibit little interest in opposing the dominant ideology. To avoid or circumvent political risks, the fangirl community reaches a common understanding to depoliticise (rather than render apolitical) their fan practices. On Weibo and Bilibili, fangirls and official media engage in a mutually beneficial relationship. Official media frequently adopt the language of fandom to appeal to young girls through propaganda, while fangirls leverage the support of official media to cultivate a patriotic image and feel empowered in fan rivalries.

In China's idol industries, the state, fan communities, and media collaborate to produce a unique sociopolitical space, wherein fan practices serve not merely as a conduit for participatory culture but also as an indicator of mainstream political values. Fandom has evolved into a practice that enables participants to construct their collective fan identity independent of pop idols. In cooperation with various platforms, the authorities have co-opted the concept of fandom for propagandistic purposes. The authorities use national icons, including authorised artists, media workers, even artefacts symbolising national projects, with the task of displaying and reinforcing national credibility. This is based on the belief that the 'national' and 'authorised' are inherently more trustworthy than the 'popular' and 'unauthorised'. Fangirls willingly cooperate with both political authorities and technological platforms. The meaning-making process of pop fandom transitions into a new domain, where fans are actively engaged in supporting these 'national idols' and upholding national credibility by adhering to their customary fan

practices. Meanwhile, fans derive satisfaction from their involvement in championing a more stable and reliable idol whose status is difficult to undermine due to national endorsement.

2. Memes Go Viral

In recent years, memes have become a prominent tool in political communication, particularly within nationalist activism. During the First *Diba* Expedition in 2016, also known as 'memes combat' ('biǎoqíng bāo dàzhàn'), a large number of *Diba* users utilised memes in their actions against pro-independence Taiwanese individuals (Yang 2017). The Second *Diba* Expedition, in which fangirls participated, maintained a consistent approach, employing memes as a method of political communication. Popular culture references and political discourses became intertwined. Memes, described by Milner (2018) as 'a lingua franca for mass participation' (5), enabled a broader audience to engage in political discussions and actions.

Shifman (2013; 2014) provides insights into the cultural logic of memes, focusing on photo-based memes and arguing that they function as 'hypersignification', wherein 'the code itself becomes the focus of attention' (2014: 340), and as 'prospective photography', whereby 'photos are increasingly perceived as the raw material for future images' (2014: 340). In fan activism, cultural references used as sources for meme creation extend beyond photos to encompass film frames and cartoon sketches. Compared to photos, memes derived from cartoon sketches employ visual rhetoric and convey a sense of innocence, sharply contrasting the tense atmosphere depicted in images of the Hong Kong protests. These cartoonish figures are more than mere human icons; when used to represent actors in political movements, they simplify the complexities between individuals, as well as the intricate relationships among Mainland China, Hong Kong, and international forces. This oversimplified portrayal situates the

interpretation of activism within a playful and childlike context. In the memes exemplified in Figure 6, the small figure representing ‘fangirls’ themselves stands up for ‘China’ and protects it like a valiant childhood companion. When Hong Kong is ‘bullied’ by the West, ‘Brother China’ confronts the aggressors and fights back.

Figure 6: cartoonish memes

A prevalent prototype of memes drew upon cinematic sources, specifically a frame from Wong Kar-Wai’s film *As Tears Go By* (1988), in which the mobster Wu Ying (portrayed by Hong Kong actor Jacky Cheung) exclaims a common Cantonese curse, ‘you eat shit!’ (‘Sik si laa nei!’). Cheung’s exaggerated facial expression was extracted from the frame and transformed into cartoonised memes. Occasionally, this meme prototype developed a variant wherein Cheung’s face was replaced with a panda’s head (Figure 7). Evidently, Wong Kar-Wai’s film bears no relevance to the meaning of the memes. What matters is not Cheung’s facial expression but the abstracted representation of it—an endlessly replicable symbol. This human expression is incorporated into the body of a cartoonish panda, resulting in a surprising, untranslatable humour marked by absurdity and incongruity. Utilising this meme template as ‘raw material’ (Shifman 2014: 340), creators add words alongside the image, as if spoken by the ludicrous panda.

Figure 7: ‘Let our fangirls show you the rules!’

Wu Jing, a Chinese actor and martial artist, also served as a popular source for meme creation. Early in his career, Wu Jing appeared in several historical and martial arts films and television series. However, he did not achieve nationwide fame until his role in the film series *Wolf Warriors* (2015-), which remains the most commercially successful military-themed film in China, promoting national strength and the Chinese military’s overseas capabilities. Following 2015, he starred in a series of films that encapsulate the indomitable spirit of China and its people, including *The Wandering Earth* (2019), *The Climbers* (2019), *My People, My Country* (2019), *My Homeland* (2020), *The Sacrifice* (2020), and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021), which span a variety of genres from war action to family drama and science fiction. Wu Jing is now considered as one of China’s most commercially viable actors. The prototype of these Wu Jing memes was derived from a frame in the film *Song of Youth* (2019), where he made a guest appearance as a PE teacher wearing a green tracksuit with the Chinese characters for ‘China’ emblazoned on the chest. Rather than asserting that fans created various memes, it is more accurate to say that they generated meme templates for others to utilise and adapt in viral communication. For example, participants employed Wu Jing templates to create memes containing their own words alongside ‘China’ (Figure 8), allowing the characters on his tracksuit to correspond with the so-called ‘semantic hashtag’ (Daer, Hoffman, and Godman 2014) that iterates in the exchange.

Figure 8: 'standing punishment for life for disrespecting China'

In the nationalist expedition, the use of phonetic *pinyin* abbreviations in memes to represent political terms was commonplace. For instance, 'Taiwan' was written as 'TW' ('Tai Wan'), and 'government' as 'ZF' ('Zheng Fu'). Some scholars address the proliferation of memes and other 'Internet language' in online communication within the context of China's censorship. For example, Shifman (2013) posits that the stringent online censorship in China compels people to employ Internet language, such as harmonics and abbreviations, on social media, and this extends to meme production. Building on Shifman's (2013) argument, I suggest that the use of such language by fangirls in their political communication may also relate to their fan activities, in addition to potentially being a response to online censorship. For example, the 'NMSL' ('Your mother is dead.') memes employed in April 2020 cursing battle between Chinese and Thai netizens originated from fan communities. Rival fans of idol Cai XuKun abbreviated his motto 'never mind the scandal and libel' to 'NMSL', which coincides with the phonetic *pinyin* initials for 'Ni Ma Si Le', meaning 'your mother is dead'. Since then, 'NMSL' has become a phrase used by rival fans when referring to Cai Xukun. Moreover, based on the tacit understanding of 'refuse-to-share' and 'never-provoking-disputes' principles (as mentioned in the previous chapter) within the fan communities, fangirls rarely use other idols' full names on social media. Instead, they resort to phonetic *pinyin* abbreviations when referring to them, although this does not always prevent disputes from arising.[32]

[32] In my fieldwork I found that social media has expanded the boundaries of censorship into language that is not related to politics, making language reduction a more common phenomenon. For example, in the newly launched

3. Idolisation and Visual Representation of Nationalist Icons

Posters and illustrations have frequently been created and employed in political movements worldwide. These visual images serve as valuable data sources in communication studies due to their capacity to evoke emotions and meanings that transcend national and linguistic boundaries. Numerous scholars have investigated the medium of posters and illustrations within the political sphere, such as analyses of posters in the British feminist movement (Cooper-Cunningham 2019), Mexican protesters' use of posters against police terror in 2014 (Wright 2019), and Stalinist posters during the Soviet Union's totalitarian movement in the 1930s (Lee 2007). As a medium that can make sense of issues across various contexts, visual images have been widely adopted and utilised for political mobilisation throughout history. The ideas or messages conveyed by visual images must be easily comprehensible, with their appeal being more emotional than rational. As a form of visual art, posters and illustrations provide an accessible and understandable medium for informing and instructing target audiences.[33]

As Lee (2007) contends, visual images were employed by the Stalinist regime in the 1930s to promote heroism due to the strong visual traditions in Russian popular culture and the low level of literacy (503-504). Similarly, during the Maoist era (1949-1976),

short video channels on Weibo and Bilibili, words such as 'most' and 'money' are censored, so that users can only write 'z' ('zui') and 'q' ('qian') respectively.

[33] The question of whether posters used in wars or political struggles should be considered an 'art form' is a contentious topic. This controversy stems from the differences between the Kantian and Marxist understandings of art. For instance, Kaminski (2015) notes that Adorno, like many other Marxists, suggests that the meaning of works of art is not objectively universal. Instead, the meaning and value of art always depend on the historical context surrounding the artwork and the subjective position of the viewer. This research regards posters in China's political movements as an art form in a Gramscian way, grounded in a specific historical context – namely, the CCP has consistently viewed art as an ideological weapon for educating and mobilising the public. Since Mao Zedong delivered a speech at the Yan'an Forum (Yánān Wényì Zuòtánhuì) in 1942, art has served as a tool for politics within China's Communist movement. For an extended historical period, the CCP called on artists to create works that served the working class and peasantry. As a form of visual art, poster creation is just one aspect of this overarching practice. Consequently, music, films, dramas, and other art forms have been incorporated into this practice as well. Thus, the contemporary posters discussed in this study exemplify how the political nature of art can manifest.

visual images were extensively produced and circulated to address the contexts of socialist construction, particularly those concerning Mao's leadership, class struggle, industrialisation (King 2011; Benewick 1999), and the portrayal of the West as enemies. The convergence of political demands for mass mobilisation and high illiteracy rates prompted authorities to consider posters as the primary tool for propaganda because they were concise and direct (Quan 2019). As Chen (1999) suggests, Maoist posters aimed to represent 'the binary oppositions of good and evil, liberator and oppressor, China and superpower, the past misery and the present happiness' (103). These realistic visual images were utilised not only as an easily digestible medium to mobilise the masses from the top-down but also as weapons employed by the masses to challenge power structures or attack other groups, continually redefining the boundaries between 'the people' and 'the enemy'.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, two significant types of posters and illustrations emerged in political movements. One type encompassed posters with illustrations as the primary focus, adhering to the socialist line. These posters followed recognisable socialist aesthetics and employed strong realism and structuralism to depict key themes in socialist transformation, fostering a multiplicity of meanings and subject positions amongst the people (Figure 9, left). Anyone contributing to the cause of socialist modernisation was likely to appear on such a poster, including individuals from the Third World who were part of the international Communist movement. The other type was known as 'big-character posters' ('dàzì bào'). At the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong published a big-character poster titled 'Bombard the Headquarters' ('Pàodǎ Sīlìngbù') in *People's Daily*, signalling the beginning of the revolution. During the revolution, big-character posters, as a distinct form, were mass-produced and disseminated in response to the central government's call for the masses to 'speak out freely' ('dàmíng dàfàng'). Big-character posters were displayed on walls or published in periodicals, and their uniqueness was manifested in the use of exaggerated font sizes and colours to create a visually striking effect (Figure 9, right),

even without the aid of images.[34] These two types of posters extended into social movements in the 1980s, including the Tian'anmen Incident, during which numerous participants utilised them to express political views (Zhao 2008).

Figure 9: (left) 'get united for greater victory!'; (right) big-character posters in Dazhai, Shanxi

A vast array of visual images has been produced and circulated in the contemporary nationalist movements, particularly those focusing on the canonisation of heroic figures. These visual images intentionally and unintentionally resonate with socialist realism in terms of their themes and aesthetics, as Maoism has been adapted for the purposes of youth political participation in post-Maoist China. These images are utilised to promote and celebrate both past and present Chinese heroes, while simultaneously reinforcing the nationalist message of the Chinese government.

Although the centrality of national leadership (Mao) appears absent in contemporary compositions, the emphasis on dominant figures in the central position signifies the residue of constructivist revolutionary aesthetics from the socialist period. Typically, personifications of China and its emblematic figures, such as the Hong Kong police force in this instance, occupy central positions.[35] These representations serve as

[34] Although posters and big-character posters were displayed in public spaces and served propaganda and mobilisation purposes, posters could also be placed in homes, allowing the dominant political discourse from public spaces to infiltrate private ones. During that era, emblematic images, particularly those of state leaders such as Mao Zedong, were commonly displayed in both rural and urban Chinese households. This practice was related to the Chinese custom of displaying 'New Year pictures' ('niánhuà'). However, New Year pictures were deemed 'remnants of feudalism' to be transformed during the socialist revolution and their contents subsequently replaced by political posters. See also James A. Flath's *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural North China* (2011).

[35] The image of national and party leader Xi Jinping seldom appears on the posters and illustrations in youth participation, which is very different from the universal iconography of Mao (Benewick 1999) in the 1970s. One of

iconography for the 'nation' itself or for national heroes who safeguard the interests of 'all Chinese'. Such iconography is reproduced and disseminated across various social media platforms by a diverse array of actors, encompassing fangirls, *Diba* users, state-sponsored media, and other participants. Furthermore, the 'masses' persist as the political subject in online nationalist movements. The representations of 'ordinary people' as heroic figures complement, rather than subvert, the iconography of national icons. Indeed, the image of ordinary young people produced and circulated by propagandists connects the dedication of ordinary young people to the idea of being patriotic and cultured youth.

In the nationalist expedition, the personification of China emerged as a prominent figure in various posters and illustrations. These representations frequently associated the national personification with familial roles, using family structures as a means to express patriotism. In some cases, 'China' was portrayed as a father figure, safeguarding the citizens, while in others, 'China' was depicted as a mother figure, providing maternal love and care to Hong Kong, nurturing and fostering growth (Figure 10). The juxtaposition of China (the mother), Hong Kong (the child), and the United States (the puppet master) in Figure 10 conveying the central message that the Western world, particularly the US, was exploiting Hong Kong to 'traumatise' China deeply. Additionally, the most notable personification of China during this movement was 'Brother A'zhong' (or 'A'zhong' for short), a nickname for China (Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 13). Fangirls participating in the movement proudly proclaimed their support for 'protecting our best Brother A'zhong'. 'China' was typically represented as an idol who took precedence over all other idols. As *People's Daily* lauded, 'we have a common idol named "A'zhong"' (Figure 12). Whilst, the CYL published the widely-spread title 'Protecting the best "A'zhong", fangirls go on an expedition and unmask the Hong Kong protesters' (Figure 13).

my informants was surprised when I asked her why Xi's representation is seldom seen. She even never thinks about that question. As she suggests, it is impossible to abuse Xi's image on social media. It takes too many risks and is 'too political'.

Figure 10: 'My…baby?' 'Don't make use of children!'

Figure 11: (left) Personification of China; (right) 'I support the Hong Kong police force, you can beat me now.'

Figure 12: 'We have a common idol named "A'Zhong"'

Figure 13: 'Protecting our best 'A'zhong', fangirls go on an expedition and unmask the Hong Kong protesters'

In numerous posters, Hong Kong police officer Lau Cha-kei, who was photographed

clashing with protesters (Figure 14), consistently occupies a central position, characterised by his distinctive bare head and armed posture (Figure 15). As a memorial to the Hong Kong police force involved in confrontations with protesters, *People's Daily* established 'Supporting Police Day' ('Quánmín Chēngjǐng Rì) on 10th August 2019 and released a series of posters on Weibo to mobilise Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong users to support the Hong Kong police. The primary conflict depicted in these images is that Lau Cha-kei, a national hero symbolising justice, is striving to protect the civilians from the dangers of the riots. Civilians can witness the re-enactment of Lau Cha-kei's actions in Kwai Chung. Participants in the movement utilised techniques from their daily fan activities to monitor public opinions, searching social media for the keyword 'Anti-bad cops' (one of the most common hashtags used by the protesters), targeting relevant speakers, and dominating comments sections with Lau's posters. The affectionate form of address 'A'sir' for Lau Cha-kei and other police officers demonstrates that the creators employed language familiar to the Mainlanders, derived from Hong Kong films, to express their affinity with the police. In terms of the specific image-text discourse, poster creators used quotes as an expressive tool. In the upper-right poster of Figure 15, the creator cites verses from the Chinese canon Classic of Poetry (Shī Jīng): 'Why did you say that there's nothing to wear? I will take my own cloak for you to share.' ('Qǐ yuē wú yī, yǔ zǐ tóng páo') This quote aims to evoke public sentiment for unity against a common enemy, while simultaneously contrasting the protesters' civility.

