

## Digital Truth-Making Among the New Chinese Online Fandom Nationalists

### Between Online Popular Culture and Political Participation

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In recent years, the rise of digital populist and/or nationalist movement and the post-truth phenomenon have affected the political landscapes of many countries, including China. This article focuses on how pop-cultural practices and practices of political participation intertwine in the digital truth-making process of Chinese online “fandom nationalists”. Using over one year of ethnographic mixed-methods data analysis following relevant hashtags and chat groups, I illustrate the truth-making practices of these online users and their clear preference for information with ideological affinities. I argue that the social media affordances allow Chinese online fandom nationalists to create various forms of strong synergies between pop-/fandom-cultural and political practices that provide an ideal ground for the propagation of certain political truths while simultaneously suppressing/hiding the truths of others.

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## Introduction: New Chinese Online Nationalism

Since the 2010s, the rapid proliferation of smartphones and social media use have ushered in what has come to be known as the “post-truth era”: a new form of political debate on the internet in which the role of opinions and emotions is more significant than that of facts (Bethke 2016). This phenomenon has often been linked to user groups described as “populist” or “nationalist” (see e.g. Jost, Maurer & Hassler 2020; Hokka & Nelimarkka 2020), who often make use of popular cultural elements in their rhetoric, memes, images, quotes, and emojis.

While in recent years post-truth practices have regularly been associated with the West (especially the USA and Europe), the East has witnessed the emergence of a similar phenomenon: the rise of new Chinese online nationalist waves and their digital truth-making practices. In November 2015, the Taiwanese teenage pop star Chou Tzuyu waved the flag of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and described her nationality as “Taiwanese” in a Korean variety show. As the videos spread on Chinese social media, furious Chinese online users accused her of being a “Taiwan independence” separatist. Shortly before the Taiwanese general election in 2016, Chou Tzuyu posted an apology video on Sina Weibo (a popular Chinese Twitter-like social media platform, also simply called “Weibo”). The move shocked and infuriated the Taiwanese public (Buckley & Ramzy 2016). It also indirectly influenced the general election in Taiwan: the pro-independence candidate Tsai Ing-wen won the presidential election. In response, Di Ba, a popular nationalist-leaning online discussion group on the Chinese platform Baidu Tieba, called for a trolling campaign against the Facebook pages of Chou, Tsai, and some Taiwanese media organizations. Using memes, ironic jokes, and internet slang, the online activists inundated the sites with comments, some of which were derogatory. The campaign later became known as the “Di Ba Crusade/Expedition”.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, the new Chinese online nationalists have been very active and noticeable. Though not all participants were women, Chinese online nationalists often appeared female-led, adopted online fandom activism strategies and displayed emotional registers of irony, seduction, and romance (Fang & Repnikova 2017: 9–13). They avidly promoted and defended the idolized/personified Chinese nation through cross-platform mass mobilization and trolling, memes flooding and fandom cultural rhetoric. In 2019, as the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement (see e.g. Wang 2023), broke out in Hong Kong, online debates between the Chinese nationalists and their opponents became fierce on social media platforms. “Fandom Girl (Expedition)” from multiple domestic to international platforms began to be used as a means of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: BBC 2016.

identifying the Chinese fandom nationalists and their campaigns against Hong Kong protesters and sympathizers (Xu 2020). According to my fieldwork in the chat groups, the majority of the group members' accounts self-identified as female.

As an important field for digital truth-making in contemporary societies, this nexus between online nationalism and popular culture raises urgent need of further investigation. This article asks: how are pop-cultural practices and practices of political participation intertwined with the digital truth-making process of young Chinese online nationalists? To answer this question, the article analyses the posts and group messages of Chinese online nationalists on Weibo. After introducing the methodology, this article provides a brief overview of Chinese digital nationalism, from its ideological beginnings in Chinese history to its rapid rise on the Chinese internet. The second section explores the digital truth-making practices of Chinese fandom nationalists. It argues that the technological affordances of fan groups and super-hashtag pages enable political truths to be imported, negotiated, reorganized, and reproduced. The fan club accounts, administrators, and other active users set the agenda and function as “gate-keepers” for the fandom nationalist communities. They have a clear preference for information having the ideological affinities of the user groups despite the availability of alternative media sources. The last section considers the trolling campaigns and memes used by Chinese online nationalists to export digital truths. The analysis of my ethnographic and mixed-methods data demonstrates Chinese fandom culture and satire's strong influence on the memes. The textual and visual design of their memes, their practices of commenting, liking, following, and reporting enhanced or suppressed social media affordances of visibility and persistence. I conclude by arguing that based on my analysis, pop-cultural practices and practices of political participation are intertwined in the digital truth-making process of new Chinese online fandom nationalists through the interactions between their practices and the technological affordances of social media platforms.

## Methodology

In my focus on digital practices and the truth-making of online political communities, I use approaches from digital ethnography (Hine 2015; Hsu 2014) that attempt to grasp the specifics of online phenomena analytically through personal, real-time participation in the online field. Within the framework of digital ethnography, this research employed three main methods: (1) qualitative chat-/semi-structured interviews, (2) online participant observation, and (3) mixed-methods data analysis.

