

From “Fans for Idols” to “Fans for Nation”: Review on Fandom Nationalism in China

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, with the increasing influence of the Internet and social media, fan nationalism, as a new form of nationalism, has been widely discussed by scholars. This paper reviews related literature of fan nationalism from three aspects: psychological drive, fan organization, and media development. In the process of politicizing the fan circle, fans sanctify their country as idols, and have a sense of identity with their ideals. The organizational structure and operation mode of fan nationalism are becoming increasingly mature owing to the extensive use of new media enables complex information to organize and mobilize fans. However, future research can turn attention to the influence of fan nationalism on the public attitude towards national sentiment, which may be helpful to understand the current trend of nationalism in China.

Keywords: *Fandom nationalism, Politicization, Psychological drive, Fan organization, Media.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“D8 expedition” incident refers to the event that “Li Yi bar,” known as Baidu’s largest bar, swiped the screen on the Facebook pages of *Sanli* news and *Apple Daily* on the evening of January 20, 2016, to oppose Taiwan independence. Since then, with the outbreak of nationalist events such as the Philippine arbitration case in July 2016 and the Sade incident in South Korea in March 2017, nationalist actions similar to “D8 expedition” have become increasingly more common. This phenomenon that fans spontaneously organize activities to participate in the patriotic movement on the Internet, has attracted many scholars’ attention. It also becomes a concentrated direction for all sectors of society to observe the ideological trend and political mobilization of the young Chinese generation. This article reviews relevant literature on fan nationalism from three aspects: psychological drive, fan organization, and media development. “Fan nationalism” in this paper refers to a new type of nationalist movement with a behavior pattern similar to that of fans on the Internet. The cluster formed

by fans is called “fan circle” here. This is a common name for this group on the Internet.

First, fans sanctify their country as their idols and have a sense of identity for their own ideals. Second, the formation, structure, operation and business model of fan nationalist organizations have gradually matured. Third, new media use complex information to organize and mobilize fans.

The review found that there is less research on the influence of fan nationalism on the public attitude towards national sentiment, fan’s self-empowerment. Contradictory psychology and the change of this business culture still needs further research.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL DRIVE

Research regarding the mental drive of “fandom nationalism” is still relatively limited, but a remarkable two-way interactive dynamic is shown when linking fandom to nationalism: the sacralization of idol and the empowerment of self. In addition, in the research that is dedicated to either fandom or nationalism, it is not difficult to find that they use similar and even tantamount

expressions. In the light of showing and detailing the whole picture of the discussion, exclusive research is also included.

2.1. The Sacralization of Idol/State

2.1.1. The common void

Arguments for the sacralization of idols tacitly agreed on the spiritual void of the era. This was brought into view around the turn of the century by Li; he trenchantly pointed out that “the time when hundreds of millions of people worshiped Mao as god, as totem has passed, and a belief crisis has occurred, leaving a void in the spiritual needs of the mass” [1]. The void is caused by the heavy workload that exhaust individuals to realize their own “dream of the youth” and is statistically substantiated by Pan’s poll [2, 3]. The absence of “role-model education” also gives an account [4, 5]. With idolatry developing steadily, continuously, and not merely bound for the youth, nationalistic expression is likewise facing emptiness, and the alerting gravity that spiritual conversion is not mainstream in the age of entertainment [6-8]. When depicting nationalism in China, Yang shared an echoing wording with Li 20 years later by quoting Benedict Anderson, “as religion began to disintegrate, nationalism played a crucial role in filling the spiritual void” [9].

2.1.2. Online Collective Activities as Rituals

The similarity in wording has reflected scholars’ attention to observing the confluence of fandom and nationalism. The majority of studies focused on representative cases like the 2016 and 2019 expedition, naming them online collective activities, regarding its venue [10-13]. Some privileged one particular activity, others longitudinally linked the two monumental events to see the tendency. Among these studies, Collins’ interaction ritual chain theory was prevailing, because it portrays interactive rituals as processes with causal relationships and feedback loops, methodologically providing a theoretical framework for many studies. Durkheim was often revisited as well for shedding theoretical light. Under the above framework emerged assorted research perspectives which intertwined in Collins’ theory with the key concepts. The following paragraphs will give further exploration.