Figure 14: the original photograph of Hong Kong policeman Lau Cha-kei in the protest

Figure 15: posters for supporting Hong Kong police force

More importantly, the gendered image of fangirls was also visually represented by themselves and other participants. In contrast to other participants, fangirls exhibited a distinct characteristic, that is, powerful visualisations were always central to their political subject. Images of fangirls were produced, circulated, and consumed by different participants through a series of posters and illustrations. The representations of fangirls varied in these images, revealing a paradox that these young women are both protective (of the nation) and to be protected (by the nation and others, especially male participants).

The bodies of fangirls were exploited by different participants in intricate ways. It is important to note that the creators of these posters and illustrations do not necessarily come from within fan communities. Some of them were created by fangirls, while others were produced by male participants or propagandists. Nonetheless, these visual texts were commonly disseminated by fan communities. A reasonable inference would be that, to some extent, fangirls endorse the expression of nationalist sentiments in these texts. Nonetheless, the tension here lies in the patriarchal ideology embedded in the texts produced by official media, male participants, and a few fangirls themselves, which 'interpellate' (Althusser 1971) fangirls as political subjects subordinate to the

male sphere, whilst, some other fangirls resisted to it. Furthermore, fangirls are more or less compelled to use these texts in the movement under the pressure of scrutiny from authorities, official media, and rival fan communities. Additionally, the discipline, aesthetics, and psychology that fangirls appropriate from everyday fan practices reinforce the formation of their political subjectivity along these lines.

From visual representations, observers can discern the role that visual texts imply women should play in nationalist politics. Return to the socialist China, heroines were prominent figures portrayed on political posters. These icons remain useful for 'uncovering the cultural, social, and historical background of themes and subjects in the visual arts' (Straten 1994: 12). Iconological posters, constituting the narratives of the socialist movement, represented the overlapping perspectives of national and women's emancipation. The women depicted in the posters were chosen to embody socialist aesthetics and values. The portrayal of national heroes during the early socialist period was rich and varied. On the one hand, in the women's emancipation movement emphasising the Maoist slogan 'women can hold up half of the sky', women, like men, became socialist subjects who had left the kitchen, broken Confucian doctrines, and become productive forces – a typical image of the 'Iron Girl' ('Tiě Niángzǐ, Figure 16). As Quan's research (2019) suggests, women in socialist China supported the CCP's socialist regime, expressed the vision of socialist life, and followed the policies of marriage and childbirth. On the other hand, however, like male-dominated national heroes, they were 'children (daughters) of the party', 'guardians of the people', and 'bricks' of the socialist cause. To some extent, the women in these posters were a subcategory of national heroes, that is, 'models' ('mófàn') amongst the 'workers, peasants, and soldiers'. Even if many of them were unnamed, they were admired as ordinary citizen models due to the heroism epitomised by their class status, hard work, and dedication. Both national heroes and heroines were socialist realist icons that served as a rich source for political and artistic interpretation. These icons were produced in and for the transformation of Chinese society under the socialist movement, sharing similarities in design techniques, especially the striking artistic exaggeration realised

through high colourfulness, emphatic font, intense language, and energised portraits.

Figure 16: 'Iron Girl': 'We are proud to participate in the industrialization.'

Rather than adhering to the socialist paradigm, visual representations of fangirls in the nationalist expedition were characterised by a fusion of stylistic elements influenced by Japanese manga, Chinese manga, and socialist realist aesthetics. For example, manga elements were widely employed to make posters more appealing to the large number of fangirls who were also fans of ACG culture. According to interviews, more than half of the fangirl informants expressed their interest in ACG culture. As one fangirl said, 'before I became a fan of Zhu Yilong, I liked to watch lesbian anime. ...I use Bilibili the most now because it has everything that I'm interested in.' Common portrayals of fangirls utilised cartoonised techniques to illustrate adolescent or childlike features of their body and face, even though many participating fangirls were already around twenty years old and either attending university or starting their careers. In these posters, youth vitality was portrayed with exaggerated eyes, unrealistic body proportions, and dramatic facial expressions. These techniques, inspired by Japanese *shōjo manga* ('shàonǚ mànhuà', or 'young girl comics'), were employed not only by creators from dominant media but also by fangirls themselves. According to Johnson's (2019) study,

shōjo manga techniques are widely used in representing adult women obsessed with nostalgic images of youthful femininity. S*shōjo manga* style bridges the gap between the imaginary carefree life and the adolescent state of expectations from adulthood.

Shōjo manga provided techniques to express the emotional development of participants, which was difficult to convey in conventional socialist posters that gave a sense of sublime. However, although the creators in the movement could not be considered to consciously imitate the works of political posters from the socialist period, many examples introduced socialist aesthetics into their creations, leading to a parodic approach that combined the socialist style with the *shōjo manga* style. For instance, the antagonistic relationship between Hong Kong protesters and patriotic fangirls was reproduced as if it were a binary opposition. As mentioned earlier, the representation of binary oppositions was a common technique in political posters of the socialist period. However, unlike the poster creators at that time who tended to overtly demonise the emblematic representatives of the bourgeoisie and imperialism (Figure 17), poster creators in the expedition avoided depicting a clear image of protesters, and there was little portrayal of the leadership of Hong Kong students. Instead, the protesters were portrayed as human-shaped contours in the shadows, suggesting a rabble of troublemakers (Figure 18).

Figure 17: 'China Support Group'. The two characters representing the fangirl and the *Diba* users are in the centre of the image.

Figure 18: ‘The proletarian revolutionaries are in power!’; Under the seal: ‘the establishment on the capitalist road’

4. ‘Civility’ and ‘Rationality’ in Fangirls’ Activism

4.1 Revisiting ‘Civility’ Discourse

To revisit the notions of ‘rationality’ and ‘irrationality’ in the political participation of fangirls, it is essential to introduce the ‘civility’ discourse (or in Chinese, ‘wénmíng’). Civility discourse shapes the political agenda of modern China. A challenging term to translate, the Chinese version of civility encompasses a range of meanings, from everyday actions such as courtesy, politeness, and hygiene to broader notions of ‘Chinese civilisation’ when used in conjunction with the word ‘China’ (‘Zhōnghuá’). From a series of policies on ‘building a city with civility’ to slogans encouraging citizens to behave appropriately and to ‘promote civility to establish new fashion’ (‘jiǎng wénmíng, shù xīngfēng’), the everyday meaning of civility discourse often materialises in policy and civic education. In this sense, civility discourse serves as a crucial aspect of the project of China’s modernity and as a condition for nation-state building and the construction of national identity.

The civility discourse implicitly encompasses the idea of governance, such as regulating physical spaces (e.g., urban spaces), which establishes a set of normative requirements for civic interaction. In his study, *The Power of the Internet in China*, Yang (2009) highlights that civility discourse has extended to the online world. Since the late 20th century, when the Internet gained popularity in China, authorities recognised the Chinese Internet as a contentious space requiring regulation. If 'building a city with civility' entails regulating a city's appearance, greening it, removing hawkers, and prohibiting spitting, then similarly, civility on the Internet involves organising and ordering the content of online spaces (websites, social media, etc.). For instance, in 2009, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, the State Council Information Office, and other departments jointly promoted computer software called Green Dam Youth Escort (Lǜ Bà) to control online content and prevent young people from accessing 'harmful content'. The software's name, Green Dam, metaphorically refers to the intervention of civility discourse in physical space - akin to a dam preventing floods (often used as a metaphor for harmful content); 'greening' the space.

Nevertheless, civility is an encompassing discourse with an ever-evolving scope that simultaneously guides policymaking. Under policy and regulation, not only are adult content, swearing, and the like regulated, but also Internet-based criticism, protest, activism, etc. In this manner, the ambiguous civility discourse functions as part of the censorship, the boundaries of which remain blurred and unclear due to the lack of precise definitions of the online content requiring regulation and policing. In a subsequent study, Yang (2018) observes that 2013 marked a pivotal year in the transformation of China's online governance. Since 2013, authorities have introduced the concept of 'positive energy' ('zhèng néngliàng') to regulate and censor online information more systematically. In this context, the 'information' under scrutiny encompasses not only the narrow sense of 'content' produced and disseminated online but also emotions in a broader sense. Hence, through online governance based on

civility discourse, the realm of the irrational enters the domain of regulation and censorship.

In this regard, rationality is defined by the absence of irrationality. And in this context of (pseudo-)rationality, debate (in fan practices and political participation) no longer epitomises rationality, as the debate itself is intermingled with emotion, challenging the Habermasian concept of the public sphere (1991) and its followers. In the subsequent sections, I will expound on how fangirls comprehend civility discourse, how it is employed in fan practices as an internal principle of community solidarity and a tool for struggle, and how its incorporation into political participation shapes their political subjectivity.

4.2 'Never-Provoking-Disputes' Principle in Fangirls' Nationalist Activism

Next, I examine how the principle of 'never-provoking-disputes' – one of the fundamental principles in establishing 'fan sovereignty' in fan activities, reinforced fangirls as subjects of 'civility' and 'rationality' in their nationalist activism. When fangirls participated in nationalist movements, they adhered to this fandom principle, premised on the notion that 'China' was personified as the Idol. The viral communication strategies commonly employed by fangirls were inseparable from such images of China as an Idol. As observed, participants produced a large number of visuals comprised of emojis (Figure 19 and Figure 20), disseminating them widely across social media and occupying the top rows of the comments section on their target accounts.

Figure 19: emoji memes

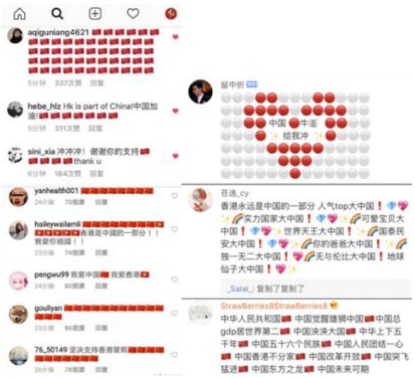

Figure 20: Fangirls use the communicative mode combining simple wording and memes inspired by fandom on social media to express their patriotism

One participant mentioned that they did not care about the political stance or views of the Hong Kong protesters at all; as long as their own voice was loud enough to overshadow the rival's voice, it signified victory. 'Action without debates' aligns with their fan practice, in which visibility serves as evidence of a just cause. Moreover, participants noted that engaging in tit-for-tat debates with protesters would damage 'China's image', as it would portray them to the international community as being 'bickering' and 'violent' as the protesters. Just like in their fan practice, they never actively mentioned the names of their 'enemies', let alone initiated disputes. Those who instigated public debates on an issue are often viewed by them as 'spies' harbouring bad intentions. Therefore, fangirls usually only used simple forms of 'pictorial weapons' in their actions – such as 'love hearts' composed of Chinese flag emojis, because these simple forms of symbolic imagery can be safely reproduced and distributed on a large scale.

In this practice, civility is reconfigured and reproduced by fangirls as the politics of 'visibility' and 'attentionability'. Fangirls use their content to visually occupy more social media space. these customs shaping fan activism in addressing national issues are consistent with the fan practices on social media. It is considered taboo to incite public debate, argument, or discussion, as it may breach etiquette. As one fangirl said,

> I never support debate. There's a word 'bicker' ('gàng') on the social media. This word accurately refers to those who always want to argue with you and prove themselves. We all have different ideas and opinions. … (Meanwhile), principles, such as political positions, shouldn't be debated. I do not want to use the Internet as a place to vent.

And another fangirl recalled,

> I'm reluctant to discuss political issues because I'm afraid that my remarks will be distorted and used by people with bad intentions. Some people don't deliberately distort the facts, but their knowledge and rationality aren't enough to make them think about these issues. I participated in the expedition because we need to express the correct political stand of 'national unity'. We didn't 'discuss' the Hong Kong issue with the Hong Kong people. We didn't expect and didn't need Hong Kong people to discuss with us the pros and cons of each solution. They didn't know the mainland at all. It's a campaign, not a debate.

Many participants firmly believe that engaging in arguments with Hong Kong protesters on social media would damage China's national image, much as one should avoid arguing with rival fans for the sake of their own idols. Specifically, some participants contend that China's national image has improved alongside its enhanced global economic status, taking decades of hard work by the Chinese people since the initiation of reforms and opening up. If someone were to engage in actions that ostensibly damage China's national image, such argument insists, this may consequently undermine China's developmental accomplishments immediately.

National interests were considered as unquestionable 'matters of principle' by the

fangirls. It was rare to observe fangirls arguing with Hong Kong protesters about sovereignty and national issues; instead, they tended to loudly discuss the 'principles'. Participants not only displayed indifference towards the opinions of Hong Kong protesters but also showed little concern for the presence of recipients in their communications. In alignment with fan practices, they aimed to occupy the online space and enhance the visibility of their own camp. For the fangirls, the movement is akin to 'supporting our Brother A'Zhong', as they support their idols on Weibo and Bilibili in their daily lives, filling social media with mass movement tactics to ensure their voices are heard to the greatest extent possible (Figure 21). As three of the fangirls said:

> They (the Hong Kong protesters) destroy infrastructure and loot shops in the city, even more extremely lighting a fire on innocent people. It's not how protests should be like. It's riot.
>
> I don't understand why they destroy their home city. Regardless of their positions and the violence, …If I want to defend my position and rights, I need to be heard. This is what I learned from political participation.
>
> We wanted domestic Internet users to know that we can respond to violence by mild ('not aggressive') actions.

Figure 21: Poster in the expedition: 'Brother A'zhong' is a five-thousand-year idol with 1.4 billion loyal fans and top data traffic. Call 'Brother A'zhong'!' 'Call' means 'speaking loudly to support' in the fan community.

However, the ‘never-provoking-disputes’ principle does not necessarily imply that the participants disregarded the opponents’ speech. While amplifying the visibility of their own discourse on social media, as in fan practice, fangirls also mobilised opinion management teams to monitor and control the speech from the side of Hong Kong protesters. Two specific strategies were employed. Firstly, they reported the opponents’ remarks to social media platforms; however, this strategy was less effective on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram than on Weibo and Bilibili, as ‘provoking disputes’ was not considered a valid reason for reporting on global social media platforms. In light of this, they adopted a second strategy for comment control – they engaged in mass actions to ‘dislike’ (or ‘thumb-down’) the opponents’ highlighted comments, thus, according to the platforms’ algorithmic ranking, those comments would become less visible (either sinking to the bottom of the comment page or being ‘folded’).