The first approach is basic to digital ethnography: qualitative chat/semi-structured interviews. Interviews have been shown to be an effective tool of internet research

(Schlehe 2008; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2015). For my work, I recruited potential interviewees from active fan groups and super hashtag (a specific Weibo feature combining hashtag functions with a stronger community feature) members through a snowballing approach: Starting with regular daily conversations in the chat groups, I gradually built up relationships and gained the trust of some active members. I then asked them to participate in ethnographic interviews and to recommend new interviewees through their social network within the community. The other main source of interviewees were recruitment posts on the super-hashtag sites. I have conducted 18 in-depth online interviews and analyzed the transcripts.

Another fundamental part was online participant observation, whose result depends on the interactions between researcher, research field, and object (Lüders 2007: 386–389; Hauser-Schäublin 2008: 38; Schmidt-Lauber 2007: 220; Boellstorff et al. 2012: 69–72). In this research, I selected fan chat groups of the fan club account @BrotherAzhongAntiHaterGroup and related accounts as main field site and clarified my identity as a researcher there. They are the largest active groups among fandom nationalists, and thus provide the most vivid example of how Chinese online fandom culture interacts with political participation/nationalist activism. From August 2019 to February 2022,<sup>2</sup> I investigated three Weibo fan groups and 16 related Weibo hashtag/super-hashtag pages in total.<sup>3</sup> For reasons of research ethic and personal safety, I used (alternative) social media accounts with the identity of a nationalist and a researcher. With this account identity, it was not too difficult to apply and join the chat groups and super-hashtag pages. Every day I interacted with group members in their rhetoric, participated in their discussions about the current issues that interested them, and observed how they mobilized and carried out trolling events. In the process, I gradually made myself visible and my account identity memorable in the groups. I also captured valuable posts such as chat texts, open posts, and memes and took field notes for further analysis. For example, I collected 111 memes from a typical Weibo account as a small sample for this paper.<sup>4</sup> When recruiting interviewees, some were suspicious of me and insisted on verifying my background by seeing if I recognized some popular comedy skits or advertising slogans from mainland China.

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<sup>2</sup> This time frame may miss the pre-history/background of the user groups.

<sup>3</sup> Due to platform setting and internet regulation/censorship, the number of super-hashtag postings is impossible to calculate.

<sup>4</sup> Because the total amount of data is large and the research is still ongoing, here I take all the memes from a representative Weibo account's timeline: @BrotherAzhongCopywritingGroup (original Chinese ID name: @阿中哥哥图文组). Links: <https://weibo.com/u/7339752230>.

The third approach was the use of qualitative data analysis software for collecting and analyzing social media data (Hine 2015: 78, 121; Bail 2014: 465–468; Hsu 2014: 43). Following Kuckartz’s mixed-methods data analysis (Kuckartz 2014: 30–37) – a combination of field research and a data-driven quantitative approach – I inserted the content of the online posts, field notes, and interviews into MAXQDA (a mixed-methods data analysis software) as the field data. I used the software to code, quantify, analyze, and visualize these data, producing a combination of quantitative and qualitative information. The frequency of these codes and their relationship to each other was counted, collated and analysed. This mixed-methods approach added a broader quantitative overview of the anthropological nuances of the field.

### Chinese Digital Nationalism

Nationalism has been a constant and significant factor in Chinese society since the second half of the nineteenth century. Rooted in Confucianism traditions and the backlash against the “century of humiliation”, collective social-economic justice, state sovereignty, and national independence have become the most frequent concerns expressed in modern Chinese political narratives (Perry 2008: 38). After the economic reform introduced in 1978, China opened doors and minds to Western liberal-democratic ideologies, which regained their influence. When the internet and social media first became popular in China, some early studies believed that online activism could build a cyber-civil society and advance democratization (e.g. Yang 2009: 24). Time has proved them wrong. The Chinese internet has had a “sinking”<sup>5</sup> user demography, which means increasing user numbers in lower-tier markets or regions. The majority of these users are less socio-economically advantaged when compared with users in cities and developed regions. From 2008<sup>6</sup> to 2021, the number of Chinese internet users grew from 253 million (19.1% of the population) to 989 million (70.4% of the population). Over 99% of Chinese internet users have smartphones and instant-messaging applications (Cyberspace Administration... 2014: 5; Cyberspace Administration... 2021: 1). During this time, China’s significant developmental achievements fostered patriotic and sometimes frankly nationalistic sentiments on social media, while internet regulations/censorship in China further strengthened after 2012. Social media accounts of certain liberal-democratic celebrities were banned, and some users were arrested (Han 2018: 67; Schneider 2018: 183; Creemer 2017: 86). All in all,

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<sup>5</sup> This term comes from the concept of the “sinking market” in economics. It was later applied to the Chinese IT industry.

<sup>6</sup> I chose the year 2008 as a starting point because it was the first time that Chinese internet users became the largest internet user group in the world.

authoritarian-nationalist ideologies came to dominate the Chinese online political landscape and liberal-democratic worldviews lost their popularity (Wu 2020: 139).