For the venue of rituals, scholars argued the likewise co-presence on the online platform, because group assembly renders lower cost and thus they are more frequently [13, 14], finalized as normalcy, given which fans can transform their idolatry activities to nationalist ones [10, 11] [15]. Jargons are adopted to test and draw the boundary between Chinese nationalists and the activists who are for the-independence of Hong Kong and Taiwan (*Gangdu* and *Taidu*) [10]. This approach of

boundary drawing is inherited from the access threshold/boundary work for fan communities [16-19]. Nation-state emerges as a mutual focus during the “expedition,” manifesting itself as a sacred object, carrying the dual emotions of idolatry and patriotism in the fan community [10] [15]. Emotional energy was a focal point in discussion. Online collective activities based their outbreak on the accumulation of the emotional energy in the fan communities. Meanwhile, the energy could also proliferate during the interactions, continuously peaking the collective effervescence [10] [13] [16, 17]. It was also noteworthy that either about the fan communities or the online collective activities, the studies about emotion outside Collins’ framework agreed on the power of emotion as the dynamic mechanism of community, lying in mobilization, provoking resonance, and sense of achievement, maintaining stable identity [11] [15] [19-21] [23- 26].

2.1.3. Bridging the Sacralization Between Idol and the State

Research on ritual systematically demonstrated that the recent emergence of nationalistic ritual behaviors has replicated the fan community ritual behaviors to such a degree that the authors defined these nationalist ritual behaviors as fandom nationalism. However, some scholars tried to shed new light on the purpose of ritual behaviors, like the resistance against loneliness [27, 28]. Collins, Durkheim, and other theorists originally based rituals on religious sacralization, the former being embodiment of the latter. However, research about idol sacralization and state sacralization were seldom linked together, albeit with abundant analogous discourse evenly scattered. The compatibility they have to the startling ritual behaviors has been eclipsed.

In order to pave the literature foundation for future studies, this section attempts to show the potential confluence of idol sacralization and state sacralization by gathering resonating thoughts on both perspectives.

For studies on Chinese fan communities, the earliest research has already compared idolatry to deity worship [2]. The religious definition of “idol” has been introduced to decipher the sacralization in idolatry, and the religious-like fanaticism among fans has been reiterated [17] [25] [29, 30]. Chen found out in her ethnography about Lu Han’s fans that the formation of idol-fan community is in line with Weber’s and Maffesoli’s description about religious community united by a built sacred object [21]. Wang stepped further in exemplifying the community under Maffesoli’s “re-enchantment” [31]. Also, the emotion of attachment, if it is centered by the object per se, may lead to sacralization. This may explain the same end which productive attachment, pursuit for mimetic intimacy, and secondary affective disorder lead to [5] [32,33].

Just as idol sacralization is no stranger to fan community, similar concepts were observed in Yang's view on nationalism, as it offers the sacred object for a re-enchantment resource. Following Durkheim's interpretation of sacralization, the state is a tenable sacred symbol [9] [15]. The state is unquestionably the supreme being in the sacralized imagination [34]. This idea was consistent with the leading slogans during the online collective activities, such as "China is our biggest idol." the correlation is the sacralization of the state that turned it to the supreme superiority.

Previous studies have shown that idol and nationalism share similarities in filling the spiritual void by sacralizing the idol or the state; idol and the state provide the highest spiritual sustenance. The remarkable conformity has apparently been displayed in studies that compared nationalism and fan community behaviors to "rituals," but they tended to demonstrate the conformity as tacit. The mentality drive in idol sacralization and state sacralization is still discussed separately. As for revealing how these two kinds of sacralization are bridged, there is still a gap to fill.

2.2. The Empowerment of Self

2.2.1. From the Ideal, for the Imaginary

In addition to sacralizing others, the self-ward of mentality drive is the self-empowerment of fans. Self-empowerment was first raised by Zhu, based on her refinement and development of Yang and Song's argument [19] [35]. She considered fans' participation as a capital of power against their marginalized voice. The power is manifested in and thus arm the fans through their efforts and resulted in building idols' the public images that "are even greater than the company's power" [19].

Liu Hailong, in his most influential essay on fandom nationalism, resorted to a synonym of "building" when defining the fans' mentality drive [11]. In his sense, fans are actively "constructing" the idols because the latter stand for a transitional object from ideal to reality, videlicet, idols are rather an important sphere for fans' self-actualization [24]. Efforts like doing charities in the name of idols and protecting idols' reputation at home and even abroad has become a criterion of fans [18] [20]. Behind the construction was a cycle of casting: fans cast their ideal onto their idols and cast the success of idols back onto themselves [3] [36, 37]. In this sense, they feel empowered because they have made their own contribution to share the glory; they would counter-empower themselves when efforts failed, since failure provokes a heroically tragic feeling [24].

The feeling was regarded as imaginary by Yang. He pointed out that fans are indulged in a heroic sentiment when practicing collective nationalistic activities [9].

Slogans like "expedition for myself" indicated that they were taking the initiative to exhibit their own agency instead of waiting to be empowered by the government [12]. Another theme that has occurred in the imaginary was the "imaginary of morality," which is one of the outcomes in Collins' interaction ritual chain. Such imaginary about the standards of right and wrong could endow participants with the power of action and the responsibility of taking action [15].

Driven by imaginary of the ideal, fans have already self-empowered by constructing a public cultural landscape, which escalates into the practice of constructing a public political landscape under a nationalistic context.

2.2.2. The shared ambivalence

When illustrating self-empowerment in fandom nationalism, a series of articles proposed an ambivalence faced by modern China to explain the process of self-empowerment with active construction and cast in online collective activities. With China's growing importance in the world, its achievements which would have provoked individual feelings of pride and superiority, are increasingly buffeted by the wave of counter-globalization [8] [27]. Liu et al. also added that increasingly extreme dissidence in Hong Kong and Taiwan are seeking to divide the country, which sharply contradicts the Chinese political correctness of grand unification [12] [16]. Fans also face the ambivalence faced by China. Fans are subject to disagreement with fans of other countries; fans of foreign idols (e.g., Korean idols) are often questioned about their patriotism [11].

Current studies have presented the ambivalences that the Chinese have not received compatible feedback to China's achievements, and that fans have become unwelcome notwithstanding their love and efforts paid. Both ambivalences showed the frustration in the imaginary. Liu gave a general warp up of the two, saying "[fans] have integrated nation, state and self-identity", yet few studies have been further conducted to elaborate how the ambivalence of fans is cast to the one of the state [11]. The following section suggests a hint from the research that has traced a deeper ambivalence of the fans' self-empowerment.

Fan communities were born as sub-cultural communities [7] [18, 19] [38], and the pleasure and empowerment that fans gained were also obtained by challenging and defying the mainstream arrangement [24]. Fans carry out charity works in the name of their idols to prove the "positive power" and legitimacy of their own groups [18]. The ambivalence of resisting the mainstream discourse and simultaneously earning its acknowledgment [18] [24] [37] may hint at the fans' casting their construction on idols to the state.

3. SYSTEM DOMESTICATION

Fan nationalism is not only a single fight of several people, but has been supported by a huge social organization. Many researchers also began to pay attention to the role of such a social organization on the national economy of fans. They discussed the influence of this organizational mechanism on the politicization trend of fan circles. Moreover, media as a significant element in this formation path, has also been widely discussed by scholars.

3.1. *The Basic Structure of Fan Circles*

Price L and Robinson L [39] defined that “people who have strong interest or appreciation for specific people or things can be called fans.” In general, Chinese scholars believed that the concept of fan circle was introduced into China in around 2005 [40]. Owing to the unique nationalist atmosphere in China, the fan circles quickly form an operating mechanism with Chinese characteristics, and gradually show an obvious politicization trend.

Fan organizations are characterized with a clear hierarchy, division of labor, and strong functionality [25]. Existing studies agreed that these groups have shown a relatively systematic and complete state, making it easier for fan groups to be organized when expressing their opinions and emotions, thus having greater influence [41]. Wu [20] found that clear institutional norms and codes of conduct have been formed to regulate organizational behavior. There are clear announcements, warnings and rumor refutation within the groups to warn and regulate members' personal behavior of. focusing on the management and division of labor within the organization, Hu [42] attributed three main elements to a good atmosphere in fan organizations, namely the refinement and clarity of management, working group levels, and the concentration of management power. They enhance fans' cohesion and sense of identity within the organizations and improve internal work efficiency. Lazarsfeld [43] proposed that idols related information is not directly transmitted to the public, but is transmitted to the audiences after the secondary communication of mass leaders in fan organization check them. According to his statement [43], the official statements of the whole community overlap with the leaders' ideas. the secondary dissemination of information often has a strong personal color. Opinion leaders play a great role in guiding the views of the whole communities.

Chen [44] believed that group identity and expression are based on close organization and careful planning. The off-site personnel provide combat effectiveness for the organization. In the whole process, the degree of political participation and consciousness are high. However, Liu [11] pointed out that despite the tight organization, this operation structure is temporal. Research shows that this

action mode and its training are not completed through traditional political movements, but formed in commercial fan communities [11].

With the maturity of the fan communities, they have multiple relationships with commerce. Jenkins [45] proposed the political potential of fan consumers while Zhang Weiyu [46] outlined the politicization path of online subculture groups. Both of them studied the political participation and identity generation mechanism of fan communities in the business environment. Wang [22] studied them from the most fundamental political and economic dimensions, specifically from the aspects of new media business culture and cultural consumption, believing that cultural products have “nationality”. Through emotional identification, the fan community uses “love” instead of “war” to “defend” and attack” the outside world at the imagination level. In the era of awakening national consciousness under economic globalization and due to the randomness and openness of network media, it is easy to use “patriotism” to win more interests and attention and even to disrupt the market order [47]. As an emerging business culture, fan nationalism is closely related to other business factors. Under the circumstances of the rapid development of the Internet and the rise of China's young generation in the future, we still need to continue to observe and judge what changes and development this business culture will have.

3.2. *Media as a Tool to Realize Fan Nationalism*

In terms of the expression within the organization, McLuhan's idea “medium is information” puts forward that the media will eventually change our feelings and expression [48]. On this basis, Zhou [10] has continued research in this field. According to her statement, the expression of the fan communities has formed a unique symbol system. This system carries the collective imagination and values of the subculture system to the society. However, Zou [49] illustrated another view that either from the “folk nature” of the expression subject, the public opinion, or its populist and irrational characteristics, the political expression of fan circles can be regarded as a “folk expression.”

Many scholars mentioned that media is used as a tool to realize nationalism, which makes a complete framework of fan communities. Relevant analysis paths can be roughly divided into two kinds. One path thinks that the new media will influence the formation of fandom nationalism in terms of the organization and mobilization mechanism [50] and the other path focuses on the emotional side arguing that the new communication technology mainly mobilizes fans' collective emotion through more complicated information resources than ever before, and then builds an imaginative community [15]. Pan [50] regarded the Internet as a tool to construct a system that is compatible

with its worldview. He noticed that entertainment has gradually become a kind of right that the collective pursues in this system. Similarly, Liu [11] considered the changing ways in which nationalism is expressed, mobilized, and implemented after the use of new media technology. He argued that media blur the original boundary between political participation and idolization behavior to a certain extent [11]. Dean [51] stated that “fandom becomes politicized when the fan community is sustained by the circulation of representative claims oriented towards contesting perceived injustices and transforming wider social relations.” According to his statement, a considerable part of the crave for wider social relations comes from conflicts with the outside in social media. In addition, due to the unique concealment of the Internet [52], the promoters of social mobilization not only have relatively clear identity labels, but also fail to show their true social identity to some extent [19]. The fans group of online novels in China also began to appear a fan-circled phenomenon [53]. From the perspective of the political economy of communication Lu demonstrated that this group has been gradually shaped into “prosumers” in the process of commercialization of online novels. This path is quite similar to the previously discussed fan groups of idols.

As “fandom nationalism” and “network nationalism” were born in the so-called “subculture area,” its emotion correlates with the emotion of counterculture [9]. Lü and Min both found that the application of new social media such as Weibo provides abundant information for public opinion friction, which makes the emotional connection among fans closer and makes these groups get more collective consciousness [30] particularly, the nationalism [54]. This phenomenon not only appears in the entertainment fan circle in China, but also, in the industries with many followers. In the eyes of some scholars [23], such organized emotional formation coincides with Durkheim’s statement on the importance of religion in modern society [55]. Nick Stevenson’s research on David Bowie’s fans [56] and Devlin Billings and Brown’s research on the fans of FIFA [57] both showed that the media can be directly used as a tool to manipulate fans’ emotions through which they construct their imagination and voluntarily follow the “discipline,” thus showing strong organization and consumption ability, and gradually developing nationalism.

Qualitative research methods were most frequently used, and among them interview research and literature research were more common, while almost no research was done in a quantitatively way. In addition, most studies on Chinese society were published after 2016, that is, after the “D8 Expedition” incident, while foreign studies in this field has a relatively long period time, the possible influence of media on the nationalist tendency of fan groups has been discussed more than ten years ago.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the review of the existing research on fan circles, we can find that the political tendency of fan circles has indeed become a new issue in recent years. Many scholars tried to study the new variants of nationalism in the media age through the classical sociological theories of Collins and Durkheim. They considered emotion as an essential element that contributes to the mass incidents and analysed this phenomenon as a type of “rituals” which notices the sanctification of the state. Moreover, the emergence of fan nationalism is closely related to fans’ self-empowerment. Scholars believed that fans imagine an ideal idol and are completely immersed in it, which results in a strong emotional expression. as sub-cultural groups. Fans in China usually share a similar ambivalence, because there is a certain projection and correlation among the identity of nation, idols, and fans themselves.

In addition, a set of studies concentrated on the foundation of fan nationalism in terms of organization formation, division of labor, operation and business model. They found that as a community, the tendency of political that happens in fans group is inevitable. Media were another academic concern. The widespread use of media not only affects the organization and mobilization mechanism of fan groups but also the creation of collective emotions. The huge amount of information on the Internet and that convenient way of communication provide soil for collective emotion and action

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Author contributions: Yue Pu developed the idea and set the framework for the whole paper. Yue Pu, Zishen Peng and Yixiao Song did the collecting and analysis of the research. All authors contributed to the writing and revisions.

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