5. ‘China’ as ‘Brother A’Zhong’ and The Construction of ‘Brotherland’

In some circumstances where fangirls acted against Hong Kong protesters, China was symbolically depicted as a mother, suggesting the need for protection or emphasising the maternal aspect. But, in many other cases, China was portrayed by fangirls as a Brother. While both representations equate China with an idol (or ‘the Idol’), the latter depiction is, of course, distinct and unique. In this part, I explore the emergence of the ‘brotherland’ discourse in this movement, whereby fangirls associated nationhood with the term ‘brother’ (‘gēgē’), a familiar form of endearment typically reserved for idols. The development of the ‘brotherland’ concept not only enabled fangirls to repurpose and apply their fan activity skills and strategies to nationalist mobilisation, but also underscored their newfound dedication to the nation.

In nationalist narratives, the concept of homeland often encompasses gendered representations. For instance, the term ‘motherland’ is not gender-neutral, and its

reference to the native land may imply the assertion of values and qualities – such as honour, sacrifice, and loyalty – that delineate the obligations, behaviours, and principles a patriot should adhere to. The prevalence of gendered rhetoric in national narratives underscores the affective associations between gender, family, and nationhood. Scholars analyse the metaphor of motherland from a gender perspective in the study of nationalism (e.g., Enloe 1989; McClintock 1995; Yuval-Davis 1997; Collins 1998; Mayer 2000; Leinarte 2006; Innes 1994; Nagel 2001). These studies generally divide the gendered perspective of 'motherland' into two interconnected aspects: firstly, the motherland as a symbol, a personified nation, and a fragile, nurturing image demanding protection; and secondly, women as embodiments of the motherland, occupying a space within nationalist discourse.

Regarding these two aspects, some scholars perceive the feminine as subordinate to the masculine discourse. As Nagel (2001) posits, 'women may be subordinated politically in nationalist movements and politics, ... [but] they occupy an important symbolic place as the mothers of the nation' (254). Enloe (1989) contends that 'nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation, and masculinised hope' (44). The link between the feminine and the national is pervasive in the anti-colonial discourses (Innes 1994), anti-imperialist movements (McClintock 1995), and nation-building processes (Nagel 2001; Yuval-Davis 1997; Mayer). In her research, Leinarte (2006) further connects 'motherland' to the discourse of family, arguing that a robust Soviet Union cannot be realised without the efforts of strong families, particularly those with resilient mothers. However, the entwined discourses of gender, family, and national identity are neither inherently a pre-modern phenomenon nor exclusive to specific cultural traditions (Collins 1998).

To further comprehend the discursive interplay of gender, family, and nation in the case of China as the 'brotherland', it is essential to situate nationalism and/or patriotism within the Chinese context, leading the discussion to the the 'family-nation isomorphism'. In the Chinese language, the term 'nation' has two literal meanings:

‘nation-state’ (‘guó’) and ‘family’ (‘jiā’). As the saying goes, ‘there is no family without the nation’. For mass mobilisation purposes, official media often assert that one should dedicate their ‘small families’ to the ‘big family’, and that ‘the family is the smallest nation, while the nation comprises countless families’. In China, the construction of family-nation consciousness, underpinning the collective morality of socio-political actions, forges connections between the individual, family, and nation.

In his examination of youth nationalism in China during the 1990s, Greis (2004) highlights the link between nationhood and the family-state emotion rooted in Chinese culture, identifying this as the source of spontaneity in political passion. Greis discerns ‘two Chinas’ (2004: 133) – one being China as a monolithic ‘state’, governed by a single party, and the other as ‘motherland’, which evokes affection and attachment. Building upon the concept of the ‘family-nation isomorphism’, three key points emerge when considering how fangirls articulated the intimate relationship between ‘brother-idols’ and the ‘brother-land’, all of which contribute to the reconfiguration of Chinese nationalism.

Firstly, ‘Brother A’Zhong’ serves as the personification of China’s territorial sovereignty. Defending territorial sovereignty lies at the core of fangirls’ participation, as they express concerns that Hong Kong might be ‘used’ by Western countries and face the risk of being ‘colonised’ once more (as was the case during the British sovereignty over Hong Kong for over 150 years). Emotional attachments to land are not unusual in nationalist narratives. However, when early modern revolutionaries of the early 20th century introduced concepts such as ‘nation’, ‘nationalism’, and ‘patriotism’ to China, they intentionally blurred these terms with their original meanings in European languages and incorporated Confucian perspectives on ‘ancestry’, ‘family’, and ‘land’ into intellectual and popular dissemination.

For instance, ‘patriotism’ (‘àiguó zhǔyì’) originates from the French linguistic root *patrie*, which is associated with experiences in patriarchal societies. ‘Motherland’ in

Chinese parallels its literal meaning as 'the land of ancestors' with *terra patria* ('the land or territory of *patria*), while the metaphorical meaning of 'motherland' retains the religiosity of land worship, signifying the land of propagation and the cycle of life. Upon translation, the literal meaning of 'motherland' as 'the land of ancestors' acquires a unique significance in Chinese, merging with the Confucian sentiment towards kinship and land. The usage of 'motherland' ('zǔguó') becomes a widespread phenomenon in mass communication in China, often without direct reference to the CCP (Cai 2016: 17). Although the Chinese term for 'nation' ('guójiā') in its narrower sense typically equates to the nation-state, 'motherland', as it permeates Chinese lived experiences, emphasises cultural affiliation. In this regard, in Chinese, 'motherland' possesses two interconnected meanings. The first meaning pertains to its literal interpretation as 'the land of ancestors' ('zǔguó', where 'zǔ' denotes ancestors), while the second meaning refers to its metaphorical connotation as a female figure – 'mother-land' ('zǔguó mǔqīn') – inspiring citizens to fight and make sacrifices for their country.

Secondly, as a counterpart to the 'mother-land', the 'brother-land' metaphor similarly embodies an imagined family-like relationship with the 'brother'. Fangirls were not politically subordinate to masculine discourses or reduced to embodiments of the motherland. Instead, with regard to the 'brotherland', fangirls re-enacted their relationship with 'China' as the Idol, perceiving the nation as an '(elder) brother' (an older yet close family member) who required their protection like idols and with whom they were willing to fight, thereby reconfiguring gender dynamics within activism. In other words, fangirls differentiated the two aspects of femininity in nationalism (women as the embodiment of the nation and the nation as the 'mother-land'), seeking equal status with male nationalists and endeavouring to protect the motherland/brotherland collectively. As illustrated by the poster in Figure 22, fangirls were depicted as fighting alongside 'Brother A'Zhong'. They found it more relatable to liken 'China' to their 'brother' rather than their 'mother', primarily because the vocabulary they had acquired from idol culture and the strategies they employed to imagine the intimacy of a male role model enabled them to envisage themselves in a 'brother-sister relationship' with

'China'.

Figure 22: 'A fangirl painting for her country'. Source: Weibo user named 'An Ordinary Person'

Thirdly, it is important to note that in this nationalist movement, fangirls' self-positioning diverged from how male participants perceived them. Some male participants and state media proclaimed 'Protecting fangirls!' during the actions. In such statements, despite Hong Kong being the primary target for protection, fangirls, as the vanguard, also sought protection from the male sphere. Contrary to the scepticism implied in this slogan, fangirls themselves exhibited confidence in their actions. The idolisation strategy furnished a familiar sense of engagement for fangirls, as one of them reminisced, 'supporting China is just like supporting our idol'. Fangirls' activism reconfigured gendered Chinese nationalism. The feminine/maternal national image, typically defended by masculine actors, was transformed into a (peer) male/brother national image, which in this case, was defended by fangirls. In terms of the 'family-nation isomorphism', fangirls found their place as members of a larger female family, while simultaneously demanding equal power alongside their male counterparts in political participation.

6. Conclusion

Fangirls are highly disciplined and adhere to fandom rules. Within the fan communities, there is a shared understanding that 'patriotism' is the most fundamental principle.

Fangirls tend to scrutinise, exclude, and report idols with suspicious backgrounds, particularly those from Hong Kong and Taiwan. They are unwilling to see 'stigmatised celebrities' profit from them while being hypocritical or betraying Chinese national identity. In this context, 'opinion management' serves as a policing practice that normalises national and progressive ideology in the broader morality of fan practices. Due to policy-level interventions against 'stigmatised celebrities' and the prevalence of reporting as a tactic in toxic competition between rival idols, comprehensive inspection, including self-inspection, has become a self-defensive mechanism. Opinion management also intensifies pan-political performance in fangirls' regular practices, enabling and empowering them to engage in political participation.

Outside fan communities, the term 'fangirls' gained popularity in the nationalist movement in late 2019. As a realm predominantly occupied by young women, Chinese idol culture 'unexpectedly' converged with nationalism when fangirls initiated a nationalist movement against the Hong Kong protesters on social media. This movement demonstrated that fangirls were mobilisable not only for pop idol fandom but also for nationalist-oriented political participation. Fangirls created a sphere in which they acted in concert with male participants while maintaining a degree of independence. Specifically, they were hesitant to accept the 'protecting fangirls' slogan proposed by the male-dominated *Diba* and CYL participants, yet they also adopted the 'civility' and 'rationality' manifestos put forth by *Diba* in forming their political subject as 'new women's citizenship', aligning with the 'never-provoking-disputes' principle in their fan practices. In other words, Essentially, fangirls adapted 'rationality' and 'civility' discourses advanced by male participants, incorporating them into the core principles of fan practices. This strategy challenged the notion of 'protecting fangirls', which had placed female participants in a more vulnerable position within the nationalist movement. Instead, fangirls' use of 'rationality' and 'civility' discourses defended 'Brother A'Zhong' (comparable to protecting their idols), as demonstrated through their aspirations and actions. Finally, fangirls personified 'China' as an elder brother, or say, idolised 'China' as 'the Idol' in their activism, which articulated China

as the ‘brotherland’ rather than the ‘motherland’ as usual, enriching the connotation of Chinese nationalism.

Chapter Six Becoming the Protagonist of History in China's Modernisation

In the second decade of the 21st century, the concept of historical materialism, represented by the metaphor 'the wheel of history rolling forward', has acquired a new connotation under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The CCP has shifted from the lofty, long-term communist promises of Mao's era to a set of tangible political and economic commitments, most notably the ambitious objective of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by 2035. While Mao's vision of communism was a historical goal that transcended its contemporaries and necessitated the efforts and struggles of generations, 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' appears to be a more immediate, albeit significant, historical objective that can be achieved within the span of one or two generations.

Discussions concerning historical time constitute a vital aspect of broader debates on modernity. During the early 20th century, numerous thinkers (e.g., Benjamin 1989; 2005; Zweig 1943; Arendt 1961; Scholem 1981) challenged the continuity and progressiveness of history, predominantly focusing on Western Europe and its messianic theology. However, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, the resurgence of debates surrounding historical time (e.g., Fukuyama 1992; Ricoeur 2000; Hobsbawm 1994; Traverso 2017; Zupančič 2020) has emerged as a significant and contested subject in both historiography and the philosophy of history, encompassing regions beyond Europe.

Fukuyama (1992) and his proponents, who advocate for the notion of 'the end of history', frequently highlight historical 'events' such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union's collapse as marking the conclusion of the 'Cold War'. Nonetheless, Fukuyama's excessively optimistic Hegelianism uncovers the antithesis of 'the end of history'. As Zupančič (2020) asserts, Fukuyama's work merely suggests 'the impossibility to end capitalism, or the impossibility for capitalism as we know it to

come to an end' (833). Zupančič further elaborates,

> The end of Cold War, that is the end of 'really existing socialism' as precisely an actually existing outside of the capitalist order, marking its boundary, now translates into an 'open totality' in which the outside (the remaining non-democratic/ non-capitalist regimes) is on its way to the inside: it is 'speculatively' already included in the inside; and this inside is all there is (and all there could be) (Zupančič 2020: 834).

Following the 1990s, China transitioned from the 'outside' of the capitalist order to the 'inside', or at least to the periphery of the 'inside'. The Chinese economic reform of the late 1970s, initiated with the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP, marked the so-called 'Eliminating Chaos and Returning to Normal' ('Bōluàn Fǎnzhèng') phase, repudiating the Maoist 'ultra-leftist line' of the previous decade. Subsequently, Deng Xiaoping's southern tour ('Nán Xún') in 1992 made neoliberal economic development the cornerstone of national construction.

The inherent paradox lies in the fact that the once sacred and revolutionary ideals of the communist future collapsed, yet the alternatives employed to fill the void in legitimacy, ideology, and policy were almost antithetical to that very future. As evidenced by the so-called 'Humanistic Spirit Discussions' among Chinese intellectuals during the 1990s, although many were cognisant of the political, social, and moral crises accompanying the economic reform, they struggled to identify a viable alternative to the communist future. The spectre of absent communism continues to influence China's modernisation. As Furet (1999) observes, 'a tunnel that we enter in darkness, not knowing where our actions will lead... we have seen the foundations of deified history crumbling—a disaster that must somehow be averted. To add to this threat of uncertainty, there is the shock of a closed future' (502).

Nonetheless, the accounts of historical time and the individual experience of time are frequently two sides of the same coin, proving difficult to separate. As Koselleck (2004) contends, 'historical time, if the concept has a specific meaning, is bound up with social

and political actions, with concretely acting and suffering human beings and their institutions and organisations. All these actions have definite, internalised forms of conduct, each with a peculiar temporal rhythm' (2). Admittedly, some writers have reduced the discussion of historical time to an examination of the order of time. According to such chronological accounts, the order of time serves as the 'ordering' or 'narration' of historical events. However, once we attempt to abandon the myth of totality, progressiveness, and continuity in historical time and scrutinise the individual experience of time more closely, it becomes evident that historical time is not characterised by 'singularity' ('one historical time') but rather by 'many forms of time superimposed one upon the other' (Koselleck 2004: 2).

When individual experiences seemingly conflict with the visions promised by the dominant political agenda, the manner in which fangirls experience individuality demonstrates the potential for transformation, as the individual is not detached from history and social existence. In this context, the relationship between the individual and the collective (such as the family and the country), as well as the individual's reflection on these relationships, remains dynamic. On one hand, injustice, insecurity, and uncertainty influence fangirls' outlook on the future in an era of utopian disenchantment; on the other hand, the dominant political agenda continues to promise a utopian vision, which manifests even more palpably and tangibly in the discourse of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by 2035. This vision starkly contrasts with the individual experiences of these young women.

This chapter explores the historicity of fangirls' nationalist ideas and practices, uncovering how these young women, situated in specific historical contexts, developed an understanding of contemporary China. As an integral component of the Chinese modernity project, nationalism has assumed distinct characteristics at various stages of modernisation. The examination of the 'family-nation isomorphism' commences with an exploration of how fangirls experience individuality and proceeds to reflect on their perceptions of their relationships with family and nation. Subsequently, I concentrate

on the fangirls' geographical imagination of 'under the heaven' ('tiānxià'), particularly scrutinising the 'inner world' and 'outer world' shaped by Chinese Internet content censorship, which in turn transforms the 'centre-periphery' consciousness surrounding civility discourse.