Chinese digital nationalism emerged concurrently with the development of the Chinese internet. The early Chinese cyber-nationalists were considered to be “well informed about the outside world, yet still very anti-American” (Zhou 2006: 211). They were driven largely by fear of external meddling in China’s affairs and by outrage at foreign criticisms of the Chinese state or its people, especially by the USA and Japan (Breslin & Shen 2010). The “voluntary fifty-cent army”, a popular term in the 2000s and 2010s to describe internet users who voluntarily defended the Chinese party-state,<sup>7</sup> argued for a neutral stance and emphasized facts and rationality. Their pro-regime discourse defined regime critics as untrustworthy and framed the national state as a “necessary evil” that defended national interests and ensured prosperity (Han 2018: 191, 218).

The campaigns of the “Di Ba Crusade” and the emergence of “Little Pinks” in 2016 marked a new phase of Chinese digital nationalism. “Little Pinks” have been described as a “postmodern informed nationalist group” who access international politics through commercial media and whose discourse is recorded in postmodern systems of cultural symbols (Wu, Li & Wang 2019: 48). Others have considered that “Little Pinks” is a label invented by dissenting user groups to recast the image of online nationalism in China (Fang & Repnikova 2017). Its massive production and usage of memes were seen as a “consensus movement” and an “active movement” (Guo & Yang 2019: 88). It has also been called “cyber-nationalism under the mechanism of image-contesting visual activism”, that is to say, it is a specific form of nationalism enabled or promoted by images on the internet (Zhou & Miao 2019: 116). Indeed, the “Little Pinks” embody a “fandom-nationalism” in which cyber-nationalists “love your nation the way you love an idol” (Liu 2019: 141).

A review of China studies and communication studies literature on Chinese online nationalism shows that relatively few researchers have explored the phenomenon using a practice theory approach (see e.g. Postill & Bräuchler 2010). Couldry has argued that media studies researchers should regard media as an “open set of practices relating to, or oriented around media” (Couldry 2010: 36), as “what people do with media and what media do with people” (Dang-Anh et al. 2017: 7). Media practices are practices that are constituted through the interaction of human behavior and media technology.

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<sup>7</sup> The internet commentators/propagandists hired by Chinese authorities are generally paid fifty cents RMB for each post/response in the 2000s. The official propagandists are therefore called the “fifty-cent army”. The internet users who voluntarily defend the Chinese party-state have adopted this term and call themselves the “voluntary fifty-cent army”.

Internet practices can be understood as routine activities in which actors, guided by their practical sense, interact with the internet's diverse technical affordances and the social and cultural assumptions that accompany them (Bareither 2019: 8–12). Through the conceptualization of affordance-in-practice, Costa further links social media affordances with the practices enacting them (Costa 2018: 3651). Analyzing Chinese online nationalist users from the perspective of practice theory means approaching digital activism as a collection of media or internet practices while exploring the technical affordances of social media platforms within the current Chinese context. This theoretical lens contributes to a deeper understanding of the nuances of the interaction between political participation and online pop culture, as well as the post-truth phenomenon within it.

### **Digital Truth-making Among Chinese Fandom Nationalists**

The digital truth-making practices of Chinese fandom nationalists are based on a fundamental and distinctive online practice – nation idolization. By analyzing the framework of Chinese fandom nationalists' organization and mobilization, this section focuses on how these nationalists gather information, discuss news coverage, present certain content as true, and export generated truth through fandom-cultural practices.

#### ***Idolizing the Nation: The Basic Practice of New Chinese Digital Nationalism***

Since spring 2019, massive numbers of people in Hong Kong took to the streets. They desecrated Chinese national flags (CNBC 2019), waved the former British colonial flag (BBC 2019), and assaulted the mainland journalist Guohao Fu in the Hong Kong airport (Wen & Wong 2019). The incidents enraged the nationalist public in mainland China, for whom the demonstrations were an insult to China's territorial sovereignty and an aggressive display of nativism and separatism. On August 14, one day after the attack on Guohao Fu, female online nationalists calling themselves "fandom girls" or "iZhong" (China lovers) began a trolling campaign in defense of China, which they stylized as if it was an idolized pop star named "Brother A Zhong" ("阿中哥哥"). "Zhong" is short for the Chinese Nation ("中国"). The English letter "i" has the same pronunciation as the Chinese Character "爱" (love). Here China is presented as a pop-star or idol, and calling it "brother" is not an ironic reference to George Orwell's "Big Brother". Rather, it is common practice in East Asian fandom culture. Fans, female in most cases, tend to call their male idols "brother" out of adoration and respect. This is rooted in the Confucian patriarchal hierarchy. Similar practices of fandom culture have also been used for Chinese political leaders. With a hawkish diplomatic style popular in Chinese nationalist communities, young Chinese online nationalists started to worship the



then Foreign Minister and the spokespersons of different ministries as the “Superband of Chinese Foreign Affairs” (People.cn 2019). This pop-culture framing has shaped the social media practices of Chinese online nationalists and distinguished them from the previous waves of Chinese online nationalism. They have created fan club accounts, hashtags, super hashtags (“超级话题”, [see: @SuperHashtagCommunity 2016], and fan groups (“粉丝群”, a specific Weibo feature allowing Weibo “Big-V” celebrities and their fans communicate closely in chat groups [see: @FanChatGroup 2014]) in the name of the Chinese nation. On first entering the fan groups, I saw the following greeting<sup>8</sup>:

Morning everyone. Thank you for joining us. Join our anti-hater campaigns, report haters/trolls/idiots, offer the latest Hong Kong “drama” updates, show [our] copy-writing/photoshopping talents, happy gossiping, learn knowledge, encourage our fellows, start “crusades” anytime, please follow @BrotherAZhongAntHaterAccount @BrotherAZhongSupportGroup! love everyone! (Field notes<sup>9</sup>)

The greeting perfectly encapsulates the daily practices of the community members. They treat event updates and debates about the Hong Kong protests as online entertainment filled with gossip and drama, and use the practices of fandom culture and online PR skills to defend the Chinese nation against those who hate their idol.

Based on my field observations and interviews, three essential types of groups can be observed and described in the nationalists’ communities: (1) support groups (“后援组”), (2) copywriting groups (“图文组”), and (3) “anti-hater” groups (“反黑组”). As their literal sub-group names indicate, these types of groups are divided according to the functions and personal skills of different members. Every day, different messages flow in and out from these types of chat groups. In support groups, users exchange daily information and mobilize campaigns. Copywriting groups mobilize community members with good photoshop and editing skills. Their job is to collect and produce content for campaigns. Anti-hater groups make up the staunchest and most enthusiastic community members. They identify and collect negative remarks about their idols and attack the accounts that post them through trolling and denunciation campaigns. In some cases, the activities of the groups overlap.

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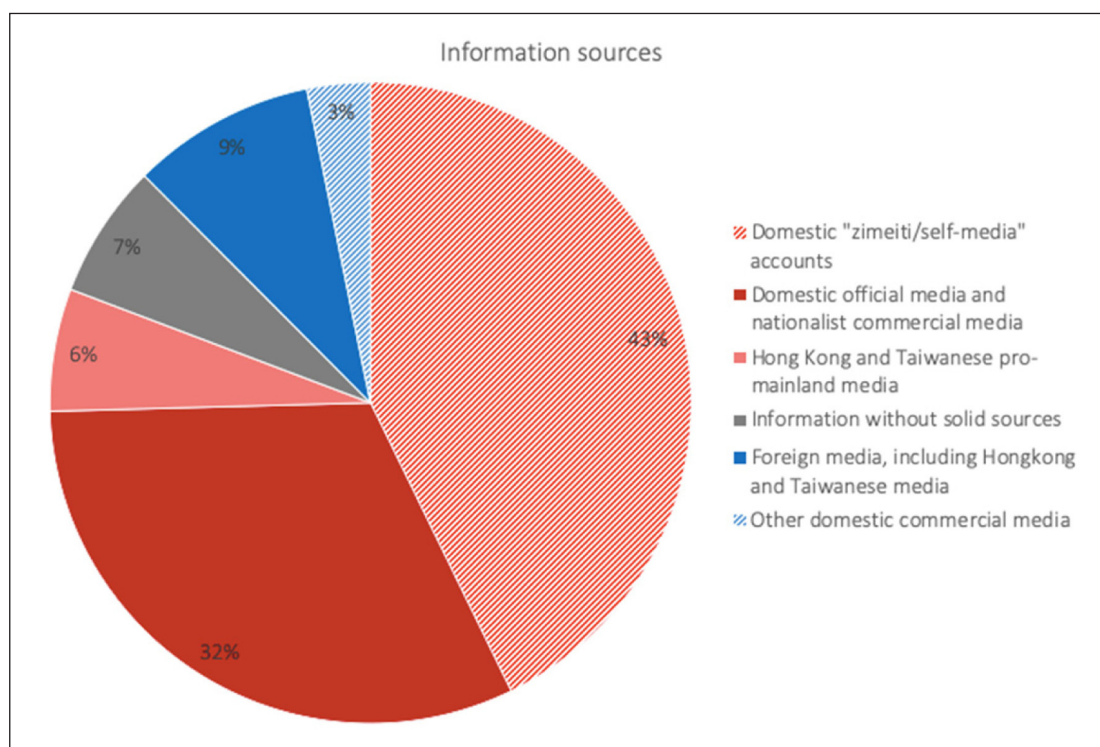
<sup>8</sup> From here on, all original field data or interviews in this article are in Chinese. All translations from Chinese into English are my own. The content in brackets in the field data citations indicates my notes on the materials.

<sup>9</sup> The field note is dated October 14, 2019, from the fan group @BrotherAZhongAntiHaterGroup2.



### *Weibo Super-hashtag Pages, Fan Groups and Information Sources*

Between 2014 and 2016, high data traffic on Weibo fandom communities induced the platform to launch super hashtags and fan groups. The aim was to intensify solidarity and interaction among popular cultural communities (@FanChatGroup 2014; @SuperHashtagCommunity 2016). Hosts and administrators had the authority to control access to the new communities and could delete or ban content. When it came to the posting of information, the most popular news links came from active users, especially fan club accounts and administrators, who dominated the agenda-setting and functioned as “gate-keepers” for the community. After the daily morning and evening greetings, the administrators and fan club accounts regularly posted at least 2 or 3 links in the fan groups. Active users also posted links in the groups when introducing a new topic. The discussions in the chat groups were mostly driven by current events in the media, although a certain proportion of interactions was devoted to general communication. Most news and information came from either state-affiliated media or nationalist-leaning commercial media or influencers. Other information sources, including overseas media, were cited. But they tended to be subjected to doubt, ridicule, and criticism (see **Figure 1**).



**Figure 1:** Proportion of fandom nationalists' information source in each category. Time frame: from August 2019 to February 2022. Source: Chenyang Song.

By the time I wrote this article, my computer-assisted analysis of reposted content on super-hashtag pages showed a marked preference for information sources with ideological affinities similar to those of the user groups.<sup>10</sup> As the graphic in **Figure 1** shows, *zimeiti*, or self-media, accounts – user-generated, non-official social media accounts (Creemer 2017: 86) – made up 42.9% of Weibo and 31.9% of domestic official media and nationalist commercial media. These were the most popular information sources for young Chinese online nationalist groups. In terms of content reposted from the *zimeiti*, 49.5% of them were from nationalist Weibo celebrities or from accounts with similar political opinions. Together with Hong Kong and Taiwanese pro-mainland media (6.2%), they make up at least 59.5% of the total news/information resources on related hashtag pages. When taking information without solid sources into account, this number surpasses 66.3%. By contrast, foreign media, including Hong Kong and Taiwanese media (9.3%), and other domestic commercial media (3.2%), make up only 12.5% of their information resources. In total, almost 60% of original posts are from domestic state-affiliated media, domestic nationalist-leaning commercial media or influencers, and pro-mainland media from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Through the conceptual lens of affordance-in-practice, Chinese fandom-cultural practical senses of online expedition drive nationalist Weibo users to set up relatively confined technological settings of their fan groups and super-hashtag pages on Weibo. Their ideological and emotional preference in this technological setting further contributes to the relative homogenization of the information sources within fandom nationalist groups.

### **Informedness: Media Preference and Truth-making**

In the field of Chinese online nationalism, Zhou's idea of "informed nationalists", who are "well-informed about the outside world, yet still very anti-American" (Zhou 2006: 211), is a landmark and widely-cited. However, the field data I gathered both fit and challenged this concept at the same time. On the one hand, these young Chinese online nationalists are still informed. Internet regulation in China has not prevented the users I interviewed from accessing information beyond the Great Firewall.<sup>11</sup> A more decisive factor is their information sources. Within Chinese online fandom nationalist communities, restricted access and ideological preference have increased the homogenization of their political positions and information sources. This results

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<sup>10</sup> By the time of this article's writing, I had coded information sources on 9 super-hashtag pages and 2,382 related posts.

<sup>11</sup> The Great Firewall is a series of legislative measures and technologies deployed by Chinese authorities. The aim is to block access to selected foreign websites and slow down international internet traffic.

in an informed but biased nationalist information landscape. Consider the following passage regarding media trust from one of my interviews, an administrator of a nationalist fan group:

Me: Can you tell me why you mainly get news from these official accounts and why you trust and like them more?

AG: I used to get news from the TV when I didn't use Weibo, but almost all of it was passive. When I was little, it was my dad's CCTV News. After marriage, it was my husband's various sporting events and sports news. So I didn't feel like I was actively getting the news. I like these online official media because first, they have a certain amount of authority and accuracy. Many independent content producers or less responsible media will just write a mess, none of it authentic. Another point is that this kind of news generally does not have personal emotions in it, which leaves me some time and space for independent thinking. The last point is: this kind of news will also have people's comments below so that I know what others think. In fact, a lot of issues and news are multi-faceted, and another point of view might bring with it other kinds of thoughts. I have benefited from some of the relatively good comments below. They make me think about issues from many aspects every time I encounter them, including some troubles in life and work, and thinking from a different angle may solve the problem, or decrease my worries a little.

Me: Have you ever doubted the quality and accuracy of the official media's reports?

AG: Of course, I have some doubts, no news media can guarantee that every report they make is 100% accurate and comprehensive. It depends on many factors, such as the subjective thoughts of the reporters and the official thoughts they want to convey to us. I've also witnessed the "in-your-face" moments of these official media on Weibo.

Me: Did these experiences have any impact on your attitude towards the official media?

AG: I don't think so, because I'm skeptical anyway, but it was only confirmed later. Anyone can make mistakes, the official media is no exception, but they've done a good job.

Me: That is, despite its inaccuracies, you still prefer to trust the official media, right?

AG: Yes, they [the inaccuracies] have been on a very small scale. There are even some biases that I am happy to read and believe myself. For example, there are some international issues where I know that the truth may not be what the domestic media reports, but I still favor our media. Some things aren't absolutely right or wrong, it's just a different position and a different way of looking at things.