In the first part of this chapter, I position the term 'livelihood' ('mínshēng', or 'shēngjì') at the core of the discussion. The notion of livelihood constitutes an essential element of Chinese nationalism.[36] However, it has been reconfigured by the young women exemplified by fangirls. Numerous informants employ the phrase 'untimely birth' ('shēng bù féng shí', literally 'living in a bad historical period') to describe their own existential predicament, drawing a contrast between their generation and the seemingly more certain lives of their parents and grandparents. Subsequently, I endeavour to unravel a historical term integral to Chinese nationalism and China's modernisation, the 'family-nation isomorphism', which have evolved throughout the process of China's modernisation. Finally, the discussion transitions to the category of 'under the heaven' by examining the Great Firewall (GFW), China's foremost information censorship apparatus, unveiling how it shapes fangirls' online and offline geographical imagination and enables some of these fangirls to become representatives in the nationalist movement. While these discussions may not provide a comprehensive historical account of these young women's transformation from fangirls to nationalists, they should inspire us to investigate the historical conditions in which both their fandom

[36] The concept of 'livelihood' has a long history in the contruction of China's nationalism. The term 'livelihood' can be rephrased and interpreted differently depending on the context. Broadly, it refers to the means of securing life's necessities, encompassing employment, income, expenses, public safety, infrastructure, and more. It can be viewed as a contemporary and distilled version of the Hobbesian state (2013), which facilitates security and order while empowering individual citizens to pursue their objectives. This perspective has, to a degree, inspired modern-day liberals and republican revolutionaries. In China, the concept of livelihood has its roots in the 1911 Revolution (Xīnhài Gémìng) that led to the fall of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912). It is encoded within the republican doctrines proposed by Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925). 'Livelihood', or 'Welfare Rights', alongside 'Civic Nationalism' ('Mínzú') and 'Governance Rights' ('Mínquán'), forms the triad known as the 'Three Principles of the People' ('Sānmín Zhǔyì') in China's early republican revolution. Therefore, I choose not to regard 'livelihood' as a neutral concept. Instead, within the Chinese context, 'livelihood' encompasses the interpretation of 'a good life' embedded in China's strong drive towards modernisation. In my study, four aspects of livelihood are highlighted by young nationalists: stability, prosperity, convenience, and happiness. These elements of livelihood encourage civilians to be aware of the unique features of China's modernisation compared to other countries, allowing them to distinguish themselves from others. In this regard, the nationalists tend to form a tacit understanding with, and coordinate well with government policies on public security, censorship, and privacy rights. These ideas are also encoded and disseminated through various rhetorical strategies employed by the mass media, shaping the understanding of self and the nation.

and political participation were intricately intertwined.

1. 'Untimely Birth': Young Women's Livelihood in the Neoliberal Agenda

In Cho's (2015) study, Korean young people grapple with the decision to either follow 'cultural directives' in pursuit of a more 'certain' and 'secure' life or embrace a 'flexible liquid society'. However, such choices are likely to depend on external factors, such as employment opportunities and social welfare, rather than personal inclinations. The Korean context examined in Cho's research was situated at the turn of the century, when Korea had just emerged from the financial crisis of the late 1990s. Nevertheless, people (especially the Korean middle class) were still experiencing insecurity fuelled by the financial crisis and neoliberal global hegemony. This period also witnessed intense competition in both basic and higher education in Korea. China's capitalist development is asynchronous with Korea's. In contemporary Chinese mass media, 'involution' ('nèi juǎn') and 'lying flat' ('tǎng píng') are two terms commonly employed by the younger generation, referring to two distinct approaches. The former signifies conforming to the rules of a competitive society and striving for elevated social and economic status through individual struggle in order to attain certainty and a sense of security amidst the crisis.[37] The latter, on the other hand, denotes subverting these rules in favour of a life filled with timely pleasure and convenience, which is often accompanied by other issues such as reluctance to have children and extreme injustice in flexible employment.

However, it is evident from interviews with fangirls that these young women can hardly truly choose between 'involution' or 'lying flat'; instead, they struggle in the limbo between the two. Fangirls who are in a state of constant struggle tend to pin their

[37] For this topic, also see Illouz's work *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2007). In this work, Illouz suggests younger generations are 'hyperrational fools'. They are better at making rational judgements and actions, analysing costs and benefits, embracing the predictability and certainty of everyday life and avoid falling into any unknown risks.

emotional longing for 'certainty' on patriotism (see Chapter Five; fangirls once directed this longing towards pop idols but faced repeated disappointment). The issue here is that only individuals wrestling with the choice between 'involution' and 'lying flat' use these two terms to describe their actions, yet neither of these two extremes is genuinely accomplished. On one hand, the neoliberal myth of achieving freedom and security through personal struggle leaves a significant number of young people from middle-class families living in constant anxiety.[38] On the other hand, 'lying flat' is perhaps a privilege afforded only to some, excluding many who are unable to embrace 'hedonism'. As Swidler (1986) observes, the reason why Italian street gangsters from ghettos do not live well-fed lives, attend fancy schools, and secure decent jobs is not that they are unwilling to, but rather that they cannot. Consequently, their concern lies not so much in how they can attain such a life, but in questioning 'who? me?' This represents a form of culture shock between classes—even though class discourses have been marginalised by occupational and cultural identities in China's dominant discourse. Intriguingly, in Swidler's study (1986), middle-class children still have the opportunity to continue their parents' middle-class lives. However, in the case of fangirls, they imagine a middle-class life while simultaneously becoming disenchanted with it.[39] Particularly those who hail from middle-class families often find nothing to romanticise about their own family backgrounds—even if they genuinely benefit from those backgrounds—perceiving themselves as less fortunate compared to those from 'better-off families'.

During interviews, fangirls often employ the term 'untimely birth' to compare their own experiences with those of their parents and grandparents. One fangirl from the metropolitan Yangtze River Delta region shares her account. In her early twenties and living with her grandparents while her parents work in banking in a nearby city, she contends that, compared to her parents and grandparents, there is a significant

[38] For this topic, see some of the recent social psychology and anthropological researches, for example, Zhang, L. (2020). *Anxious China Inner Revolution and Politics of Psychotherapy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
[39] More than half of the informants are from middle class backgrounds, cf. Chapter Three.

discrepancy between the promise of ‘a good life’ (by which she means ‘a decent material living standard’) attained through personal struggle and the sobering reality:

> My grandparents (when they’re young) also stress ‘struggle’ (‘fèndòu’). They had endured great hardships but their efforts were not in vain. … I work for a ‘capitalist’ every day, and I can’t afford a square metre of house with my yearly savings. … My parents were also born in good times, just after the reform and opening up, and housing prices were not bloody high.

This is a typical family of three generations in contemporary China. Being raised in a trans-generational context by both her grandparents and her parents has afforded her a unique opportunity to engage with different references for ‘struggle’ and ‘a good life’. She has been able to reflect upon the pasts of both her grandparents and her parents, and she has come to romanticise the stories of their hard-fought journeys, thus enabling her to form her own interpretations of the concept of ‘a good life’. She recognises the importance of her elders‘ stories and the lessons they can impart. She is inspired by their courage and determination to fight for what they believed in, regardless of the consequences. In this romanticised narrative, their struggles yield results that either match or at least come close to expectations, and such consistency and certainty form the basis of her understanding of the assurance of a good life. Beyond her tendency to romanticise the stories of her grandparents’ and parents‘ youthful struggles, what insights can we glean from her narration?

Firstly, we can glean some basic information about the historical context of the three generations of ‘struggle’ in terms of practices. Her grandparents were born at the end of the 1930s, and at her age, between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, they underwent dramatic socialist transformation, particularly in terms of the transformation of ownership of the means of production. Apart from being privileged members of the emerging social system (in this example, of military and worker classes), her grandparents’ struggle enabled them and later her parents to lead what their

contemporaries regarded as 'decent'.[40] For her grandparents, 'struggle' referred exclusively to contributing to the 'socialist cause', and in return, the improvement of one's material life was only a least-attractive by-product, hidden in public political discourse. In her parents' generation, the situation changed drastically with the reforms foregrounding marketisation and privatisation. 'Individual struggle' emerged as a new phenomenon, distinct from the 'struggle' of the socialist period. The 'struggle' in this period began to adopt a pragmatic tendency, and it was no longer for a political cause (socialism, especially class struggle), an imaginary collective (the people), or a highly ideal future (communism) that might not be realised within a lifetime.

In the narrative of this fangirl, the notion of happiness progressively permeated everyday life. It became almost synonymous with a higher material standard of living, something that could be achieved within an individual's life cycle through hard work. Simultaneously, due to the reform, some public resources related to wellbeing that had been allocated by the state (such as housing) were handed over to the market. With the privatisation of social sectors (particularly health and education), responsibilities for wellbeing were transferred to individuals or families as self-responsibilities. Indeed, although her parents benefited from the promise of individual struggle, her mother gave birth to her near the age of forty so as not to hinder her career advancement. However, instances of delayed childbearing or child-free practices were far less common in the 1990s than they are today. More importantly, while there is a particular historical coincidence in her and her mother's life circumstances, the attitudes and choices they made in addressing the same situation were markedly different. She felt that she would

[40] For an examination of the political history of the Chinese socialist revolution, and specifically, the role played by the people in the struggle, see Lin Chun's recent work *Revolution and Counterrevolution in China: The Paradoxes of Chinese Struggle* (London: Verso Books, 2021). Also, refer to Chapter Two in Wu Yiching's historical work *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014). Focusing on the history of women's engagement in China's socialist revolution, see Chapter Eight in Gail Hershatter's work *Women and China's Revolutions: The Socialist Construction of Women, 1949-78* (Washington D. C.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). Furthermore, in Chapter Nine of her book, Hershatter explores Chinese women's individual struggle under the title of 'capitalised women' in the context of post-1978 reform. The discourse emphasising individual struggle in the context of economic reform differs from the collective struggle of Mao's period. Hershatter also points out that, in the reform, the 'naturalised' gender division of labour has returned, replacing the practice of encouraging men and women to perform the same work during the Mao era.

never be able to start a family and maintain the same material level as her parents through 'personal struggle'. She also chose to become a fangirl partly to counter her anxiety and disappointment regarding the outcomes of the promise of struggle by projecting herself onto her idol – 'Even though the government, my boss, and my parents told me to work hard for my money,' she adds.

The idol industry has undergone localisation in China after being imported from the Korean context. In the process of localisation, TV reality shows have been modified to cater to female audiences. As one of the leaders in a fangirl community suggests:

> The Korean idol industry is not female-biased. It has nothing to do with gender, age and occupation. A middle-age male lawyer can have his idol (in South Korea). (However), in China, most fans are women. In our group, over 95 percent of the fans are young girls. I do not know why, but this is a very interesting phenomenon. … China's producers know that. They have many strategies to attract more women. Zhang Yuqi (a Chinese female celebrity) was asked by the producer in a show to state that 'Chinese women need their own programme'.

Her idol's name is Yisa Yu, a female singer who first gained prominence in 2009 on *Super Girl*. After a few years of relative obscurity, Yisa regained her fame in 2020 when she appeared on the Chinese reality TV show *Sisters Who Make Waves*, produced by iQIYI. Unlike *Super Girl*, a television programme aimed at discovering potential singers, *Sisters Who Make Waves* is unique in that it features female celebrities aged between 30 and 55 who have experienced career lows. My informant felt that, although she had not yet reached the age of 30, she could identify with the 38-year-old Yisa – a heroine in her eyes for overcoming her career slump with great courage. As I have discussed in Chapter Five, contemporary Chinese reality TV producers possess the awareness and ability to create programmes that cater to the tastes and expectations of specific demographics. The show features idols such as Yisa, an 'older unmarried woman' who is marginalised and demeaned by public opinion, and Ning Jing (winner of the first season), 'a middle-aged single mother' who has built a successful career

after her divorce while raising a son. As Ning Jing says,

> We prefer 'girl crush', … it's nothing to do with the sexual orientation. … We admire independent and successful women … a sense of the rise of women. …

The show's audience is not limited to middle-aged women; it also attracts a younger demographic. For instance, the fangirl in this example tends to project her gendered subjectivity onto these women who have achieved significant career success. She also creates an imaginary emotional connection with Yisa based on, in her words, 'a universal sense of femininity' and 'empathy between women'.[41] As this fangirl informant reflects on her own life circumstances, she becomes concerned with politics, which she otherwise does not care about. Her perceived lack of 'success' in life leads her to find an outlet in her fan practice. In other words, her lived experiences provide her with both a reason to be a fangirl and a motivation to care about politics. In the interview, she avoided using the word 'politics' ('zhèngzhì') and instead employed the term 'policy' ('zhèngcè'), stating that she does not care about politics and that her parents and grandparents also want her to stay away from political matters. Despite her seemingly contradictory identities as a fangirl and a nationalist, she offers invaluable insights into the political realm, allowing us to better comprehend how these two identities intersect. Her observations furnish a helpful perspective on the current political climate, providing a clue as to how these two identities can coexist. In her view, the two main factors driving social and political crises at present are 'capital' ('zīběn') and 'Western power' ('xīfāng shìlì').

'Capital' here can be understood as an overarching term describing specific economic phenomena such as power imbalances in the workplace, excessive working hours, low wages, inflation, and so on. 'Western forces' is an ambiguous term borrowed from official media, and in our conversation, it refers specifically to the United States: 'If the

[41] 'Empathy' ('Gòngqíng') frequently emerged as a key liberal feminist virtue in the accounts of my informants. However, the potential misuse and abuse of 'empathy' warrant further investigation. Those who invoke it may overstate its effectiveness. In some instances, empathy appears as little more than a narcissistic bourgeois morality, failing to facilitate envisioning a world characterised by class-based differentiation.

U.S. sabotages Hong Kong... if the US obstructs us from recovering Taiwan and ultimately goes to war... (it) will undoubtedly destabilise what we have today.' Hoping to employ nationalism-oriented actions as tactics to maintain stability in both a rhetorical and practical sense, this fangirl joined her ex-boyfriend in an online nationalist campaign against the Hong Kong protests in late 2019. At the time, her ex-boyfriend was a *Diba* user, and she was a member of a fan community for Eason Chan (another of her idols at the time, from Hong Kong). She considered herself merely an ordinary participant, far less passionate than her ex-boyfriend. In hindsight, she attributed her lack of enthusiasm to the perception that Hong Kong was ultimately removed from her daily life (a remote crisis) and that there were more pressing matters (nearby crises) to address at the time. She had just graduated from university and had been unable to secure employment. Several companies had rejected her, and a few others had dismissed her after learning she was unmarried. Furthermore, the 'good jobs' at the state-owned enterprises in her hometown were reserved for men (albeit not explicitly), with only low-skilled positions available to women – 'I felt that I had wasted my university education.'

Another fangirl recounted a similar tale:

> I can't do housewife [work] and my current job at the same time. I'm new to this job and I need it. My boss won't be pleased to see if I get married, pregnant and on maternity leave. … Compared to many of my college classmates, I'm lucky to be doing my current job. In my hometown, many positions are no longer for women, even if they (the employers) don't say so frankly. I was even surprised that I had this job, because the HR who was interviewing me repeatedly asked me if I was married and had kids, and I said 'no'.

In their narratives, a tension between individual and collective goals can be discerned. Despite China's remarkable economic growth and the Chinese government's more assertive diplomatic stance compared to the previous decade, these women still feel adrift as individuals. For women, in particular, there is a distinct yet interrelated gender dimension that goes beyond national identity. On the one hand, the Chinese government

encourages women to enter the labour market. The goal of modernisation, with women obtaining equal rights to work, is rooted in China's modernisation trajectory, which encompasses the efforts of the socialist women's liberation movement and the increasing number of urban women gaining access to higher education in recent decades. On the other hand, however, there are indications of a resurgence of gender traditionalism and family-centred ethics within familist discourse ('back to family') due to pressures resulting from an ageing population and a steep decline in birth rates, as evidenced by public and private employers' reluctance to hire young unmarried women who have not yet had children.

If China has been pursuing an alternative modernity (an analogue of the Third Way in China, known as Socialism with Chinese Characteristics) in the sense Calhoun (2010) describes since the 1990s, today, at the onset of the second decade of the 21st century, the position of this alternative modernity has edged closer to traditionalism in the corner where neoliberalism and socialist authoritarianism vie with each other. When it comes to lived experience, female informants typically feel a sense of dislocation between reality and the ideal. While a certain degree of dislocation may also exist among young male nationalists, I contend that women, due to the realities they face in a changing society, tend to develop a more collective sentiment that serves as a catalyst for their empathy in cultural and political actions.