Me: Well, that's true. So you still feel that, despite the problems you have just mentioned, the information and opinion they provide are more in line with your own position, so you still prefer to believe their reports. Is that the right way of understanding it?

AG: No, there are some points that I do not agree with, but they write what they write, and I have my own judgment. I just cited some of the ones I agree with, although I know it's not necessarily comprehensive, but I will still "side" with the news report.

Me: By the way, do you circumvent the Great Firewall [and surf blocked foreign websites]?

AG: I circumvented the Great Firewall when the protests first erupted in Hong Kong.

Me: Beside that period, do you circumvent the Great Firewall in your daily life?

AG: Well, I barely need to in my daily life, unless I want to check erotic literature outside the Great Firewall. I barely look at foreign media. My husband works in the export industry. He does have the need [to circumvent the Great Firewall and surf the blocked foreign websites]... (Interview, July 6, 2020.)

In the interview, my informant elaborates why, despite her digital access to the outside world, she prefers the Chinese state media. Besides her early passive media consumption and patriotic education, she believes that state media are generally more reliable than zimeiti because of the authority behind them. Even though she is aware of the problems of the state media, she still trusts them because they better fit her own political beliefs. The associated comments also help her think through both rational and emotional perspectives. Concerning the motivation for accessing the digital world outside China, her "wall-climbing" behavior is initially driven by desire for entertainment, not politics. However, major political events do induce users to circumvent the Great Firewall and act politically (by, say, consuming political news from foreign media and participating in online political campaigns, etc.) Regarding

these questions, other interviewees gave very similar answers. That is to say, the new Chinese online fandom nationalists are informed but biased in their socio-technological preferences. “Truth” here is not an absolute; it is something that is chosen and made in socio-technological contexts. These young online nationalists consciously accept, reinforce, suppress, and ignore certain information depending on whether it fits their emotional and ideological needs at that moment. They use their information sources to reproduce what they consider to be truths and to “export” them by means of online practices, through which they attempt to prove their political stance’s legitimacy and beat their opponents in online public opinion-making. First comes ideological and emotional needs, then comes the truth.

### ***Memes as “Truth-carriers”***

In the concept of Chinese fandom nationalists, “truth” is the complex of facts and narratives that fit and legitimize their ideology and emotions. At the other end of the digital truth-making process is one of the most remarkable online practices of the young online nationalists: massive trolling campaigns. As part of these campaigns, the online nationalists use internet memes to carry and deliver truths and emotions. Shifman regards internet memes as “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which created with awareness of each other, are circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the internet by many users” (Shifman 2014: 41). The massive organized production and use of campaign content on common political stances make the trolling work of young Chinese online nationalists into identifiable memes. My qualitative computer-assisted analysis shows that pop culture elements play a significant role in their meme production: cute animation from certain communities or countries (Chinese nationalists, Hong Kong protesters, Hong Kong police, the Chinese Nation); images from dramas, movies, cartoons, real-life celebrities, and scenery; fandom-culture rhetoric. In the sample, only 11 out of 111 memes are not purely textual. The majority (around 90%) are purely textual memes such as slogans, arguments and lyrics. Based on my content analysis, I identified five categories of memes: (1) Memes about territorial integrity, (2) Memes about protester violence, (3) Memes about Chinese achievements and contributions, (4) Satirical memes, and (5) Invective memes from fandom culture.

#### 1) Memes about territorial integrity:

These memes include support for China and its territorial integrity, for Hong Kong, and for Hong Kong police with bantering attitudes. Chinese online nationalists are

opposed to Hong Kong's separatism in the movement because it contradicts the most central concern of Chinese nationalism: territorial integrity. The Chinese national flag and other visual symbols of China often serve as a key element in the memes. The cute emoticon bunny in **Figure 2** represents the People's Republic of China. This image of China went viral because of the nationalist online comic "Year Hare Affair"<sup>12</sup>.



**Figure 2:** An example of memes with emoticons. Source: <https://weibo.com/u/7339752230>. Download date: April 15, 2022.

## 2) Memes about protester violence:

Accusations of physical and verbal violence committed by Hong Kong protesters against Hong Kong police and pro-mainland/establishment civilians (Chaterjee & Roantree 2019; Lo 2019; The Strait Times 2019; Wen & Wong 2019) have been a key part of the trolling campaigns. From Chinese nationalists' perspective, "the hidden truth" about the violence of Hong Kong protesters is "revealed" by the footage of Hong Kong protesters throwing Molotov cocktails in the background of this meme in **Figure 3**, while nationalists illustrate their stance and emotion through the headline "undisciplined and out of control [in Chinese]/shame on Hong Kong". Another frequently cited example of this type is the August 14, 2019, assault on the mainland Chinese journalist Guohao Fu at the Hong Kong airport (Wen & Wong 2019), one of the largest triggers for Chinese nationalist trolling.

<sup>12</sup> *Year, Hare, Affair* is a popular nationalist online comic, in which nations are portrayed as anthropomorphic animals to describe political, military, and diplomatic events about China in the twentieth century. See e.g. Li 2017.





**Figure 3:** An example of textual and graphical memes. Source: <https://weibo.com/u/7339752230>. Download date: April 15, 2022.