Fangirls occasionally cultivate virtues of mutualism and altruism, or 'doing things together', in both cultural and civic engagement, and the authorities attempt to curry favour with these young women through flattery. However, fangirls also exhibit an ambivalent attitude towards the authorities, characterised by both exploitation and distrust. For instance, fan communities circumvented the Red Cross, the official channel for donations, and independently raised money and goods for the coronavirus pandemic relief, believing their foundations to be fairer and more transparent than those of the authorities. Meanwhile, as one fangirl suggests, idols and fans can reap the benefits of these 'patriotic acts' by maintaining a positive public image. The impetus

behind these acts is also ascribed to the practical-level intervention of the government propaganda department in idol culture. As described by a fangirl, idols and fan communities that participate in patriotic activities are often labelled as 'patriotic idols' ('àiguó ǒuxiàng') or 'positive energy idols' ('zhèng néngliàng ǒuxiàng') by the mainstream media, as opposed to 'stigmatised' ones, thereby gaining greater commercial value within the entertainment industry.

However, fangirls resent the manner in which propagandic agents depict them as a group to be protected in the movement, whether under the guise of 'protecting the fangirls' or in posters that perpetuate gender differences in a familist way, where family takes precedence over individual needs and desires. In the case of 'Jiangshan Jiao' and 'Hongqi Man' (mentioned in Chapter Five), fangirls posted comments on Weibo to criticise the CYL for their cheap and cringeworthy creation. They returned to fandomised patriotism, voicing their anxieties about being women within the trends: 'Jiangshan Jiao, do you experience slut-shaming after being raped?' 'Jiangshan Jiao, how do you balance family and career after marriage?' 'Jiangshan Jiao, are you pressured to have a child?' 'Jiangshan Jiao, must you marry before thirty?' and so on. The CYL subsequently discontinued this failed propaganda project and deleted all related posts.

In numerous nationalist movements, as previously discussed, the representation of women's bodies generally aligns with a subordinate relationship that emphasises men's protection. Women are often portrayed as younger sisters and daughters in need of protection from elder brothers and fathers or depicted as vulnerable girls lacking agency who require safeguarding by the authorities. Fangirls exhibit an ambiguous attitude towards the female images that are consistently associated with family, particularly those family scenes that reinforce the realities of women's lack of social security in both domestic and professional spheres. As one fangirl recalls:

> … there's a poster that made me feel uncomfortable. I don't remember who

> did it. It seemed to be a work of the CYL, and then (the CYL) posted on the Internet. Someone showed us in our WeChat group, so I saw it. The poster depicts a family eating New Year's Eve dinner (a symbol of reunification and return). The father was just returning home from work when the mother brought the food from kitchen to the table. There're two children at the table, one symbolizing Hong Kong and the other was Macau. ... This scene looks very warm, but what makes me uncomfortable is that this mother is obviously a housewife without a job. I can't accept it.

While she recognises the concept of 'sacrificing the small for the large (the nation-state)' and the 'family-nation isomorphism' in her discussion, even if only in a politically metaphorical sense, she does not wish for the male role in the family to be the sole breadwinner. She appeared noticeably uneasy when discussing this topic. Nevertheless, this woman was once a 'mama fan' of Roy Wang. Her performance as a 'mama fan' in fan practices has effectively alleviated anxieties caused by parental pressure regarding marriage and childbirth in reality, as well as concerns about being laid off by her employer due to workplace competition.

2. Re-imagination of the Family-nation Isomorphism

China's fangirls, who have a predilection for 'heroines' rather than feminine and delicate features, exemplify a shift in ethics and values that is inextricably linked to the social and economic context of the past two decades. Fangirls in their early twenties were born in the late 1990s. Despite the ubiquitous influence of the Internet, these young Chinese individuals from 'Generation Z' are distinctive in that they have experienced China's rapid market reform and globalisation throughout much of their lives. When asked about their lived experiences in relation to economic take-off, fangirls' feelings were often fraught with ambivalence. They typically express pride in China's economic accomplishments while expressing concern about the pressure resulting from limited employment opportunities and unaffordable housing prices ('But we all face pressure on employment.'); they reap the benefits of the free market while

denouncing consumerism and moral decay ('[We are] easily incited by consumerism.'); they strive for greater self-reliance and competitiveness while also becoming more financially dependent on the collective, be it family or nation ('I have emotional and financial dependences on my parents. I also have these dependences on China, especially when I'm abroad.'); they acknowledge the meaninglessness of being 'data labour' in the fandom routine while seeking fulfilment from it ('I know it's nothingness but I feel fulfilled.'); and so on.

The story of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* finds its contemporary counterpart in the experiences of young Chinese women over the past thirty years, and prompts increasing discussions of individualism (e.g., Evans 2010; Martin 2021; Kipnis 2012; Hoffman 2010; Anagnost 1997; Ong 1999; 2003). The formation of fangirls' political subjectivity revolves around the overwhelmingly rational agenda of China's historical and social economic rise, as well as the irrational aspects of the self-construction process. Indeed, ambivalence is an unavoidable by-product of citizen formation (Ong 1999; 2003). As Ong suggests within a Foucauldian framework:

> …the effects of technologies of governing as related through social programs and experts seeking to shape one's subjectivity can be rejected, modified, or transformed by individuals who somehow do not entirely come to imagine, to act, or to be enabled in quite the ways envisioned in the plans and project of authorities. Thus, while governing technologies are involved in the making of citizens by subjecting them to given rationalities, norms, and practices, individuals also play a part in their own subjectification or self-making (Ong 2003: 16).

In the following discussion, I seek to build upon existing literature concerning individualism in contemporary China, offering an enhanced interpretation of the challenges faced by the fangirls. To achieve this, I explore three aspects related to fangirls (re)imagining the 'family-nation isomorphism' that arises from their practices in dealing with the relationship between female individuals and the nation-state. These three aspects are interconnected, and none is necessarily more dominant than the others.

Firstly, in the reimagining of the 'family-nation isomorphism', family can be equated with individual'. In *From the Soil* (1992), Fei Xiaotong likens China's social structure to a ripple ('differential pattern', 'chāxù géjú'), with morality centred on the individual and 'relations' ('guāxì') extending in concentric circles. The hierarchical structures of blood ties, generational relationships, and the distinction between public and private are all reflected in these circles. The concepts of 'nation' and 'state' in China are both entwined with local ideas and subjectively constructed (Abrams 1988: 58) within different communities. Fei's model of morality is a scalable structure; that is, the scope of both 'family' and 'nation' can be expansive or limited. For instance, in various contexts, 'family' may refer to the nuclear family or the extended family encompassing all close relatives; 'nation' may refer to China or 'local government'. Rather than being a post-socialist phenomenon, this pertains to modernity and the process of situating the 'self' within an enduring moral structure that has never been entirely absent from political dynamics. In China, the issue neither emerges suddenly nor vanishes abruptly as a consequence of economic reform. During much of socialism, concepts such as the 'commune' ('gōngshè') and the 'unit' ('dānwèi') occupied a place within this moral structure; following the reform and opening up, the nuclear family (primarily comprising three family members) progressively filled the 'ripples' between the individual and the nation in urban life (All my interviewees were only children with no siblings, unlike their parents and grandparents, and unlike their distant relatives residing in rural areas).

When mentioning the relationship with their families, 'confused' was a frequently used term by my interviewees during our conversations. But what does this word precisely convey? In a metaphorical sense, the word in Chinese ('mímáng') refers to an individual who cannot discern the path ahead amidst the fog. As one informant shared with me:

> I feel confused about myself and… my future. ..... I said so to my dad but he

said I shouldn't be so sentimental at such a young age.

Upon graduating from university and securing employment, this fangirl ceased living with her parents and instead rented an apartment near the downtown. She only visited her parents' home sporadically. Dissatisfied with her job and seeing no opportunities for life improvement, she perceived every future day as a mere repetition of the present. Within her moral structure, she (and, at most, her pet cat) embodies both the initiating droplet that creates the ripples and the 'family' itself. She informed me that she was a 'career fan' of Roy Wang, taking pleasure in his growth (and noting that they were both born in 2000). However, she failed to identify a 'progressive' trajectory for herself, one that is promised by neoliberal reforms and the goal of national modernisation. It is evident that the modernisation process has generated a sense of displacement in the individual. She projected her expectations for personal development onto her idol, integrating this into her everyday moral framework, allowing her to connect with national development. In this regard, the idol served a functional role in preventing her from losing her 'self' within the imaginings of the 'family-nation isomorphism'.

Secondly, as McRobbie (2020) suggests, we must exercise caution when discussing resistance to family structures and avoid romanticising acts of resistance. While some fangirls acknowledged their inability to achieve a middle-class life, a few were discontented with this and sought alternative paths to re-establish a stable form of family, that is, reintegrating the 'self' into a more stable (middle-class) network of relationships and moral structures. Although these various strategies could be summarised as a 'return to traditionalism', they differed among individuals and were inspired by diverse ideological sources. Here, I present two examples encountered during the final phase of fieldwork.

In the first example, an informant from a suburb of Shanghai, frustrated with her job and interpersonal relationships, heeded her parents' advice and married the son of a local entrepreneur. The two families joined together; however, according to local

marriage customs (‘bìng jiāhūn’, literally meaning ‘joint family marriage’), she needed to have at least two children, with one taking her husband’s surname and the other taking her father’s. She believed that, although she needed to have two children, her life was less difficult than before, and she found relief in having more material security than when living in a rented house in the city centre. Another example comes from Yunnan, a province in southwest China, involving the aforementioned informant who had previously worked as a reality show planner for a TV station. After working in Beijing for several years, she concluded that she would never be able to buy a house in Beijing by herself or with her parents’ financial support, so she returned to Yunnan. When I last met her in early 2021, her parents’ connections had helped her secure a position in a local official institution (‘unit’), providing her with a so-called ‘iron rice bowl’ (‘tiě fànwǎn’). She and her husband lived just a five-minute walk from her parents’ residence. In a way, whether based on patriarchal marriage practices or socialist heritage, such life choices align with the slogan ‘back to the family’. It appears that the return to traditionalism allows the individual to find a more stable position for the ‘self’ within the moral structure of a social welfare system that has become partially dysfunctional due to neoliberal reforms.

Thirdly, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, fangirls produced or disseminated a substantial number of posters and illustrations in political communication, not only comparing China to motherland or fatherland as gendered terms, but more to ‘brotherland’. When the nation was personified as the mother, it represented the ability to nurture the people, while also displaying vulnerability and appearing to need protection; when personified as the father, it was the protector. Fong (2004) introduces the concept of ‘filial nationalism’, arguing that dissatisfaction with China’s backwardness, poverty, and corruption can coexist with a strong sense of nationalism – ‘they saw themselves as modern individuals who were unfortunate enough to have been born in China, an environment that they considered disadvantaged in the global competition for affluence’ (644); meanwhile, they ‘share with their elders a powerful sense of nationalism based on the belief that they could no more cease to be “people of

China" than they could cease to be their parents' children' (645). In Fong's study (2004), her informants were young people with dreams of studying in the U.S. at the turn of the century, likely around twenty years older than my informants. The context in which individuality is discussed has evolved over the past two decades or so. One significant change is that, compared to Fong's informants, fangirls are less optimistic about their personal development prospects. Instead, they possess a much more positive view of China than Fong's informants. In the eyes of fangirls, China is no longer a backward, poor, and corrupt country, but rather a power on par with the West (albeit 'with some minor problems'). This shift in the evaluation of personal and national development has influenced the changing connotations of 'filial nationalism'. For fangirls, 'filial nationalism' is closely linked to their satisfaction with China's development and their activism to prevent the West from surreptitiously 'undermining economic and social development and stability'. In their actions, we first observe the consistent emphasis on territory/land in Chinese nationalist narratives, which connects fangirls' national identity to the transcendent meaning of homeland and ancestors (*Patriae*-). However, we also witness the 'brother-sister relationship' imagined by fangirls in their activism, where 'brother' refers to China as 'the Idol'. In other words, partly in line with the idea of 'filial nationalism', the parent-child relationship imaginings were downplayed by brother-sister relationship imaginings in the fangirls' instance. Young female participants endeavour to establish their position within a novel framework in which the pop idol, or the personification of China as the Idol, holds a critical place. As the fangirls' conceptualisation of the brother-sister relationship predominantly derives from fan practices that involve viewing pop idols as 'brothers', rather than their lived experiences, they have subsequently incorporated communication modes from fan practices when engaging with the imagined familial relationship with 'Brother A'Zhong'.

3. Re-imagination of Online World, and the Problematic Right to Speak for the Majority

Despite being ensnared in a neoliberal model of development themselves, fangirls also perceive what they refer to as the 'majority of Chinese' through a progressive and developmentalist lens. Although they grapple with the tension between national modernisation and everyday life, they tend to believe that they are closer to the development goals promised by the government than those 'lagging behind', particularly in terms of a more progressive intellectual mode and information access. In this context, the 'majority of Chinese' is an ambiguous term, and its meaning may vary according to the individual who uses it. After all, one cannot generalise about the socio-economic status of fangirls. Even if many fangirls come from urban middle-class families, this category of young people cannot be reduced to a single image. However, one of the points here is that fangirls from different backgrounds distinguish themselves from the 'majority Chinese' through shared skills in information access and communication acquired through fan practices.

This issue is specific to the Chinese Internet. As part of China's Internet infrastructure, the GFW censors access to 'overseas' information. Those individuals or groups who possess the ability to circumvent censorship and access prohibited sites can reimagine the Internet space, projecting the terrain into their reality and shaping their understanding of social differentiations. In terms of spatial imagination, fangirls embrace both the division of the Internet into 'the Inner Internet' ('nèi wǎng', literally 'intranet') and 'the Outer Internet' ('wài wǎng', literally 'extranet'), and further distinguish Chinese Internet users as 'developed' and 'less developed'. By doing so, they believe that they are, in fact, granted the privilege of expressing politics on behalf of the 'majority of Chinese', regardless of who they are and whether they desire to be represented.

As one of the main techniques in Internet censorship in China, the GFW restricts full use of the Internet blocking access to an increasing catalogue of foreign websites and

apps, and slowing cross-border traffic by DNS spoofing.[42] Without the use of circumvention methods (VPNs, proxy servers, Tor, etc.), domestic Internet users have limited access to most of the global social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit. According to fangirls born around the turn of the century, their initial use of the Internet can generally be traced back to the early 2010s, when only domestic social media platforms were available. In their insightful responses, 'the Inner Internet' and 'the Outer Internet' are two terms used to differentiate between the domestic Internet services they can access and the foreign ones to which they have no regular access. In other words, the presence of the GFW reshapes the geographical structure in the online world, leading domestic users to perceive a circular structure and position themselves on the inner side.

This does not imply that fangirls adopt a passive attitude towards the restricted access to 'the Outer Internet'. On the contrary, as members of fan communities, they possess the skills and techniques to 'climb over the wall' ('fān qiáng') and access foreign content related to K-pop, J-pop, and *doujin* ('tóng rén',or 'fan creations'). [43]Given the ambiguity of laws and regulations surrounding the potential risks of bypassing the GFW, the action of 'unblocking censored websites' inherently represents an adventurous vibe in their practice, particularly in the nationalist expeditions for which fangirls were mobilised not for mundane concerns, but for reasons of nationalism. In this context, what insights can we gain from the imaginary circular structure of the Internet?

The ability to access global social media empowers fangirls in political participation and enables them to perceptually differentiate themselves from those lacking these skills. In this case, the primary cause of the 'digital divide' is not a scarcity of infrastructure, but rather the skills and techniques to 'climb over the wall' – to circumvent the censorship imposed by the GFW. During my fieldwork, regardless of

[42] DNS (Domain Name System) spoofing is one of the major methods used by the GFW to censor the Internet. When a user under such censorship attempts to access an address, erroneous DNS data is introduced into the DNS resolver cache, causing the name server to return an incorrect result.

[43] *Doujin* culture originates from Japan. It is for people obsessed with popular or niche interests who share their hobbies, ideas, creative products (music, novels, manga, photobooks), etc in the clique.

their economic and social status, all informants could afford smartphones and Internet fees. Even telecom service providers in areas with 'less developed' economies typically offer more affordable monthly plans than those in first-tier cities. Although it is not the case in China as in India where civilians living in far distant rural areas or of lower socio-economic status might experience restricted access to the Internet due to the lack of technological infrastructure and competence (Banaji and Buckingham 2013), people can only access the domestic Internet and a very limited number of global sites without the use of a proxy to circumvent censorship.

Fangirls are not inexperienced in utilising skills and techniques for censorship circumvention when surfing the Internet. One of the main reasons is that, as a fangirl, the normalisation of censorship is a regular practice, and conflict with and response to such normalisation is inevitable. Many idols hail from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan and enjoy a broad audience not only in Mainland China but also in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and even globally. Therefore, even if not engaged in nationalist expeditions, fangirls are accustomed to circumventing censorship in order to keep up with their idols' news, communicate with overseas fans, and publish their *doujin* works in online communities inaccessible in China. Furthermore, fangirls belong to their own fan communities, which are highly organised and mobilised in their day-to-day activities. These groups also collectively train fans to bypass censorship before nationalist expeditions, instructing those unfamiliar with banned social media platforms on their proper use. In this sense, the skills for Internet censorship circumvention are readily available to fangirls.

The privilege of unfettered access to the global Internet provides fangirls with a sense of psychological satisfaction, which stems primarily from three aspects. First, as one fangirl expressed, she felt that she 'can do such an amazing thing'. In fact, it was a sense of accomplishment that an unassuming individual experienced when participating in a grand narrative. Second, since the skills and techniques for Internet censorship circumvention are not universally possessed, fangirls in the expedition can 'speak for

the majority of Chinese' and 'defend national interests'. Importantly, there is no inherent link between socio-economic background and the availability of unrestricted Internet access and technological capabilities. In this context, the ability to circumvent Internet censorship (primarily through the use of VPNs) defines a privileged group, which does not necessarily align with their social class in offline settings. For instance, individuals at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum may feel empowered by this skill, distinguishing themselves from others in higher strata who do not utilise VPNs. Third, the legal risks associated with bypassing Internet censorship remain ambiguous, and the authorities have never formally acknowledged the Great Firewall. The primary risk of facing penalties for circumventing censorship lies in providing an 'illegal proxy service' to others, rather than using the proxy for personal purposes. Consequently, whether the purpose of using a proxy to access a banned site is fan activity or nationalist activism, it can be perceived as a rebellious act within the boundaries of safety.

The use of VPNs encourages young individuals to recognise their privilege, as they are empowered to represent others in large-scale online movements aligned with nationalist agendas, enjoying expanded access to censored information and immunity from punishment. The censorship system, implemented under the guise of safeguarding social stability in China, also differentiates those capable of using VPNs from the general populace. Participants may perceive themselves as exhibiting greater 'civility' and 'maturity' compared to other citizens, given their ability to access and discern 'undesirable' information. Two fangirls defended the rationale for the GFW's existence, asserting that, due to the disparity in 'civility levels' within Chinese society, it is an inevitable stage wherein the Chinese government must exert increased control over the Internet, enabling China to maintain stability against the West and chart a course towards becoming a more developed nation:

> … the GFW is the filter. If you have the will and the ability to climb over the wall, you can see things that officials do not want to show you. … The level

> of civility within Chinese society has not yet reached a very high level. The economic base determines the superstructure. A civilized society needs to be based on economic strength. China is still developing. People with immature minds, such as teenagers and labours, will not be affected by bad information. If there is no will and ability of you, this information will be kept out of the wall.

And:

> I love my country, but I do not think the Chinese are well-educated enough for everyone to have the ability to identify overseas information. … I understand the GFW. … the number of Internet users has increased, and it is necessary to block information that is content with the government. … those who think that the wall should not exist, think from the perspective of their own self-interest. But at a macro level of national interest, do you know how significant the wall means to China? The significance of walls today is more important than in any era. When I visit overseas social media, I can distinguish opinions and tell what is good and what is bad. My first visit to YouTube was in junior high school when I was not mature enough. … If the wall suddenly disappears, how can ordinary people have the ability to face this (information). … The wall blocked some bad information, which made me feel safe.

These statements are also closely related to the awareness of risk and uncertainty, by which fangirls strike a balance between celebrating the rapid rise of the Chinese economy as a significant achievement in the China rising narrative and addressing anxiety stemming from their everyday life. Fangirls' desire for certainty is reinforced by the underlying logic of data-based practices; in the realm of big data and algorithmic ranking, virtual society in the information age boasts a considerable advantage in disseminating and operationalising deterministic judgements. Fan communities, bound with big data and algorithms on social media, embody an air of inevitable certainty and rationality. The understanding of rationality and certainty partly inspired from fandom has influenced their political participation and civic engagement to alleviate anxiety concerning risk and uncertainty. As discussed in the previous chapter, fangirls frequently cited the destruction of public facilities by Hong Kong protesters as an illustration of the consequences of 'irrationality'. In their political and civic participation, fangirls display a strong sense of principle, characterised by the

reaffirmation of certain historical truths deemed unquestionable and the rejection of the uncertainty inherent in public debate.

As one fangirl states, 'freedom is 90 percent the economy and 10 percent politics.' Fangirls' enthusiasm for politics is not particularly salient in their lived experiences, especially given that their parents, who experienced the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, are not eager to see their children become entangled in politics. The bias towards economic reforms post-1989 has led the generation born in the 1970s and their children to reassess the value and risks of political participation, with economic and social stability viewed as the foundation for personal freedom. ('My parents never talk about politics at home and never let me do so;' 'My parents want me to study hard, make money, take care of myself and talk less.') They also re-evaluate their understanding of the Tiananmen Incident in light of the Hong Kong protests, perceiving the latter as a reflection of their parents' political involvement in 1989:

> … my real reflection of the student movement in 1989 started after the riots in Hong Kong. I asked my parents, but my parents told me that I mustn't discuss it. I've learned that this incident is not allowed to be discussed in China at all. I can't find this history in history books either. Perhaps (this incident) did have bad impacts on the images of China and our parents. Sometimes I can't face our parents because they were alike the Hong Kong thugs when they were at my age. … Because of the Internet, a door suddenly opened in front of me. My parents may not know what foreign countries are like when they were young.

And:

> The generation (of my parents) lived in an era that is not diverse enough in the sense of wearing, eating, speaking, culture and travel. My grandparents' generation even only cared about their children's food and clothing. … If China is unstable, … the achievement of reforms will be ruined.

In this context, fangirls express an ambivalent attitude towards the GFW. Among my informants, I observed a general confusion regarding the persistent hostility directed towards China from foreign countries, primarily Western nations. This hostility appears

to persist despite China's ongoing modernisation, which contradicts their understanding of the nation's commitment to modernity. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, China was subjected to bullying and humiliation by the West due to its technological and developmental lag. This historical context reinforces their belief that the GFW is both reasonable and necessary, as it prevents the dissemination of 'toxic information' that could potentially undermine the nation. These fangirls tend to distrust their fellow citizens, for example, presuming that only a select few, as 'well-educated and well-informed Internet users', possess the qualifications required to access 'the Outer Internet', thereby privileging space mobility on the Internet. Simultaneously, in their collective actions, fangirls have come to recognise that they cannot merely act as defenders but must also proactively protect China's national interests. In doing so, they navigate the complexities of censorship, nationalism, and the digital sphere.

In summary, fangirls have reimagined the geography and topography of the online world, a process influenced by multiple interacting factors. The GFW, which censors online content, divides the virtual landscape into an 'inner world' and an 'outer world', that is, the 'Inner Internet' and the 'Outer Internet'. This discourse more or less connects to the nationalist narrative of 'under the heaven', which emphasises a China-centric worldview and impacts fangirls' perception of the 'outer world' in their political participation. Fangirls perceived themselves as actors better equipped to speak on behalf of the wider population, thus positioning themselves as historical subjects. Fangirls expressed concern that the 'certainty' of economic development and national vision might be threatened not only by Hong Kong 'thugs' but also the 'low-quality', 'irrational' and 'over-political' Internet users from Mainland China.

4. Conclusion

This chapter commences by identifying the discrepancy between individual temporal

experiences and historical time, situating the lived experiences of fangirls within China's contemporary modernisation process. China's modernisation project has never remained 'finished'; instead, it has acquired new objectives under recent state leadership. In this context, young women are being shaped by the nationalist discourses of progress, development, globalisation, stability, and competitiveness. Lived experiences reveal that fangirls are caught in different perplexities. Inequalities in terms of gender and class have broader impacts on fangirls' everyday life, including the absence of welfare systems, discrimination, violence, anxiety, shifting family relations, and altered future expectations, among others. Fangirls exhibit complex responses to these social realities, wherein resistance, resilience, endurance, and compliance coexist.

I historicise the lived experiences of fangirls and explore their motivations, intentions, capabilities, and actions in turning towards nationalism. As demonstrated in the aforementioned analysis, fangirls endeavour to understand their roles in contemporary China, as well as to understand the causes of their predicaments. In doing so, those who ultimately embrace nationalism prioritise the prosperity and stability of the nation, even though some among them do not fully align with the Chinese government, but rather identify with the nation-state in a more transcendent way. In their actions, fangirls defend China's sovereignty, akin to how they protect the 'idol sovereignty' in their fan practices. Sovereignty here refers not only to China's territorial boundaries, but also to the online world, to an extent shaped by the GFW responsible for content censorship and creating an 'Inner World'.

The 'Inner-Outer Internet' structure implicates a historical perspective on the relationship between China and foreign countries, as well as the relationship between civilians and the state. However, reducing these two relationships to binaries (China/Barbarian, China/West; monarch/subjects, civilian/elite, informed/uninformed, etc.) does not enhance our understanding. The binary at play here, if one exists, is delineated by two factors: the linear time characterising China's modernisation through a forward-moving narrative, contrasted with the circular space in which China's Internet

is subject to a walled structure. Compared to other Internet users in a broader sense, fangirls perceive themselves as more qualified actors who stand up in such crucial historical moments. By understanding and addressing their predicaments, fangirls construct a novel form of women's citizenship. This identity is itself strongly shaped by middle-class and neoliberal discourses, ultimately privileging the right to participate in politics on behalf of the majority of the Chinese population.

Conclusion Studying Youth Online Activism and Nationalism in China

The topic of youth civic engagement has attracted considerable attention in the digital context. This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse by offering a pertinent case study from China. Drawing on an analysis of the 'event' wherein fangirls from fan communities participated in nationalist expeditions across global social media platforms, this study unveils the complexity of Chinese youth online activism. While the activism of fangirls shares some characteristics with general youth civic engagement, their distinctiveness is notably more pronounced and thought-provoking. The case of fangirls highlights the challenges researchers face when exploring youth online activism and civic engagement within China's unique social and historical context. To unravel this complexity, it is essential to historicise 'youth politics' and situate these female youth participants in the context of China's transformation. By employing ethnographic research methods to capture their voices, we can examine their identities, actions, and everyday experiences, while acknowledging the significant aspects that may have been overlooked or underestimated – aspects that could potentially challenge prevailing and Euro-centric assumptions about civic engagement.

1. Data-based Pop Fandom Meets Activism

In this research I have situated fangirls at the nexus of global and local contexts, addressing their engagement from fan culture to nationalist-oriented activism. I have examined the impact of popular culture on fangirls and how they adapt fan practices for use in political communication. I argue that, in the contemporary context of social media, nationalist movements do not solely involve top-down mobilisation, nor do dominant powers remain detached from fandom. Rather, authorities skilfully interact with the fan communities, catering to their interests, styles, and tastes in the new modes of political communication.

In mainland China, the evolution of pop fandom is based on the emergence and proliferation of communication mediums such as television and the Internet while also being influenced by fan cultures in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Contemporary idol culture, centred around the concept of 'persona', originated in the late first decade of the 21st century with the advent of talent shows such as *Super Girl*. Fans began using television and the Internet as mediums to vote for their idols and organise a series of online and offline activities. However, the fangirls and fan communities explored in this study have a more recent history. Their activities are based on data- and algorithm-driven social media platforms, such as Weibo, which reflect unprecedented means of communication and cultural characteristics in fan practices. Today, the pop fan base is larger than ever before, with a highly hierarchical structure formed within fan communities. A series of routine activities in fan practices have become an integral part of fangirls' everyday experiences, attracting numerous participants due to their low barriers to entry and repetitive labour. Meanwhile, fangirls are disciplined by strict rules, which are widely applied in activities that support their fans and target their rivals, delineating the identities of participants in different communities.

Like football fans, China's pop fangirls typically act in groups in fan practices, but the taste of individual fangirls is highly customised by the data-based idol industries. Idol companies and producers of talent shows create idols with different appearances, backgrounds, and personalities for potential fans to 'choose from'. As consumers, fans do not have to interact with agents of idol industries when becoming fans because the idol industries work based on the assumption that data and algorithms can always produce an idol that suits a fan based on given variables. When a fan 'chooses' an idol, the fan is not choosing for themselves but for the group of people they represent who share the same socio-cultural profile. In the idol industries, therefore, individual fans are only meaningful if they are placed within a fan community. Fans who participate in collective activities are anonymous, and their value is only in the personal data that

marks their socio-cultural profile, which can be used here or transferred elsewhere. In fact, what is understudied is why a fangirl chooses a particular idol over other idols. Arguably, rather than fangirls 'choosing' their idols, it is the data and algorithms that drive them together with other fangirls of similar personalities and psychological compositions, and the idol is merely a highly customised product to meet their expectations. As Stalder (2017) notes, 'this form of generating the world requires not only detailed information about the external world (that is, the reality shared by everyone) but also information about every individual's own relation to the latter' (116-117). That is to say, social media becomes not only the platform for activities but also the infrastructure that connects fan communities and individuals together.

Their intense social media use makes fangirls not only be familiar with the features, techniques, and proper strategies across major social media, but most of them spend regular leisure time on these platforms on daily basis. This fact implies that fangirls are likely to be more self-aware of their role as free laborers than the many social media users who unwittingly contribute value to tech giants. Despite this consciousness, however, fangirls are still willing to keep their status as digital laborers for other purposes, such as we have seen in Andrejevic's (2012) study, exchanging their unpaid labour for pleasure, or for the fulfillment of psychological needs and future-orientation.