### 3) Memes about Chinese achievements and contributions:

The most distinguishable feature of this type is the listing of detailed statistics and historical events. The truth of mainland China's contributions to Hong Kong's daily functioning and economic development is quantitatively visualized in the meme example in **Figure 4**, with the aim of rationally and objectively highlighting mainland China's achievements and its massive support for Hong Kong, delegitimizing Hong Kong's protest against the Hong Kong and mainland China establishment. It indirectly accuses Hong Kong protesters of being arrogant and ungrateful toward the constant support from mainland China and ignorant of its achievements and strength.



**Figure 4:** An example of purely textual memes. Source: <https://weibo.com/u/7339752230>. Download date: April 15, 2022.



#### 4) Satirical memes:

This type of meme, as in **Figure 5**, tends to lampoon the hypocrisy, naivety, and incompetence of the Hong Kong protesters with strong sarcastic emotions. These memes suggest that the Hong Kong protesters are driven not by fair demands, but by foreign forces and outside financial support. They portray the protesters as sacrificing their future for the sake of activist leaders and paint them as naïve, incapable enemies who cooperate with Western countries like the United States and the United Kingdom.



**Figure 5:** Content in Cantonese: “Your leader fled to study abroad, you are arrested in prison. Truly tragic!” Source: <https://weibo.com/u/7339752230>. Download date: April 15, 2022.

#### 5) Invective memes from fandom culture:

This type of meme uses the rhetoric of fandom culture to compare Hong Kong protesters to anti-fans and puppets of Western hegemonic idols such as the US or UK. The example in **Figure 6** portrays the USA and the UK as “flopped losers” and “foot-washing maids” – terms in Chinese fandom culture for unpopular stars or idols with lower status in the pop industry. Being unpopular is considered to be humiliating for pop stars (especially pop idols) in China, because popularity, rather than skills in performing, singing, or dancing, is the most crucial factor in the careers of Chinese idols. The memes imply that opponents should have focused more on their own achievements than on meddling in China’s internal affairs.



**Figure 6:** An example of purely textual memes. Source: <https://weibo.com/u/7339752230>. Download date: April 15, 2022.

Young Chinese online nationalists use these memes to ridicule the mainstream narrative about the Hong Kong protest in the global online public sphere. They portray the Hong Kong protesters as absurd, violent separatists supported by the narratives of the global mainstream media. The memes show the online nationalists' strong alignment with China's achievements instead of with liberal-democratic values. Their support for the party-state relies heavily on what Zhao has called "performance legitimacy": "the Chinese authority's right to rule is justified by its economic and/or moral performance and by the state's ability to defend its own territory" (Zhao 2009: 418). The memes' visual design and strong reliance on text reflect the interaction between young Chinese online fandom nationalists' practices and the affordances of the Instagram platform. Because the content of Instagram is primarily visual, texts tend to get lost on the platform interface. The most efficient way to maximize the visibility of trolling texts on hashtag pages is to present them as images. The memes tend to use large fonts in yellow or white on bright red backgrounds. Besides the fact that the color combination comes from the Chinese national flag, it also serves to strengthen the visual impact: when scrolling down a targeted hashtag, a big wave of red floods the page.

### ***Exporting Truths through Trolling und Denunciation***

Moving from the specific techniques to the macro-level activism, the practices of China's online fandom nationalists fit the following two definitions. Phillips defines

trolling as an expression of a troll's online identity, motivated by a particular kind of unsympathetic laughter while insisting on and celebrating anonymity (Phillips 2015). Flame wars are "intentional (whether successful or unsuccessful) negative violations of (negotiated, evolving, and situated) interactional norms" (O'Sullivan & Flanagin 2003: 84). Regularly organizing, targeting the hashtag pages and comment sections of opponents, and delivering massive barrages of content with the same memes and slogans make up the group's online identity. The intention is not to keep a dialogue with equals, but to state their position unilaterally, ironically, and entertainingly, all while denouncing opponents in an attempt to eliminate their voice. A good example is the following trolling guideline message<sup>13</sup> that a fan club account posted in the fan groups before one of their daily trolling campaigns:

daily trolling campaign against target accounts/pages/hashtags; Instagram trolling guideline: <http://t.cn/AiRhH56i>.

must-have tags:

#hongkongpolice

#defendhongkong

#hangintherehongkong

#hkpolice

#onechina #hongkongpolice #hongkongispartofchina #hongkongbelongstochina

Major trolling strategies: Send more posts with more tags, don't reply to "trash youth" [online Hongkong protesters];

Focus on our own side: Make our popular posts more visible, elicit more replies to those popular posts;

Mind our words: Unite all the patriotic/pro-mainland Hong Kong folks, unite all forces that can be unified, avoid mentioning or insulting other countries;

Protect yourselves: Don't disclose your personal information, remember to check if the pictures' watermarks with Chinese social media IDs are cut off. (Field notes)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It is challenging to discern who exactly is behind such guideline messages: The top organizers of the trolling campaigns were unavailable for and appeared unwilling to participate in interviews. Based on my fieldwork and interviews with fan group administrators, these guidelines could be created by ordinary young fangirls with extensive experience within their communities. As for the degree of Chinese state involvement within these fandom groups, there exists a singular photograph that implicates such involvement of party propaganda department staff. However, its authenticity cannot be confirmed.

<sup>14</sup> The field note is dated October 11, 2019, from the fan group @BrotherAZhongAntiHaterGroup3.

As the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement continued to escalate in Hong Kong from 2019 to 2020, online debate about the movement and related issues became heated on multiple social media platforms. Chinese online fandom nationalists carried out daily trolling campaigns against Instagram hashtags related to the Hong Kong protest. The aim was to promote their views of the protest on international social media platforms. To boost the visibility of their posts, they sought to create as much data traffic for their posts as possible and to “occupy” the timelines of related hashtags. They avoided violating the platform rules and stayed anonymous to assure their privacy and the safety of their accounts. The first line of the following message links to a detailed trolling strategy for Instagram that illustrates how their trolling practices are entangled with the affordances of social media platforms:

Instagram installation package: [https://as.sogou.com/app/apkdetail?pid=34&cid=45&docid=5144009909862806300&wid=1528&v=5&uID=NfhqYRORmhpr7Mv\\_\\_](https://as.sogou.com/app/apkdetail?pid=34&cid=45&docid=5144009909862806300&wid=1528&v=5&uID=NfhqYRORmhpr7Mv__)

No participation under 23 years of age. Quarrels are not recommended; if you cannot help quarreling, make good use of the “quarrel guidebook”: <http://t.cn/EPzp89q>.

Notes!!!!

Key factors of Instagram’s post-weight calculation: numbers of followers, comments, likes

- Follow your fellows mutually as much as you can, increase the weight of your posts, so that our posts can trend on Instagram
- Don’t tangle with “yellow zombies” [Hong Kong protesters]; invective against them will only increase their contents’ popularity; sisters who cannot help disparaging them should do so in their own posts and conduct chats in their own comment sections

How to prevent being blocked by the platform

- Change your profile after registration, a must!
- Don’t start criticizing from the beginning; follow more neutral topics like celebrities or sports
- In the beginning, post more content without exposing your own identity, so that you won’t be flagged as a bot
- After being blocked by platforms, there’s a chance that you can continue using your account after changing the passwords

- Report the “trash youths” [Hong Kong protesters] accounts; “clean” the world. (Field notes)<sup>15</sup>

As the examples above show, the practices of these users were designed to manipulate the technological affordances of Instagram such as visibility and scalability. On the one hand, these users promoted their own messages through the social media practices of mutual following, liking and commenting. On the other, they avoided direct engagement with opponents so as not to amplify the latter's views and work and to prevent their younger collaborators from being “brain-washed”. They also attempted to keep their accounts active by creating real and apolitical timelines and profiles. Since Instagram's algorithms calculate followers, likes, and comments in order to “dataficate” content popularity (Mayer-Schoenberger & Cukier 2013: 30), its quantitative measure of popularity is linked to affordances of social media: “the potential audience who can bear witness” and “the ease with which content can be shared” (Boyd 2014: 11). From an anthropological perspective, affordances are always bound to the practices enacting them (Costa 2018: 3651). Through their online practices, China's online fandom nationalists enhance and suppress the visibility, scalability, and persistence of social media content depending on its political orientation. Under the core concept/frame of defending and promoting idolized/personified Chinese nation, their cross-platform mobilization and trolling selectively manufacture and contest truths on social media through fandom cultural memes and rhetoric.

## Conclusion

Focusing on concrete digital practices, this article has asked how digital pop-cultural practices and practices of political participation intertwine in the digital truth-making process of new Chinese online fandom nationalists. Drawing on practice and affordance theories, the article reveals the nuances of digital truth-making in the Chinese socio-cultural context. This research shows how Chinese fandom nationalists constructed and employed online fandom-cultural infrastructures. These infrastructures were dominated by organizers and active users who controlled access to the groups and hashtags, steered other members' practices, information access, and output. This dynamic led to a decentralized political mobilization of thousands of members. Within these groups, despite the availability of diverse media sources, political truths with Chinese nationalist ideological preferences are imported, negotiated, and reproduced through a pop-/fandom-cultural lens and rhetoric. Both the visual and textual

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<sup>15</sup> The field note is dated August 31, 2019, from the fan group @BrotherAZhongAntiHaterGroup3.

affordances of social media platforms allow Chinese online fandom nationalists to draw on Chinese fandom cultural memes in order to emphasize China's territorial integrity and developmental achievements, and to accuse their opponents of violence, hypocrisy, naivety, and ineptitude. The datafication of social media platforms allows their practices of commenting, liking, following, and reporting to enhance or suppress the visibility and persistence of nationalist social media content. In this process, the facts and narratives that fit the ideology and emotions of Chinese online fandom nationalists are molded into truths that support nationalist politics. In bringing these observations together, this article demonstrates how the affordances of social media platforms allow Chinese online fandom nationalists to create strong synergies between pop-/fandom-cultural and political practices, providing an ideal ground for the propagation of certain political truths while simultaneously suppressing/hiding the truths of others.

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