Compared to most other social media users, fangirls' practices rely heavily on platforms' search engines. Their practices are thus completely subservient to the algorithms' sorting and ordering. Since the commercial value of pop idols is determined by their presence on social media, making their idols more visible and searchable on mainstream Chinese social media, such as Weibo, becomes the first task of fangirls. As discussed in Chapter Four and Five, there are many strategies to increase the visibility of idols. In any case, as individual fans, it is only straightforward, if not mechanical, actions that can contribute to increasing the 'heat' of an idol. By accumulating a certain number of 'likes' and 'retweets' for positive topics and trends, they can get their idol's name on the trending list, and they can also report competing idols, putting their rivals at risk of

losing commercial value. This explains fangirls' relevance to 'data making' on digital media that will also justify and necessitate my approach to situating fangirls in the field of contemporary media studies.

Further, fangirls have devised a wealth of communication strategies and tactics to elevate their idols' rankings in talent shows, support the sustainable development of their careers, and attain greater commercial value. Broadly speaking, the work of fangirls involves enhancing the positive visibility of their idols on the Internet and mitigating negative influences. As a result, alliances and conflicts with other fans are inevitable. In the process, fangirls acquire training in fundamental, pan-politicised participatory capabilities. Moreover, given the normative and regulative intervention of state apparatuses on the Internet, idols face the risk of being cancelled for violating 'public morals' (especially 'unpatriotic' behaviour), which inherently links fan communities with state power from the outset. Fangirls frequently use digital techniques to extensively uncover the 'dark past' of their rivals and report them to authorities. In the worst scenarios, this tactic, which can make troublesome rivals disappear overnight, becomes a consensus among participants in fan wars, but also leaves the instigating party in a precarious position.

In this sense, fan communities are far from being apolitical or depolitical. They have extensive experience in dealing with authorities, and fangirls are proficient in utilising various strategies and tactics to manage conflicts with rival fans in their daily practice. Such tactics may include strategically employing cancel culture to report transgressions to the authorities or publicising them in the media. Furthermore, shifting policies targeting youth culture compels both the idol industries and fan communities to adopt assertive responses in order to ensure their survival.

Fangirls find themselves in a predicament where the persona of pop idols struggles to (self-)prove innocence in intensifying fan wars, especially when rival fans scrutinise the political backgrounds of their idols. Consequently, fangirls experience speculation

and disenchantment with pop idols due to the high risks associated with financial and emotional investment and tended to shift their idolatry towards sanctified national icons, tturning those representing state power, national spirits, and honour into idolised figures. This extended application of idolisation is not without the substantial promotion of authoritative institutions, such as collaborations with platforms. Therefore, many fangirls are fans of both popular idols and national icons, creating fan works for both, such as videos, posters, and so on. The concept of idolisation reflects a negotiable space between popular culture and state power. State power utilises popular fan culture to maintain its hegemonic position, yet to preserve this status, it also needs to accommodate the practices of fan culture. Simultaneously, fangirls leverage state power to win fan wars while deriving a sense of certainty and accomplishment from national icons, endorsed by the state, that popular idols cannot provide. In this regard, such extended use of idolisation strategies, as well as the ambiguous relationship between fan communities, state power, and nationalist ideologies, serves as a crucial foundation for the swift mobilisation of fangirls during the Hong Kong incident.

State power, through its intervention in pop fandom, partly absolves itself of responsibility for the adverse effects of capitalist development. Fangirls tend to separate the concepts of ‘state’ and ‘capital’, viewing them as distinct, binary categories. This perception may be influenced by the state’s efforts to present itself as a distinct entity that governs and regulates capitalist forces, often with the aim of ensuring social stability and harmony. However, this binary thinking lays the groundwork for potential misunderstandings among fangirls regarding the perplexing relationship between their own individual interests and national interests. By maintaining this binary, fangirls might overlook the interconnectedness of state policies and the capitalist structures that both enable and constrain their everyday lives, including their involvement in fandom. This disconnect may result in an inability to fully appreciate the complexities of state-capital relations and the ways in which they shape individual experiences. Furthermore, this binary may hinder fangirls’ sensability to critically assess the role of state power in reinforcing existing social hierarchies, inequalities, and power dynamics. By

maintaining a strict separation between the state and capital, they risk perpetuating a simplified understanding of the political-economic landscape, which can limit their ability to engage in actions relating to their interests and the broader socio-political context.

2. The Problematic Public Sphere: Challenging the Rationality/irrationality Binary

The civic engagement of fangirls represents a politics of (data-based) visibility related to the absence of debate. As observed, the principles of 'rationality' and 'civility' governing fangirls' involvement in nationalist movements – regardless of the degree of influence from male participants – are deeply rooted in their idol fan practices. Indeed, without the daily training integral to fandom practices, fangirls may find it challenging to organise and mobilise effectively in the nationalist movement due to a deficiency in essential skills and techniques. More significantly, the principles of fan practices (mainly the 'refusal-to-share' and 'never-provoke-dispute' principles) mould the political subjectivity and sovereign consciousness of fangirls, simultaneously redefining the notions of 'rationality' and 'civility' within these actions. In this case, how understanding the categories of 'rationality' and 'civility' advocated by fangirls becomes crucial because it deviates from the rationalisation of the public sphere. This perspective necessitates focusing on the 'irrational' aspects present in fangirls' actions, rather than perceiving them as an 'erosion' of 'rationality' by 'irrationality'. Instead, we should challenge the binary boundaries between the two and re-examine the notions of 'rationality' and 'civility' within this Chinese context.

Rationality is frequently treated as a quality that characterises the public sphere. Two of the earliest and most influential theorists who associated the concept of rationality with the public sphere were Jürgen Habermas (1991) and Karl Popper (2002), who, in

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, respectively, suggest that the rationalisation of the public sphere would enhance the common good. Conversely, emotions, feelings, sensibility, or passion—whatever one may call them—might undermine the rationalised development of the public sphere. This idea has influenced many researchers studying journalism, new media, and political communication in later generations and across various social contexts (e.g., Harley 1996; Dahlgren 2009; Zheng 2007; Freidman 2007; Farrar Straus & Giroux. Coleman 1999; Gore 1995).

Thus, the closely intertwined concepts of democracy, rationality, and the public sphere raise a series of theoretical issues that can make it challenging for researchers to address phenomena in different contexts. Some researchers, such as Rudolf Wagner (2001), advocate for the adoption of Habermasian concepts of the public sphere and community belonging to analyse the construction of national identity by the media in modern Chinese history. However, Habermasian theory has inherent limitations when confronted with the particularities of nationalism. If rationality and democracy are granted normative status in the project of modernity, and if politics is viewed as the exercise of rationality in the public sphere, then how do we understand political participants in non-democratic settings? If public morality, defined by autonomy, knowledge, consent, recognition, and the like, is closely linked to rationality and is a prerequisite for political participation, then are political participants (such as fanatical fangirls) who lack these qualities still moral agents? Without challenging the hegemonic position of the public sphere and rationality in civil society, we fear that many voices will be ignored or misinterpreted. As Nancy Fraser (2008) contends in her critique of Habermas, the public sphere is an exclusivist concept, a 'singular bourgeois public sphere' that excludes informal, subaltern categories.

In line with Fraser's argument, I have contended that the categories excluded from the public sphere are extensive, encompassing the 'Global South', women, and youth. Moreover, it is important to note that the Habermasian conception of the public sphere

relies heavily on his Germanisation of earlier liberal thought, such as that of John Stuart Mill, in the context of reflections on the Second World War. That generation of German scholars (e.g., Habermas 1991; Muller 2009) tends to supplant the nation-state with the constitutionalism of the 'supranational nation' as a potential source of patriotism. Consequently, applying the concept of the public sphere to analyse fangirls' case in China's context is even more challenging, as this concept has maintained a high degree of vigilance against patriotism based on national identity since its inception. Such theoretical appropriation risks leading us solely towards a dualism of rationality and irrationality (for example, fanaticism or fancifulness), which may partially obscure the historicity of nationalism and the myriad contested, contradictory, and incongruous aspects of cognition and action in political movements.

Hence, this research has offered a historicised narrative that challenges the dualism of rationality and irrationality, civility and incivility in discussions of the public sphere. I reject the commonplace but oversimplified notion that irrationality is an invasion of the public sphere. Instead, I complicate the public sphere and civil society by emphasising the irrational elements of political participation. In other words, the public sphere cannot be easily engineered by a transparent set of conditions across different societies due to its inherent complexity. Some scholars (Toscano 2017; Calhoun 2012) argue against the overarching Eurocentrism and Enlightenment-centrism by questioning the distinct binary that divides civil society into secular and non-secular spheres in the modern world. Similarly, my attempt to critique the dualism of rationality and irrationality serves this end as well. In the case of fangirls, a novel understanding of rationality and irrationality, civility and incivility in the public sphere emerges. This re-articulation results from the unique amalgamation of enthusiasm and passion that fangirls contribute to the political arena. In this sense, their participation is characterised by an intensified sense of 'irrationality', often leading to a more fervent engagement with political participation. Concurrently, this situation permits fangirls to withdraw from constructive dialogue and debate without relinquishing their adaptation of 'rationality' and 'civility' in their mobilisation efforts.

In this light, the category of irrationality has been expanded. Not only are things that would normally be considered irrational categories demobilised from the public sphere, such as emotions (Yang 2018), but even public debates are demobilised from the public sphere - as debates are considered as militant by fangirls in both fan activities and political participation. Furthermore, fangirls not only employ the notions of 'rationality' and 'civility' to demarcate themselves from Hong Kong protesters, but also to distinguish themselves from the majority of Chinese Internet users who, due to the GFW, are precluded from accessing the global social media. They express apprehension that this latter group, by virtue of inadvertently acquired skills or technologies for circumventing Internet censorship, may become embroiled in heated exchanges with adversaries on global Internet platforms. Such interactions have the potential to incite disputes and, consequently, tarnish China's national image and interests. In this context, the re-conceptualisation of 'rationality' and 'civility' also informs the fangirls' women citizenship, as well as their comprehension of who possesses the greater entitlement to represent the majority.

3. Fangirl's Imagined Kinship, and the Gendered Nature of National Representation

The connotation of Chinese nationalism is not static; rather, it is continually evolving in the context of China's modernisation. The investigation of fangirl's activism contributes to updating the connotation of Chinese nationalism by unveiling the emergence of a 'brotherland' narrative within the nation-state discourse. The construction of 'brotherland' is inextricably linked to the appropriation of imagined relationships between fangirls and their idols. In terms of identity formation within pop idol fandoms, fangirls often establish an imagined kinship with their idols, with the most prevalent relationship being 'brother-sister'. Even those 'girlfriend fans' who

imagine heterosexual intimate connections with their idols affectionately address these celebrities as ‘brother’. Moreover, fangirls designate their idol’s persona as a ‘room’, their fellow fans as ‘family members’, and the entire community is devoted to safeguarding their collective ‘home’.

In the nationalist actions, fangirls utilise idolisation tactics by personifying China as a supreme idol revered and protected by different fan communities collectively, thereby conceptualising their connection with the nation as a brother-sister relationship. Such practices of idolisation are no accident. The concept of ‘persona’ central to pop idolatry provides fangirls with communicative vehicles in both fan practices and political participation, particularly in imagining the relationship between themselves and the idol/nation.

Therefore, fangirls’ fan practices and political participation are highly gendered phenomena. In their daily activities, fangirls reproduce their imagined relationships with idols, creating fan works that depict these relationships, such as fan fiction, posters, illustrations and videos. Similarly, during the nationalist movement, fangirls produce distinct visual works featuring ‘Brother A’Zhong’. These gendered national representations reflect a novel ethical understanding of the relationship between the individual and the state among these young female nationalists. This ethics echoes and enriches the ‘family-nation isomorphism’ inherent in Chinese nationalism. In specific, the reconfiguration of the position of female participants within the ‘family-nation isomorphism’ framework offers a fresh perspective on women’s roles within nationalist endeavours. By engaging in fan practices and political participation, fangirls challenge gender norms and expectations, demonstrating that women can be active agents in shaping nationalist discourse. Through their creative expressions, fangirls construct an alternative space where they can explore and negotiate their identities in relation to the nation, asserting their agency and subjectivity in the process.

4. Towards the Intersectionality of Nationalism and Cynicism

Lastly, the example of fangirls offers an opportunity to investigate the intersectionality between nationalism and cynicism amongst the Chinese youth. Chapter six demonstrates that fangirls, as political and historical actors, experience a plethora of paradoxes in their individual experiences that are difficult to rationalise. For instance, they find themselves caught in the dichotomy between the vision of national development and the predicament of their personal lives. On one hand, they endorse neoliberal nationalism characterised by development, stability, prosperity, and competition; on the other hand, their practical experience reminds them at any time that the development achievements of the nation-state seem to be drifting away from them. They grapple with the disjunction between 'name' ('míng', the signifier) and 'reality' ('shí', the signified). 'Livelihood' was originally an integral part of the promise made by the nation-state to individuals; however, individuals have experienced the discrepancy between the promise's nominal significance and its actual fulfilment.[44]

In China, cynicism has attracted much attention since the reform and opening up, especially since the 1990s when marketization and consumerism began to affect the daily lives of ordinary people. Scholars (e.g., Chen 1995; Seppanen 2016; Shirk 2010) usually situate cynicism in the post-socialist context, deeming cynicism as an inevitable and universal phenomenon as the communist ideology loses its legitimacy. The 'moral

[44] Diogenes was untroubled when the Athenian people derided him for living a 'dog-like' life. He took pride in displaying contempt for social norms and conventions. According to him, the term 'dog' or 'dog-like' should not be used derogatorily. Instead, the dog symbolises loyalty, spirituality, and faithfulness. 'Cynicism' originates from the Greek word for 'dog-like'. There are indeed similarities between Diogenes' understanding of a 'dog-like life' and the modern Chinese philosophy of cynicism. In the Chinese context, the connotations of 'cynicism' also encompass metaphorical expressions of 'dog' or 'dog-like'. The term 'quǎn' denotes 'dog' or 'dog-like' in Chinese, referring to a life attitude that remains indifferent to political and social issues, disengages from worldly strife, and dismisses moralities as hypocrisy. However, there are two significant differences between cynicism in the Chinese sense and Diogenes' understanding. Firstly, Chinese cynicism regards material and physical comfort (adequate food, clothing, and prosperity) as essential components of life, diverging from Diogenes' emphasis on spiritual comfort. Secondly, 'quǎn rú' is an oxymoronic term according to the Confucianists. The term 'dog' is considered indecent in the Chinese context and is often used in cursing. Being 'dog-like' contradicts Confucian doctrine because Confucianists are expected to achieve their ambitions by 'engaging society' ('rùshì'), and 'serving the country and the world' ('zhìguó, píng tiānxià'). Although, from a literal standpoint, 'cynicism' refers to traditional Chinese intellectuals, its actual usage has been extended to encompass ordinary Chinese people as well.

decay' in the daily life of Chinese people in the past three decades has also been partly attributed to the influence of cynicism (Feuchtwang 2016). One view (Seppanen 2016) is that cynicism in contemporary China originates from a nostalgia for Marxism and Maoism in official discourse after the 1990s, which caused people to turn to materialist realism on the one hand, and scepticism over political participation on the other, reconciling socialist values with the capitalist ones. This point of view represents the common idea about political cynicism that citizens demonstrate distrusts of politics, politicians and governmental institutions and keep a distance from the political realm (Austin & Pinkleton 1995; 1999).

Cynicism correlates the contemporary understanding of cynicism with the tension between 'name' and 'reality' embedded in the Chinese language (Steinmuller 2016; 2014) and explores how the ideologies of cynicism and nationalism cooperated in youth participation. Steinmuller's analysis of cynicism focuses on 'irony' in the Chinese language in particular that a salient rift between the official language publicising collective morality and the reality of political corruption and social injustice causes duplicity in everyday life:

> ... mocking … is a very common attitude in everyday conversation. … Yet if both irony and cynicism emphasize the gap between signifier and signified, they do so in radically different ways. Irony leaves space for interpretation, whereas cynicism closes this space and implies radical criticism, denial or resignation (Steinmuller 2016: 1-2).

In their talk, fangirls often used words such as 'anyway...' and 'lying flat' to resist to the realities that did not match expectations in the toxic social competition, the dilemma of high output and low return. Some of them, for example, considered the philosophy of 'taking things as they come' as passive resistance to 'capital', 'materialism' and 'consumerism'. This passive resistance, however, was not contradictory to their political participation, but rather constituted a certain degree of motivation for it. One possible explanation for this, as mentioned earlier, is that they generally separated

‘nation-state’ or/and ‘state power’ from ‘capitalism’ in their talk. The differentiation between these two categories (‘nation-state’ and ‘capitalism’) is reinforced by the notion (largely derived from political education) that ‘China is a socialist country’. When ‘capital’ takes away social welfare and equal work opportunities, they are more willing to stand with the nation-state and act against ‘Western forces’ and multinational corporations.

If the narratives of national humiliation and national calamity bridge the gap between the historical past and the present (Zheng 2014), the narrative of national greatness links the present and the future. However, the anticipated consistency between national greatness and personal prosperity has not materialised for individuals, and alternative paths remain elusive. The nostalgia some informants express for their parents’ or grandparents’ generation is not a critique of the current system, but rather a romanticised imagination of the abundant wealth-generating opportunities that once existed. In fact, many informants express aversion to the overly politicised aspects of socialist discourse (such as the emphasis on class), and they do not differentiate between socialism and the early stages of the reform and opening up period in their conversations. Instead, they simply believe that during those times, people had avenues to achieve a decent standard of living.

In contrast to their grandparents, who benefited from social welfare during the Maoist period, and their parents, who took advantage of ‘get-rich-overnight’ opportunities in post-Maoist China, these young individuals face a sense of uncertainty and insecurity due to fierce competition, unaffordable housing prices, and an unpredictable future. Specifically, as young women, they grapple with the paradox of personal aspirations, risks associated with motherhood, and gender discrimination. While these factors may seem not immediately related to the discussion of youth nationalism, they reshape fangirls’ understanding of what constitutes ‘a good life’ for a contemporary Chinese citizen and heighten their political and cultural sensitivity towards protecting ‘a stable China’. In fact, the emphasise on ‘stability’ connects young nationalists with the

assertion that ‘stability overrides all’ in mainstream political agenda. As Marinelli suggests, in the discourse of national stability, ‘name’ (formalised languages) keeps ‘reality’ (practices) under tension as ‘speech’ (yán), which should have implied correspondence between the signifiers and the signified, has been suppressed and obscured.

Capitalism consistently seeks to ‘borrow’ the so-called ‘charisma’ (Weber 1948) from other sources to attract individuals, which influences personal choices, aspirations, values, and behaviours indirectly, not through the threat of violence or constraint, but through the inherent persuasiveness of truth. This process links to the anxiety that such norms evoke and the images of life and self-perception it cultivates, which possess a certain allure. When informants expressed their inability to emulate the lives of their parents and grandparents through hard work, they envisioned an urban middle-class existence – one that includes a house, a car, stable and respectable employment, children, and so forth. Regardless of their origins – migrant labour or middle-class families – their depictions of ‘a good life’ did not demonstrate any significant class distinctions.

The ‘Chinese dream’ can be viewed as a Chinese adaptation of the ‘American dream’ (Fong 2004). Children from middle-class families aspire to ‘replicate’ the lives of their parents, while those from migrant labour families seek to ‘imitate’ the lives of middle-class households. However, they find themselves ensnared in the tensions of temporal experiences – achieving such living conditions did not seem as difficult for their parents and grandparents in their time – and a disconnection from the mainstream political agenda, as the projects of the ‘Chinese dream’ and the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ appear irrelevant to them in terms of material prosperity.

The fangirl who hated the CYL’s portrayal of a housewife mother on the poster added,

'I might not even have a chance to live like that.'[45] This statement in fact contradicts her earlier statement. What might underlie such a contradiction? Why would a girl want to live a life of family dependency that she does not seem to agree with? It is difficult to place the fangirl's fan practice and political participation within a binary structure of escapism and active resistance, but more like a reconfiguration of cynicism in a new historical context caused by the separation of 'name' and 'reality'. This cynicism is sometimes paradoxical, but it can function as an alternative strategy for fangirls to come to terms with the tension between the Chinese modernisation process and individuality.

Overall, the emergence of these young women as fangirls and their participation in nationalist movements is not a mere coincidence. Investigating the lived experiences of fangirls may afford us insights into the anxieties faced by young Chinese women born around the turn of the century, as well as the ways in which these anxieties manifest in nationalist sentiments. The paradox inherent in China's political and economic processes is similarly reflected in fangirls' activism. These young women reap the benefits of economic reforms while concurrently harbouring anxieties about the nation's destiny and their own futures. In summary, the pervasive influence of neoliberalism, the resurgence of traditionalism, the conflation of family and nation in collective imaginaries, and the cynicism arising from the disjunction between 'name' and 'reality' contribute to shaping fangirls' perspectives on national identity and their conception of what constitutes 'a good life', which in turn, have reconfigured the connotations of Chinese nationalism.

The examination of youth nationalism in connection with fangirls is far from exhaustive. Fangirl activism offers a unique lens through which to examine the indication of cynicism within the mass participation of Chinese young nationalists. This phenomenon is characterised by the reliance on rhetoric to confront, negotiate, and enhance

[45] See also Huang, Y. (2018). *The politics of online wordplay: On the ambivalences of Chinese Internet discourse* [PhD Thesis]. London School of Economics and Political Science. In this research, Huang explores the playful online language games on the Chinese Internet. He reveals two major contradictions: on the one hand, both recognising and denying the living conditions of the truly disadvantaged; recognising and denying the lifestyle of the dominant class, but also longing for the life of the middle class.

formalised languages. Given that the ideology of the Chinese Dream promotes personal struggle, the intersectionality of nationalism and cynicism might offer a framework for extending the discussion to other marginalised groups within contemporary Chinese society, who are similarly repressed by hegemonic ideologies and dominant power structures. Examples include young male migrant workers, who may grapple with the tensions between nationalism and their identifications (fostered by the vision of neoliberal reform and the prospect of a more affluent society).

5. Limitations

Upon reviewing the data and its usage, it is evident that this research is subject to certain limitations. The following points, while not exhaustive, highlight some of the key limitations, which primarily stem from the imperfect sampling strategies employed in the fieldwork. These strategies appear to have overemphasised certain samples, thereby excluding other important perspectives. In analysing the data, it is challenging to fully capture the highly heterogeneous nature of the informants' experiences, despite my consistent effort to avoid oversimplification of the underlying complexity.

For the purposes of this study, I define 'fan communities' as primarily comprising young women at their early twenties. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the presence of a small number of middle-aged women and male members within the community. Although their exact proportion of the total membership cannot be accurately determined, some informants have estimated that the proportion of active male fans is likely less than one percent, while the proportion of middle-aged female members may be marginally higher (approx. 10%). The current interpretation does not account for the involvement of middle-aged female and male members in nationalist movements. Moreover, I cannot extrapolate the conclusions drawn from the young female population represented by the informants to these unexamined fans, as it would

be inappropriate to assume that they share similar psychological motivations in terms of fan practices and political participation.

Furthermore, this discussion does not scrutinise the possible influence of fangirls' sexual orientation on their engagement with fan culture and nationalism. I believe this area warrants further investigation, particularly in relation to the ongoing debate surrounding the reconciliation of gender politics and nationalism by LGBT individuals, as well as their engagement in nationalist mobilisation within a context where the authorities exhibit opposition to queerness.

6. After Fangirls

In September 2021, coinciding with the final writing-up of my research, the Propaganda Department of the CCP issued a document on 'the rectification of cultural and recreational activities', targeting the idol industries and fandom. As one of the major departments affiliated with the Central Committee of the CCP, responsible for 'ideology, public opinion, and media', this was not the first instance of the department implementing regulations to govern idol industries and fandom. For example, as mentioned in Chapter Four, between 2014 and 2021, the Propaganda Department, Cyberspace Administration of China, and National Radio and Television Administration repeatedly issued joint orders for cultural industries to ban 'stigmatised celebrities' suspected of 'anti-China conduct' and drug addiction. This time, the rectification primarily focused on data-driven fandom and 'disorders' within fan communities. Consequently, Weibo removed the idol ranking, and several producers terminated their reality shows. One informant relayed that this was the most severe crackdown to date, causing many of her peers to leave the community. Particularly affected were fans in the 'outer circle', who lost most of their arenas for regular activities immediately after the discontinuation of the idol ranking (though the 'Super

Topics' remained). Shortly thereafter, a reality show featuring this fangirl's idol was abruptly cancelled due to the cancellation of one of the participating idols. This was not an isolated incident. In contrast to the collaborative nationalist expedition in late 2019, fan communities struggled to find favour with authorities two years later. Nonetheless, fan communities persisted. Following a series of orders and regulations, producers began to reconfigure the personas of idols and themes of reality shows. For instance, Hunan TV Station launched a series of 'positive energy' reality shows in late 2021, including *Braving Life*, which followed celebrities as they experienced the lives of 'grassroots heroes' with ordinary yet extraordinary achievements in everyday occupations (e.g., firefighters, special police).

In reality, pop fandom in China has been continuously evolving in response to market dynamics and policy changes. Stricter governance has led to a downturn in idol industries and fandom due to the loss of virtual spaces for participation. Pop fandom has equipped fangirls with communication strategies, cultural imaginaries, political understanding, and technical skills in mass mobilisation. Whilst, the lived experiences of fangirls extend well beyond fan practices. The contingency of accusations against Hong Kong pan-democrats for inaction towards pop stars was a necessary condition for sparking fangirls' actions but not a sufficient one. The events that have befallen fan communities and fangirls are not isolated phenomena, but rather are closely linked to China's modernisation process at this stage. The factors that have interpellated fangirls as nationalists include not only the instructions given during the nationalist expeditions but also the neoliberal and nationalist projects developed over the past two decades, which these young women have experienced firsthand. As actors embedded within contemporary China, these young women possess the potential to find alternative avenues for political participation and civic engagement. In this sense, this research aims to demonstrate the extensive potential of digital ethnography in investigating other forms of popular culture (such as ACG culture and military fandom) on the fringes of youth politics within a broader socio-political and historical context. Also, it remains to be seen how fan communities, fangirls, and idol fandom will evolve over the next

decade and how these developments will (or will not) intersect with China's mainstream political agenda.

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Appendix I: Information of the Interviewees[46]

No.	Birth Year	Gender	Hometown	Online or Offline	Fan Community; or related Jobs	Times
1	1999	F	Xiamen	Offline Interview	Chaoyue Yang; Vin Zhou; former production member	2
2	1998	F	Changzhi	Offline Interview	Wasn't anyone's fan at the time	1
3	1999	F	Zhaotong	Offline Interview	Zhiguang Xia	1
4	1999	F	Panjin	Offline Interview	Zhiguang Xia	1
5	2000	F	Shenyang	Offline Interview	Zhiguang Xia	1
6	2003	F	Nanjing	Offline and Online Interview	Yibo Wang; Lumi Xu; Kris Wu	3
7	1999	F	Beijing	Offline Interview	P.O.I; Eason Chan	1
8	2000	F	Beijing	Offline Interview	P.O.I	1
9	1999	F	Shanghai	Offline Interview	P.O.I; Han Lu	1
10	1996	F	Qujing	Offline Interview	Xiaowen Zhai; Head	2
11	1994	F	Zhaotong	Offline Interview	Hongkai Qiu; Head	3
12	1999	F	Yuxi	Offline Interview	Meiqi Meng; Oh Se-hun	2
13	1995	F	Fuyang	Offline Interview	Hongkai Qiu	1
14	2002	F	Nanjing	Offline Interview	Viin Zhou	1
15	1998	F	Shenzhen	Offline Interview	Hongkai Qiu	1
16	1994	F	Shenzhen	Offline Interview	Hongkai Qiu	1
17	1997	F	Qingdao	Online Interview	Xiaowen Zhai	1
18	2001	F	Hangzhou	Online Interview	Xiaowen Zhai	1
19	1995	F	Beijing	Online Interview	Xiaowen Zhai	1
20	1995	F	Shanghai	Online Interview	Xiaowen Zhai	1
21	1994	F	Xi'an	Online Interview	Roy Wang	1
22	1995	F	Shanghai	Online Interview	Roy Wang	1
23	1995	F	Shenzhen	Offline and Online Interview	Roy Wang; Yilong Zhu	2
24	1999	F	Anqing	Online Interview	Jingting Bai	1
25	2002	F	Chengdu	Online Interview	Yibo Wang	1
26	1995	F	Chengdu	Online Interview	Yibo Wang	1
27	1993	F	Changsha	Online Interview	Wasn't anyone's fan at the time; former production member	2

[46] Only 35 fangirl interviewees included, excluding other 29 youth nationalists interviewed during the pilot.

28	1995	F	Chengdu	Online Interview	Meiyun Lai	1
29	2001	F	Nanjing	Online Interview	Vin Zhou; Jing Tan	1
30	1995	F	Wuhan	Online Interview	Roy Wang; Jing Tan; Minxia Wu	1
31	1993	F	Chengdu	Offline and Online Interview	Roy Wang; Working for an idol agency	2
32	1995	F	Kunming	Offline Interview	Vin Zhou; former programme planner	1
33	1994	F	Suzhou	Offline Interview	Yisa Yu	1
34	1996	F	Shanghai	Offline Interview	Yisa Yu; Tianyu Zhao	1
35	2000	F	Hengyang	Online Interview	Tianyu Zhao	1

Appendix II: English translation of the Informed Consent

The following is the English translation of the Informed Consent, which was not offered to participants.

The Informed Consent Form

To whom it may concern

I invite you to participate in a social science research. This Informed Consent Form contains information about the research project, which can help you decide whether to participate in the research project.

This research project has passed the review of the Ethics Committee of the London School of Political Economy.

Please read the Informed Consent Form carefully and communicate with me if you have any doubts (r.chen20@lse.ac.uk).

After you sign this Informed Consent Form, you will be deemed to have voluntarily participated in this research project.

Research Aims and Methods

The purpose of my research is to explore the national identity of Chinese young people in the Internet age. Specifically, it involves how the younger generation views China, what Chinese identity means to them, how political consciousness comes into being, how to discuss hot political dynamics, their use of social media, their participation in youth subculture and so on. In the course of fieldwork, the main methods I have taken include in-depth interviews and

online observation. My research targets young people in China, mainly college students, including a small number of high school students who are about to enter the university and college students who are not long after graduation. And, they have a high sense of identity with China and are interested in youth subcultures such as fan culture or ACG culture.

I have read the Informed Consent Form in full. I already know about the contents of the Informed Consent and all the questions have been fully answered.

I can ask questions about the details of participating in the research project at any time.

I grant permission for the data generated from this interview to be used in the researcher's publications on this topic. I can choose to not participate in or withdraw the research project at any time without any adverse consequences.

All information I provide, including my personal information and other information related to research projects, will be kept confidential. I will be in anonymity in the study.

I will receive a signed copy of the informed consent form.
I voluntarily agreed to participate in the research project.

Signature of participant:
Signature date:

I have accurately informed the participants of the Informed Consent Form. Participants accurately read the Informed Consent and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research project.

Signature of researcher:
Signature date: