

Everyday nationalism on social media in China:

A study of A Zhong Ge

Student Name: Lizhen Peng

Student Number: 540066

Supervisor: Dr.Delia Dumitrica

Master Media Studies - Media, Culture & Society

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perception of everyday nationalism in China on the widely-used social media platform Weibo. *A Zhong Ge* is a virtual image of the nation of China created by the new form of grassroots nationalists iZhongs with various popular cultural elements. Studying this case could shed light on the developing situation of Chinese nationalism in the context of social media. The research tries to discuss: How do the younger generation of Chinese social media users make sense of everyday discourses about nationalism which utilize popular culture to personify the nation in the case of A Zhong Ge? It is worth studying because it is important to understand how young people experience nationalism and discover themselves in the new form of nationalism in China. It could provide a lens to dig into ordinary people's perceptions of everyday nationalism in China.

To answer these questions, this study used in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions in six sections: (1) Background information; (2) Familiarity with discourses of *A Zhong Ge*; (3) Fans-circle girl/ iZhong, popular culture and nationalism; (4) Everyday experiences of *A Zhong Ge*; (5) Understandings of *A Zhong Ge* with other nationalism events; (6) Understandings about national identity construction in *A Zhong Ge*. 12 Chinese overseas students across eight countries and regions have been invited to one-to-one video call interviews via communication apps WeChat and WhatsApp.

By means of a qualitative discourse analysis of these interviews, the study finds that younger generation social media users in the sample offered contradictory evaluations of A Zhong Ge image. And the familiarity of popular cultures may affect social media users' perception of nationalistic discourses used by iZhongs on social media. In addition, the younger generation of social media users who are outside of this community may show negative attitudes towards fan culture and fan girls (iZhongs). Besides, the younger generation of social media users are aware that the role of the official mainstream media is affecting public opinion. Last but not least, the younger generation of social media users outside of the iZhong community are more likely to mute themselves in the context of A Zhong Ge nationalism to avoid risks.

KEYWORDS: Everyday nationalism; Banal nationalism; National identity; Social media; Fandom

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1. Introduction

This study examines the perception of everyday nationalism in China through the case of a recent wave of citizen-led nationalistic activism *A Zhong Ge* on the social media platform Sina Weibo. Chinese nationalism on the internet has been becoming a common phenomenon in China (Wang et al, 2017). One example here is the case of “Little Pink”. The term refers to a group of Chinese internet users who participate in nationalistic activism on social media platforms by creating and sharing memes as their weapon for protesting Taiwan’s political drift from China (Fang & Repnikova, 2018). Previous research found that Little Pink was formed mostly by young Chinese who had used their familiarity with popular culture to create nationalistic messages to criticize negative message or thoughts about China (Wang et.al, 2017).

Nationalism has been defined by scholars as both a political ideology and a form of behaviour (Gellner, 2006; Smith, 1991). As a political ideology, nationalism claims that a nation is a homogeneous unit entitled to self-determination in the form of a nation-state (Gellner, 2006). However, nationalism is also a part of everyday life – it becomes a way in which people understand themselves and the world around them. In this thesis, I am interested in this form of nationalism, also known as everyday nationalism.

Everyday nationalism focuses on human agency of ordinary people in nationalism. It refers to the production and reproduction of the nation in routine activities through the integration of flags and other symbolic resources in the daily identities and practices of ordinary people (Fox,2018; Billig, 1995; Edensor,2002). Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, p.546) emphasise that individuals are both ‘consumers of national meanings’ and the ‘contingent producers’ of everyday meanings through daily interaction and reproduction. Thus, it is of vital importance to study the everyday practices of nationalism from the angle of ordinary people.

Previous scholars have paid attention to everyday nationalism about how people make their national identity in their social interactions, habits, routines, and practice knowledge in offline life (Condor, 2000; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Skey, 2011). On the contrary, those daily activities on social media seem to be less valued. Yet, the study’s perspective of everyday nationalism is important because it could help people know how the sense of national identity has been reflected and reproduced in daily routine. Not only performing existed identity but a new version of national identity could be constructed in the process of practicing nationalism on digital media (Wu, 2019). Studying everyday nationalism on social media could offer an opportunity to understand the forming process and behavioural patterns of nationalism among Chinese grassroots.

More recently, the nation, China, is personified as an online celebrity or an idol, with grassroots groups becoming involved in spreading these ideas on social media. In this research, I focus on these forms of personifying China as present in the case of *A Zhong Ge* (阿中哥). The origin of *A Zhong Ge* could date back to the Hong Kong independence protest in 2019, when many Chinese stars stated their will to support Chinese territorial sovereignty through posting “Hong Kong is part of China” on social media. On their side, Hong Kong independence protesters reacted against those stars on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. On Chinese popular social media platform Weibo, fans of the stars who defend Chinese territorial sovereignty gathered together and created the image of *A Zhong Ge*. They had personified China as an idol who has been attacked by Hong Kong protesters. Since then, the fan’s supportive activities for the idol *A Zhong Ge* have presented as the nationalistic movements aimed at fighting against the independence movement in Hong Kong. This case is particularly interesting because it also relies on elements from popular culture to articulate a system of discourses of nationalism on social media.

A Zhong Ge could be translated as “brother China” since “Ge” is a typical way to call male idols in China. The users behind this trend also entitled themselves as “Fans-circle girl” or alternatively “iZhong” (“i” refers to love and “Zhong” refers to China”). Similar to Little Pinks, those iZhongs also use digital resources especially memes to throw their anger and to show their determination to protect their idol China on social media. What is striking here is that the idolization of China is mixed with elements of popular culture. In constructing the image of *A Zhong Ge*, iZhongs use the fandom discourses to output Chinese culture, history and national pride. For instance, the most common sentences “*A Zhong Ge* as a 5000-year-young idol must be the most handsome boy in the world”, “*A Zhong Ge* has been the oldest surviving culture since he made his debut 5000 years ago” and “I am the girl of *A Zhong Ge*. I will never give up (loving him)!” construct a positive persona of China. Before the case of *A Zhong Ge*, Chinese always called China as Motherland or mother to show their respect and love to China.

Nevertheless, the new name *A Zhong Ge* seems to change the gender of the nation and also change the relationship between individuals and the nation. Those fandom discourses about *A Zhong Ge* which are used to increase intimacy with the younger generation by creating the idol image may not be accepted by some young netizens. On the one hand, for internet users, using elements of pop culture could make young netizens who are unfamiliar or even unsatisfied with fandom culture become out of context in *A Zhong Ge*. On the other hand, for self-censorship in China, many internet users chose to mute themselves due to political and social pressure (Jiang, 2012). As Chinese cyberspace only allows limited

political discussion, Chinese internet users are sensitive to discussing political topics and they are aware of the threaten of making improper comments to inconformity movement's ideology (Jiang, 2012).

As nationalism in China is on the rise, recent years also witness the main nationalistic practices domain shift from offline to online. Although historically, young people have been the force to be reckoned with in Chinese nationalism since the 1990s, the new generation of students are largely engaged in the nationalistic movements online than ever (Wu, 2019). As previous research about Chinese cyber nationalism has shown, younger generation Chinese play an important role in organizing and participating in nationalism with the internet (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Wang et al, 2017; Wu, 2019). So, in order to probe the influences and reasons of rising nationalism in China, it is of significance to take a close look at the young generation Chinese. In doing so, it could offer us inspirations for Chinese nationalism and the mobilization for the younger generation in the internet context.

Since younger audiences are avid users of social media, this project will use a sample from among this group to analyse their opinions on *A Zhong Ge* and iZhong's / Fans-circle girl's performance. Wang, Li and Wu (2017) found that college students who were born in the 1990s have more access to western culture and thoughts. It means that this group of people are more likely to take a more objective view on nationalism. Likewise, they also argue that Chinese students who have experiences of studying abroad more probably feel their affiliation with China (Wang et.al, 2017). Moreover, people who grow up with similar language, social background and national educational curricula may provide more appropriate and fruitful understandings with cultural phenomenon in *A Zhong Ge* case.

This research aims to examine the question **How do young Chinese social media users make sense of everyday discourses about nationalism which utilize popular culture to personify the nation in the case of *A Zhong Ge*?** By digging into this question, it could reveal the relationship between young Chinese internet users and Chinese nationalism practices in the context of social media. As a novel form of everyday nationalism, it is important to know how young people experience nationalism and discover themselves from *A Zhong Ge*.

To answer these questions, the approach of in-depth interviews and qualitative discourses analysis are used to collect data and conduct data processing. These methods could help to uncover many thoughts which muted beneath social media posts. Analysing the symbolic resources which have been used in building the online nationalism discourse could reveal whether this form of everyday nationalism is similar or different from

traditional discourses of nationalism in China. Furthermore, this would also shed light on how everyday nationalism is performed by citizens.

It is important to understand everyday nationalism on Weibo because we could shed light on how cyber nationalism has been understood by grassroots Chinese in their everyday life in the context of idolization. It could provide us with a new angle to dig into the role of social media in forming bottom-up nationalism.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Nation, national identity and nationalism

The concept of *nationalism* has diverse definitions. Gellner (2006) defines nationalism as a primarily political principle stating the congruence of political and national unit. In his study, he argues that the shared and formal education system, cultural homogeneous, and linguistic standardisation are some central features of nationalism (Gellner, 2006). Anderson (1991) adds to Gellner that nationalism is not equivalent to the awaking the self-consciousness of one nation which means it would not build a brand-new nation. However, their theory of nationalism pays attention to nationalism as a top-down ideology pushed by political elites to publics but ignores the aspects that ordinary people digest and reproduce the national ideology in the everyday life.

Smith (1991) sees the concept of nationalism as an ideology used for constructing and maintaining a collective identity for people within a territory. And the core idea of this ideology is constructing a particular national identity among people living in the same territory (Smith, 2010). He argues that nationalism draws on the pre-existing shared history of the community to build a common sense of belonging.

Muller (2008) distinguishes between two types of nationalism: civic nationalism and ethnic nationalism. Civic nationalism argues that the nation is composed of members bonded by laws, rules and political institutions. It indicates that all people living in the same border within a country are part of the nation no matter what ethnical, racial or religious they belong to (Muller, 2008). In contrast, ethnic nationalism argues that the nation is made up of members who are tied together by shared ethnicity or “common blood” (Muller, 2008). It regards the nation as a big family sharing the same morality and reinforced through uniform popular traditions and customs. In our case, rare ethnic topics are discussed in the *A Zhong Ge* related discourses in building the national ideology. Rather, all the members of China were valued as a whole. For instance, the “children of China” is used to call members of the nation.

Defining the word *nation* is difficult since it is an abstract concept. Some essentialist scholars argue that the notion of nation is a named human population territorializing a historic region as their motherland and sharing a public culture, collective memories, common legal rights as well as a sense of solidarity within the territory (Smith, 2000). In other words, essentialism define the nation as the group of people with objective commonalities of race, language, or culture constructing a collective identity.

In contrast, constructivists, however, argue that the nation is a social construct. Benedict Anderson (1991) defines the nation as an imagined political community with boundaries in

which the nation is always bonded by a deep, horizontal comradeship. In building the imaged community, reading written languages in newspapers, books, and magazines in local language help the nation member to define the nation. Constructivism value the nation as a convergent of historic results made by daily plebiscite which solidify people within the country by reaching the common wills (Renan, 1998). Gellner (1983) states that nation is constructed by shared, formal educational system, the congruence of political unit and of culture, linguistic standardization, similar culture and extensive bureaucratic control. That is to say, a people in one nation share an unalterable ethnicity, which could find clues in their shared bloodline, language, history, culture, character and behaviours.

Within the nationalist ideology the nation is defined by the language, history, culture and independent autonomy (Smith, 2010). It means that when we talk about China as nation, it not only refers to the geographic territory, common heritage, but also the collective wills derived from party-state. Although Chinese ethnic groups have multiple religious, language and culture, the nation of China is built upon Han people as the major population, mandarin as the standardized language and Chinese civilization as traditional culture. The reason we value both majority Han people and minorities as a whole nation is that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) builds political propaganda to remain the loyalty of ethnic groups (Tang & He, 2010) to the “one nation” ideology. Moreover, in the context of civic nationalism, ethnics are of insignificance when we use nation to refer to a state or its citizenship. (Connor, 2004; Muller, 2008). Therefore, this study only focuses on the civic aspect of nationalism regardless the ethnic issues in nationalism.

Social psychologists argue that national identity is collective perception to differentiate the members of one nation from others and it could build the sense of belonging and consciousness (László, 2013). Some scholars describe that national identity comes from the shared subjective feelings about the nation (Anderson, 1983; Guibernau, 2004). For individuals, national identity refers to how they identify themselves as members of the homogeneous nation and how they perform themselves based on those identification (Edensor, 2002). Previous study also points out that national identity could also refer to the citizens’ psychological recognition of their uniqueness compared with people from another nation (Kim, 2012). Wodak et. al (1999, p.169-170) revealed that the cultural identities including mentality, character, behavioural dispositions, language and so forth play an important role in imaging “innate nationality” and people could whereby differentiate themselves nation from others. In this regard, the personal pronoun “We / us” and “They / them” are applied to address their national identity. These elements above could be used as tools to analyse the imaged community of Chinese nationality.

In terms of structure and consequences of national identity, Gries (2011) finds that the nationalist historical beliefs are an essential component of Chinese national identity. It indicates that that histories of the national past and national identities in the present are mutually constituted in China. In other words, in practicing nationalism and patriotism, Chinese people will value themselves as “We / us” and also others as “They/them” based on the historical factors.

2.2 Nationalism and patriotism

The meaning of the two terms, *nationalism* and *patriotism*, are somehow confusing in some conditions. Different scholars hold different attitude to the interchangeability of them. Connor Walker (2018) emphasises that nationalism and patriotism are two separate concepts. He argues that nationalism is the loyalty and identity with one’s nation in the pre-existing cognization of the world while patriotism refers to one’s devotion to their civic identity and national institutions (Walker, 2004).

When treating nationalism and patriotism as two attitudinal clusters, Kosterman and Feshbach (1989) state that nationalism is closely related to one’s deep sense of superiority compared with other nations in the world. For instance, the behaviours of claiming one nation is the greatest one than the rest should be considered as nationalism. At the same time, patriotism concerns about pride feelings and emotional attachment to one’s homeland and shared national identity with other citizens (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). As an example, the sense of national pride when a person sees the player of his/ her country win the Olympic game should be considered as patriotism. In this term, patriotism tend to portray the positive emotional relationship within the nation. It simply describes one’s affiliation and attachment with his/ her country. On the contrary, nationalism place emphasis on the comparison with other countries or people in the other nation.

A previous quantitative research about Chinese’s attitude towards nationalism and patriotism also found that those two concepts are empirically distinct in the social context of China (Sinkkonen, 2013). Sinkkonen (2013) shows that patriotic emotions would not guide people to compare their nation with other nations. In other words, Chinese’ patriotism does not equal to look down upon other nations or states. In addition, compared with patriotism, nationalism has closer connection with foreign policy preferences including international cooperation, economic protectionism and the international role of China (Sinkkonen, 2013). Thus, in the Chinese context, nationalism tend to expresses China’s character in dealing with multilateral and bilateral relations.

Oppositely, other scholars deny the strong difference between nationalism and patriotism. Some scholars like Micheal Billig (1995) refuse to treat those two concepts separately and they use those two words interchangeably. Anthony Smith (2009) elaborates upon the significant overlap part of those two concepts. He points out that patriots show the same emotions on pursuing goals on collective autonomy, national solidarity and national identity. At the same time, nationalism could also have the extreme side as patriotism once the nationalistic behaviours are impelled by a violently emotional psychology, seek irrational ends (Smith, 1995).

However, the distinctions about nationalism and patriotism above are not clear in understanding national discourses in practices of people's daily life. Indeed, individuals could have different perceptions of nationalism and patriotism. Interesting, they seem to be blind to nationalism in daily life since they often consider this term as "negative patriotism" (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). It could lead people to misuse or overuse the word patriotism in their daily life to avoid negative connotations in talking about loyalty to the nation.

Particularly, in the language context of China patriotism is translated as *aiguozhuyi* (爱国主义) which literally means love-country-ism. Nationalism is translated as *minzuzhuyi* (民族主义) and its literally translation is ethnic-group-ism (Bislev & Li, 2014). In everyday life, Chinese people are found to use *minzuzhuyi* to describe historical versions of nationalism or ethnic nationalism in other countries. And the term *aiguozhuyi* is used to refer to Chinese nationalism in modern times (Bislev & Li, 2014). Since then, this research should distinguish those two concepts in light of the practical context.

On that account, this study will apply Kosterman and Feshbach's theory to differentiate nationalism from patriotism based on whether people use language to compare different nations.

2.3 Banal nationalism and everyday nationalism

Billig (1995) draws attention to the banal aspects of nationalism. These banal aspects have to do with the everyday representations of the nation through the use of symbols including national flags, sports events, popular songs, etc. Besides, Billig (1995) also aware the political speeches as well as the routine reports on mass media naturally construct sovereign state and independent nations. In this process of reproductions, media channels use deictic language including "we", "us", "here" and so forth to address audiences in the nation (Billig, 1995). Those routine apply of the symbols of the nation is seen as helping

build a sense of belonging among citizens and strong sentiments of pride in the nation. Billig's insights of banal nationalism help to reconsider nationalism as an imperceptible landscape in hardly noticeable ways. These findings are useful for the research since in the case of A Zhong Ge, symbols which are included in the nationalistic movements by iZhongs on social media could be considered as performances of banal nationalism.

Everyday nationalism builds on banal Billig's nationalism, but it emphasises to human agency in performing the nation ritually (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Since most people imply their national identity through talking about nationhood, their understandings of nation and nationhood could be embodied from ordinary people's verbal and non-verbal communication and expression. In the process of experiencing, giving meaning and talking about nationhood, the form of bottom-up national identity could be reflected (Condor, 2000). It is useful to inspire the researcher to pay attention to how ordinary people perceive nationalism in everyday life in the case of A Zhong Ge.

For banal nationalism, Billig emphasizes the ideologies of nationalism while the study of everyday nationalism focuses on how people do things (Fox, 2018). However, Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) argue that the ideology is not an elite phenomenon but ordinary activities that grassroots citizens engaged in. Through observing how individuals talk about the nation; how they make national choices; how they perform collective rituals and certain symbolic meanings in daily life; how they consume national products, the practices of nationalism in everyday life could be framed in ordinary routines (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008).

Michael Skey (2011) dedicates a book to everyday routine in nationalism. He generates five different dimensions of national discourse: spatial, temporal, cultural, political and self/other. Specifically, spatial dimension refers to the expression and experiences of territory of the nation; temporal dimension is embodied through daily and mass 'national' rituals (Skey, 2011: p.11); cultural dimension refers to the taken-for-granted symbolic system used in everyday life (Skey, 2011: p.11); political dimension stresses the organizational mobilization and sustainability of social movements (Skey, 2011: p.12); self/other dimension focus on the embodiment of people, traits and values in different nations (Skey, 2011: p.12).

Nevertheless, those scholars state that ordinary people and their everyday practices in doing nationalism is always missing in the research on nationalism. This research will shift the domain of everyday nationalism to a digital environment, so these theories about nationalism motivated by grassroots could be referenced. At the same time, it could help to decipher the differences between *A Zhong Ge* and traditional nationalism on the internet.

2.4 Nationalism and internet in China

The modern nation known as People's Republic of China (PRC) has existed since 1949 which has dramatic differences from ancient China in both its territories (i.e. the territoriality of Taiwan is different from Han Dynasty) and political principles (i.e. laws, regimes, etc.). In this thesis, we defined the nation China as PRC territorially due to the online discourses about *A Zhong Ge* originate from the territorial sovereignty of Hong Kong.

Townsend (1992) states the primary Chinese identity is cultural rather than nation or state in the period of culturalism. In the period of culturalism, China rejected foreign influences and emphasized the native culture. Indeed, Chinese display higher loyalty to cultural traditions origin from Chinese ancient civilizations such as Chinese language, cuisine, rituals, dress and so on (Townsend,1992). However, since 1949, the culturalist approach to the nation has been replaced by a politically-defined community (Townsend,1992. p100). Scholars agree that nationalism had been used by intellectuals as the means of motivating Chinese publics to release the gushing enthusiasms to save China from the aggression of western countries (Downs & Saunders,1999). A typical example here is China's territorial dispute with Japan over Diaoyu Island.

Therefore, the rise of Chinese nationalism is highly related to the PRC regime, who promoted the "one nation" ideology which has opposed these parathions of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau from mainland China.

Chinese nationalism had tended to focus on boycotting foreign people, goods and culture (Liu, 2006). For example, in 2008, groups of Chinese in different areas of China launched protests to boycott and destroy Japanese products due to the dispute with Japan about the territorial sovereignty of Senkaku / Diaoyu Island. It could be traced back to the bilateral territorial contradictions between China and Japan in history. However, contemporary nationalism unfolds on the internet. In China, it is also associated with the transformation of the nation into a brand to both domestic and international people (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Wang et al, 2017). In other words, Chinese nationalism on the internet cares about shaping and boosting the image of China.

With the development of the internet, cyber nationalism has become a widespread phenomenon in China. According to Wang, Li, and Wu (2017), there are three waves of Chinese cyber nationalism. The first wave could date back to 1998 that a Chinese college student used the bulletin board system to pass on the information and organize offline protest Chinese discrimination in Indonesia. Lasting eight years (1998-2015), the first wave of Chinese cyber nationalism has several features: First, the main actors were college school

netizens who born in the 1970s; Second, they unsatisfied with the performance of government in international relations (i.e. Chinese government sidestepped questions about the Air Force One photo op incident in 2002); Third, those participants were critical with public affairs.

The second wave of cyber nationalism spans 2008 to 2010 (Wang et.al, 2017). Different from the first wave that young people directly expressed their concerns about their motherland, the second wave was performed in the context of subcultures such as animation, esports games and so on. Its main actors were born in the 1980s and many of them accessed to western media. There was a trend that the more they contact the western world, the more likely they became nationalists. In the second wave of cyber nationalism, people often developed their sense of national identity and political consciousness in the process of consuming subcultures.

In the third wave, the nationalistic crusaders in cyber nationalism have become more specific and have been labelled a particular name “Little Pink”. Little Pink is the group of people who practice their patriotism and nationalism by equipping memes as their weapon to advocate their political cause (Fang& Repnikova, 2018). For the group of Little Pink, their political ideology originates from the mediated politics in the background of commercialized new media (Wang et.al, 2017). They often attack celebrities who are at loggerheads with the nation. The very well-known event in the third wave which was discussed by former studies (Fang& Repnikova, 2018; Wang et.al, 2017) is Chou Tzu-yu, a female idol from Taiwan, who introduced her nationality as Taiwanese in a Korea TV show. That event brought blog wars between her fans and Little Pinks. But compared with nationalists in the second wave, Little Pinks behaves more enlightened in blog wars in obeying many rules. As the development of economy and education in China, the young generation netizens in the third wave who were born after 1990 are more likely rid of blind worship for the western world. Especially, the expatriate students and international travellers are more positive to the nation China and their nationalistic sentiment (Wang et.al, 2017. p 46-47).

Yet, as the development of Weibo, Little Pink seems to be labelled with negative stereotype which is used to refer to Chinese radical nationalism in general (Wu, 2019). They are thought to attack to others who are have the different ideas about the nation with them. As a new form of nationalist, the similarities and differences between them and Little Pink still need to be discovered.

2.5 Idol, fandom and fans culture in China

Popular culture is defined as the media products which are made by people, made for people and well-liked by people (O'sullivan et.al,1994). Hence, cultural products including but not limited to music, dramas, movies, animation, idols and diverse fan practices could cover popular culture in East Asia (Chen ,2017). Particularly, idol and fans culture are subculture rising in the internet domain of China in recent years (Chen, 2017; Xie, 2019; Wu, 2019). The Chinese word “爱豆 (*Ai Dou*)” which refers to idol originates from the title of young idols in South Korea and Japan (Wu, 2019). Idols are mainly come from young singers, actors /actress, bands and other entertainers who are praised to skies and worshipped like stars by adolescents and young adults. Idol supportive behaviours have sweep across China since the Korean wave hit around (Zhang & Negus, 2020). However, the nation-state government sets barriers for foreign cultural products such as Hallyu idols to avoid the expansions of other country's soft power and promote the domestic culture (Chen, 2017). It offers much more opportunities for the development and popularity of domestic popular cultural products in China. The persona of A Zhong Ge has been emerged in this social cultural context that domestic popular stars are more welcomed in China.

The words, fans and fandom remain negative connotations for people since they refer to the cultural identity based on one's devotion to cultural products (Duffett,2013). Lewis (1992, p.9) defines fans as “a potential fanatic” and fandom as “excessive, bordering on deranged, behaviour”. But Lewis's study only examined fandom and fan behaviours in offline activities such as Beatlemania which was a phenomenon in last century without the popularity of internet. Due to the fandom of A Zhong Ge relies on the mediation of internet, it offers a context with huge differences from offline activities. In consequences, whether iZhongs leave impressions for people which are different from those fanatic remains as an unsolved question.

Using elements of fan culture to practice nationalism is not emerged in A Zhong. Wang's et.al (2017) research compared two group of nationalism with fandom background, “军迷 (military fans)” and “迷妹 (fan girls)”. The former one represents masculine, rational and political behaviours, whereas the public image of “fan girls” tends to be feminine, emotional and de-political or the political unconscious. This group of “fan girls” prefer to post non-aggressive or gentle discourses such as Chinese food, scenery, patriotic poems, songs and so on to reply to bad speech on China. The “fan girls” could be seen as the predecessor of iZhong / fans-circle girl because both of them are deeply impressed by fan culture and both of them have an idol or idols, though iZhongs' idol is the “virtual” A Zhong Ge rather than specific human beings.

“饭圈应援(*Fan Quan Ying Yuan*)” which literally means Fans-circle supportive activity is a common phenomenon of fandom in China which including both online and offline parts. For offline, it refers to spend money on supportive activities in idols’ offline work such as promoting a massive run on idols’ concert tickets and pulling the supportive banners for idols (Xie, 2019, p.7-9). At the same time, online supportive activities are a series of systematic “数据打投(*Shu Ju Da Tou*)” which could also be understood as creating “data traffic” for their idols. These refer to controlling and guiding public opinions for their idols, keeping and creating high-profile image for idols on social media by posting positive topics about their idols and fighting back to negative and even hate speech (Xie, 2019, p.9-12).

Additionally, the old fans will guide new fans in their community to analyse understand the negative news of the idol for protecting their icon better. The logic of fans-circle activity support is denying any bad comments on the idol but massively promoting compliments on social media. Thus, “idol politics” based on the collective power of fandom are formed from the interactions and conflicts with specialized language patterns and ways of battle on social media. Wu (2019) argues that those fans construct a sense of belonging since they are gathered on various social media platforms by the collectivized beliefs of defending their common idol. Besides, members of each particular fandom group prefer to use symbolic elements, for example they use the same profile picture to enhance their strong collective identity (Wu, 2019).

Under this background, even though there is not a real singer, actor or band in the case of A Zhong Ge, the manifestation of iZhongs could borrow the logic and system of “idol politics” in Chinese fandom.

3. Method

This project focuses on how the discourse of the nation in the case of *A Zhong Ge* is received by audiences. To answer the research question, this study adopted the semi-structured interview for collecting data. As explained in the previous chapter, the research focuses on Chinese social media users' perception of the online nationalism discourses, so the in-depth understandings from the aimed population are important. Conducting qualitative interviews allows us to gather data about how Chinese social media users' understandings of the complex social phenomenon (Qu & Dumay, 2011) about *A Zhong Ge* in their daily life. The semi-structured interview offers flexibility to discover or elaborate information which has been hidden in interviewees' mind but may not have previously been considered by interviewers (Gill et al, 2008).

As elaborated in previous chapters, the group of Chinese students overseas is of social importance and value in clarifying their opinions on nationalism. It is because students overseas are more likely standing in a neutral position to narrate social facts in the society rather than worship to the western world (Wang et.al, 2017). However, there could be some deviation of perceptions because Chinese students in different countries might be aware of different information through local media and interactions with local people. Consequently, for the sake of avoiding potential bias and stereotypes to China in one nation, the study decided to open to Chinese students overseas around the world.

In order to reach out participants range from all over the world, the interviews applied the strategy of video call interview via communication apps WeChat and WhatsApp. Due to this research needs to make interactions with international students from China in eight countries, it means face-to-face communication is virtually impossible. Nonetheless, long-distance communication has advantages to reach transnational participants and save expense and time compared with the face-to-face interview (Opdenakker, 2006). Even though the interactions between interviewee and interviewer might be weaker than the face-to-face interview, most social cues including voice, intonation and body language could remain and be captured through camera and microphone through video call.

All the interviews were done in Mandarin as the communication language. On the one hand, using their mother tongue could encourage participants to express themselves correctively and avoid language matters. It could positively avoid misunderstandings because of participants' choice of English words in conversations. On the other hand, due to the language patterns which used in China fans culture are unique and it could not be simply translated into English. For example, the direct translation of the very common sentence “为

阿中哥打 Call” is “Making the call for A Zhong Ge”. However, this has nothing to do with a telephone call but rather refers to cheering for A *Zhong Ge*. Hence, it is important to use the original discourses to discuss this nationalistic phenomenon on Chinese media. Nevertheless, the interviews allow participants to use some particular English vocabulary as an alternative.

3.1 Sampling and recruitment

As discussed above, the young generation Chinese social media users could offer the participants in this project will thus have to fulfil the following criteria: (1) The participants are born between 1990 and 2002 (it means that they must be adults above 18 years old); (2) The participants are familiar with social media in China especially Weibo. (3) They have access to get higher education in the foreign countries or have been graduated from overseas universities; (4) They are familiar with the “A Zhong Ge” discourse on social media; (5) They are willing to share their thoughts about nationalism in China and feel free to talk about their experience critically.

This research used two kinds of measures to gather participants. At the first step, the first step is online advertising which could contribute to outreach to different people widely (Robinson, 2014). Due to one of the criteria of choosing participant is “Chinese social media users”, publishing an advertisement on Weibo and WeChat, two of the most popular social media platforms in China, could help to reach out targeted group. After the public online advertising, the following step applied snowball sampling to build a connection with other Chinese students studying abroad. The snowball sampling could narrow the aim of the study and maintain the power of information (Malterud et al, 2016). Through snowball sampling, more proper participants were recommended by both researcher’s friends in her social network and people who saw the online advertisement.

The twelve interviewees were recruited by reaching out to the researchers’ fellow colleagues studying abroad and asking them to suggest further participants. I also recruited participants by contacting them on social media if I saw them involved in the A *Zhong Ge* conversations.

In this research, since the study aims to head for in-depth analysis of discourse details, the scale of the sample size could be small, N=12 (Malterud et al, 2016). This study invited 12 overseas students across eight countries and region including Denmark, Finland, France, HongKong, Japan, the Netherlands (residing in 4 different cities), the USA, Sweden as

participants. Those participants are almost master students but one bachelor student. Two of them are males and the rest are females. Participants overview is shown in Table 1.

No.	Nickname	Gender	Year of birth	Education Level	Country of study	Years of study abroad
1	Tia	Female	1996	Master	Netherland	1
2	Lay	Female	1991	Doctor	Netherland	1
3	Hui	Female	1995	Master	Netherland	6 months
4	Guo	Female	1996	Master	France/Finland/Netherland	2
5	Xu	Female	1993	Master	France/Finland/Netherland	1.5
6	Huang	Female	1994	Master	U.S.A/ Netherland	2.5
7	Wan	Female	1994	Master	Netherland	2
8	Yan	Female	1995	Master	Hong Kong	1
9	Shin	Female	1997	Bachelor	Netherland	1.5
10	Yu	Female	1993	Master	Sweden	2
11	Chang	Male	1996	Master	Denmark	2
12	Kang	Male	1996	Master	Japan	2

Table 1: Participant's overview

3.2 Ethics and reflexivity

Since our research topic asks participants to share personal and even sensitive ideas and feelings about nationalism, it should follow the research ethics to make participants untraceable (Saunders et al, 2015). In other words, participants' personal identities should be disguised for ensuring anonymity. In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of human subjects, participants' names will be replaced by pseudonyms in this research. Our participants will be categorized by descriptive information such as biological sex, age, studying major, and country rather than individual data such as location and name.

Each interview will start with an explanation about research goals. And all participants will receive and sign the informed consent form which includes an introduction about the research topic, participants' obligations and rights in the interview. Because those participants share their personal thoughts and feelings about a nationalism movement throughout the interview, the interview questions must be designed to guide interviewees based on ethical consideration. Moreover, the position of the interviewer should keep neutral

but the interviewer could show self-disclosure to construct similarities with participants due to the fact that they are young people (Abell et al, 2006).

Every interview in this study will last between 40 minutes to 70 minutes. And the interviewer will record the interviews digitally. All personal information in the interview will be anonymous and every interviewee will be given an alternative nickname for identifying different cases in the phase of analysing data. Other personal details such as place of residence will be altered to further conceal respondents' identity.

According to Berger (2015), the position of research will impact research on access to the 'field'; the research-researched relationship and information sharing; the way to construct the world, to gather information, and to shape the findings and conclusions. In this research, the researcher is a member of the younger generation of social media platform users who have studied abroad. It means the researcher is also a member of the observed population. Therefore, the researcher could easily shape a relationship between herself and the participants by sharing similar experiences. Due to the sensitive nature of nationalism in China, the status of the researcher may enable participants to share more personal thoughts which are muted on public platforms. Besides, the researcher has knowledge of fandom culture and Chinese nationalism. And she had observed iZhongs and A Zhong Ge related nationalistic discourses for 3 months. It means the researcher understands the study topics well, which could not only guide and help participants to discuss the national discourses but also contribute to interpreting participants' answers.

3.3 Interview Guide

This research applied semi-structured interviews because it allows participants give open responses in their own words and probe into targeted questions in depth (Horton et al., 2004). In other words, direct questions, indirect questions, follow-up questions, specific questions and interactive questions were combined (Turner, 2010).

All interviews were guided by a structure of six themes: (1) Background information. The first theme covered some basic information about the participants such as their country of residence, social media preference and access to information. Asking some simple questions as the ice breaker could contribute to narrow down the distance between interviewer and participator and engage participants in the interview (Brennen, 2017). (2) Familiarity about discourses of *A Zhong Ge*. The second theme aims to know participants' impression of *A Zhong Ge*. They could tell their opinions about their feelings about *A Zhong Ge* through two examples on Weibo. (3) Fans-circle girl/ iZhong, popular culture and nationalism. The third theme examines participants' perceptions and attitude to

popular cultural elements used in *A Zhong Ge*. (4) Everyday experiences about *A Zhong Ge*. The fourth theme asks participants to share their experiences and feelings about the nationalistic topic, *A Zhong Ge*, in their daily life. (5) Understandings about *A Zhong Ge* with other nationalism events. This theme focuses on how participants understand *A Zhong Ge* and *iZhong* as a new phenomenon. (6) Understandings about national identity construction in *A Zhong Ge*. The last theme aims to detect participants' understandings about performances of national identity in *A Zhong Ge*.

During the interview, some typical examples of *A Zhong Ge* discourses on Weibo were selected and used to assist. In doing so, the researcher showed several typical *A Zhong Ge*-related Weibo posts including text, video and pictures to participants to reinforce their impression about related topics. Firstly, there were two Weibo posts with videos used in the interview. The first one was published by People's Daily, the largest official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, with the sentences: A Zhong, A Zhong, go bravely! The children of China will follow you forever! Let us tell the world, # Our idol named A Zhong!... The video in the first Weibo post is a short cut of one of the most popular entertainment programs in China named Happy Camp in 2019. In the video, all the hosts and audiences shouted out the sentences in above, and the well-known host He said "There is no regret to be born in China in my life". Besides, all audiences in the video carried banners which wrote supportive slogans like "Children of China support A Zhong Ge forever", "A Zhong Ge, we love you", so on and so forth.

As for the second Weibo which was posted by Shanghai Jiao Tong University official account which was consisted of cartons. This Weibo post also carried the hashtag # Our idol named A Zhong and it wrote "Let us listen to how those fan-circle girls tell us about their idol. Let us support A Zhong Ge together". There is much more information included in the second video. First, the video used many descriptive phrases to compliment China at the beginning such as "Holding world with virtue, our big China", "Territorial integrity, our big China", and extra. Second, it described a personified history of China who used to be a nobility, but bullied by other countries later and lost three siblings which refers to Hong Kong, Macaw and Taiwan). Third, it listed many so-called achievements in recent years in fields of economy, culture, education, infrastructure. Specifically, it used sentences like "China's Gross Domestic Product (hereinafter referred to as GDP) ranks the second in the world", "As one of the permanent members in the United Nations, China is the top celebrity with devoted fans bases", "China has five-thousand-year history from generation to generation", and so forth. Last but not the least, there were many symbols used in this video such as national flag, national song, the map of China, personified images of China, rabbits

which is a representative symbol of China source from a nationalistic animation *Year Here Affair*, and so on.

Apart from the Weibo and videos, three representative pictures were selected and used in the interview. By sending these pictures, participants were asked to describe their understandings and feelings about them. All the three pictures were selected because they were not only used on Weibo and other social media platforms but also it was reported by online or offline news. In the first picture, there are two characters and the former character who is of greater stature and stronger named iZhong while the smaller and weaker character leans behind iZhong named China (shown as Image 1). At the same time, the sentence on this picture writes “No one could bully him”. This image explained the relationship between A Zhong Ge and iZhong. In detail, iZhong as the fans of China shows his/her determination to protect China from others. The second image shows the portrait of iZhongs or Fans-circle girls who regard China as their idol (Image 2). There are three girls in this image and all of them wear a cap made of the pattern of China’s national flag with a pair of rabbit ears. Noticeably, the girl standing in the centre holds a keyboard like a weapon. As for the third picture, it has been recognized as the portrait of A Zhong Ge (Image3). It is a male military figure who equipped army uniform and weapons. He holds a large China’s national flag in hand and assumes a position of kissing it. Even though it tries to portray an army figure, however, the image of A Zhong Ge is of the feminine face and his hairstyle is much more than the standard Chinese soldier.



Image 1: iZhong and A Zhong Ge: No one could bully him



Image 2: Portrait of iZhongs / Fans-circle girls



Image 3: Portrait of A Zhong Ge

In addition, some typical language patterns or A Zhong Ge support slogans were discussed in the interview: “阿中哥哥有 14 亿活粉 (Translated as A Zhong Ge has 1.4 billion active fans)”; “守护全世界最好的阿中哥 (Translated as Let us safeguard the best A Zhong Ge in world) ”; “阿中哥哥走花路吧 (Translated as A Zhong Ge, let us walk flower road);“我和阿中哥哥锁了(Translated as I am locked together with A Zhong Ge) ”; “哥哥只有我们了 (Translated as A Zhong Ge have nothing except us)”. The reason of choosing those language patterns is because that they could be seen on Weibo posts and comments very frequently. More importantly, those sentences could be found in some mainstream media reports such as China Central Television (hereinafter referred to as CCTV), People’s Daily, and also their Weibo posts or comments.

3.4 Data analysis & interpretation

Nationalism is composed of expression and practices in everyday life in which discourses are mainly the indispensable forms (De Cillia, 1999). Jørgensen and & Phillips (2002) define discourse as language use in daily life for communication which could help speakers to create a true or real world, individual selves and identity. Then, the discourse analysis refers to “a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)” (Jørgensen and & Phillips ,2002, p.12).

Since the research objectivities were to understand and decipher the way the younger generation talk and perceive nationalistic discourses, the qualitative approach discourse analysis was conducted. This analytic method could help the researcher make interpretations based on both the detail of the interview material and the contextual knowledge (Jørgensen and & Phillips, 2002). In addition, it could contribute to decipher participants’ national identity reflected from the words and sentences in the interactions.

In analysing participants discourses, this research referred Fox and Miller-Idriss’s (2008) study which focus on the practice of everyday nationalism through observing talking, choosing, performing and consuming. In detail, analysing “talking” refers to analyse the way individuals talk about the nation, the meaning of the nation to individuals, and how they talk “with” nation in the specific context. In “choosing” the nation, they mean to observe how individuals make “national choices”, for example “reading a nationalists newspaper” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008, p.542). By “performing” the nation, collective rituals and their symbolic meanings in everyday life are examined. As for “consuming” the nation, Fox and Miller-

Idriss argue that (p.549) it is reflected by “mundane tastes and preferences of ordinary people” in their everyday consumption habits. At the same time, Skey (2011) pay attention to nationalism in observing everyday nationalism and he suggests to measure nationalism in five dimensions: spatial, temporal, cultural, political and self/other.

With these in mind, the interviews were analyses based on above tools. According to Potter and Edwards (1996, P.609), doing discourse analysis entails three aspects, by focusing on “what is discourse doing”, “how is the discourse constructed to make this happen”, and “what resources are available to perform this activity”. For this study, the interview transcriptions were examined and identified by: (1) Participants’ choice of vocabulary in expressing their understandings of concrete elements or examples; (2) Their attitudes or arguments shaping in the discussion of “A Zhong Ge” related topics; (3) Participants national identity constructed in the conversation. In practice, the researcher focuses on participants’ word selection such as “we/us” and “they/them”; phrase construction, for example the interviewee Kang’s answer “... I feel sense of honour for China, I think that I am a member of it...” embodied the national pride and belongings ; sentiments performing in certain example such as “proud”, “ridiculous” and so on.

In terms of the credibility of a qualitative research, researcher’s efforts and abilities approach as main instruments (Golafshani, 2003). In this research, participants’ discourses were analysed horizontally which means those answers are interpreted under the same system to assure the reliability. It means that all data were interpreted by the same tools mentioned above and clustered by topics found in this study. Besides, since I am a member of research targeted group, the Chinese younger generation social media user, and I am also an active consumer of popular culture in China, my personal experiences could prove the reliability of data interpretation.

4. Results

4.1. Nationalistic discourse of A Zhong Ge

In this case, diverse discourses including pictures, videos, text and emojis have been applied to construct the nationalistic context of A Zhong Ge on Weibo. This section will introduce the main discourses and the main image of the fandom community iZhongs.

In A Zhong Ge context, national image is reflected as in the image of A Zhong Ge. The widespread picture Image 3 directly shows the recognized figure of A Zhong Ge. Its personified image is a young man in the Chinese army uniform who is holding and trying to kiss China's national flag. In contrary to the army figure, Image 1 depicts the nation China as a helpless child hiding behind iZhongs for protection. China in this image looks much smaller and weaker than iZhongs.

In addition, China's personified figure Wang Yao (王耀) from the Japanese anime Axis Power Hetalia (APH) has been used in making propaganda videos to represent A Zhong Ge. In those videos, Wang Yao either wears Chinese dress or uniform with national flag.

Apart from using the figure of A Zhong Ge to build the image of China, the national image also has been constructed through iZhongs' discourses of A Zhong Ge. In the context of A Zhong Ge, the national image of China is mainly building based on the comparisons with other nations and states. Particularly, iZhongs emphasize and keep reproducing comparative discourses such as "China is now the number two economy in the world", "China is the only existing ancient civilization in the world", "China has the most cultural and natural heritages in the world" ect. to differentiate China with other country.

Moreover, many pictures and slogans about Chinese territory have been emphasized in A Zhong Ge discourses. Specifically, many sentences once appeared in history or politic theory class such as "Defending One-China principle", "Hong Kong, Macaw and Taiwan are China's territory since antient times" and "We will not lose any part of the motherland" are often applied.

Finally, like previous nationalistic movements, many non-aggressive discourses such as Chinese food, beautiful scenery, patriotic songs and so on are common in A Zhong Ge propaganda on Weibo.

In the process of building national image of A Zhong Ge on Weibo, the image of main images of the fandom community, iZhongs /Fans-circle girls, has shaped. Paralleling the animated figure of A Zhong Ge in Image 3, the fan community also made a self-portrait in Image 2. Its key elements include national flag, the nationalistic symbol rabbit, and keyboards. It could correspond to the bullied and weak national image of A Zhong Ge in Image 1. In this picture iZhongs write the sentence "A Zhong Ge have nothing except us"

for stimulating intense emotional resonances. Indeed, this sentence build a strong tie which is different from kindship and friendship but a relationship between fans-idol. Therefore, portrait of iZhongs indicates their power and patriotic sentiments which shape a persona of guardians to love and defend their country.

Notably, iZhongs / Fans-circle girls adopt the discourse patterns from Chinese fan culture in constructing collective means of talking on social media. For example, iZhongs frequently use sentences: “走花路” (*Zou Hua Lu*, literally means “Walk The Flower Road”) which could be understood as “(I) hope everything goes well for you” ; “Let us safeguard the best A Zhong Ge in world”; “A Zhong Ge has 1.4 billion active fans” ; “A Zhong Ge is the top idol of the world”. Besides, many patterns formed by emoji and phrase are also popular among iZhongs. For instance, a comment of A Zhong Ge related Weibo under People’s Daily can be seen in Image 4 below. In Image 4, iZhong uses emoji Chinese national flag, heart and stars to form a big heart with the phrase “Motherland forever” at the heart of the pattern.

Accordingly, the specialized term could build an imaged border between iZhongs and others. Moreover, to define the system of iZhongs is regard of the mechanism of mobilizing and organization. In the imaged community constructed by the core icon A Zhong Ge and fandom discourses, iZhongs are mobilized by the same ideology of “A Zhong Ge is the top in the world”. Therefore, their daily rituals in reproducing those three models of language patterns could be considered as promoting the “top” ideology.

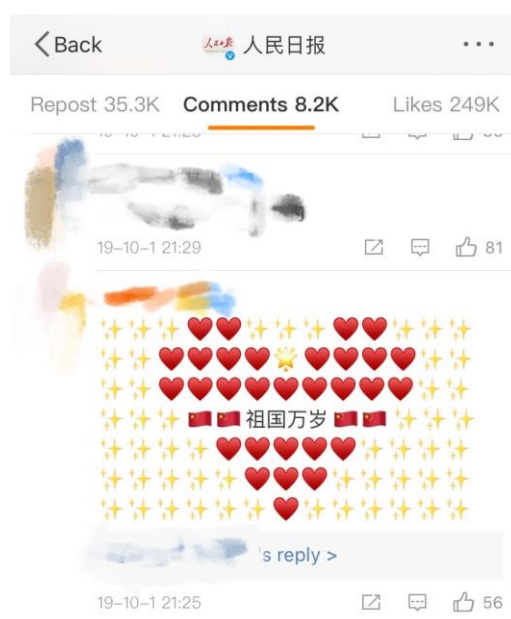


Image 4: iZhongs use emoji and slogan to reply A Zhong Ge related post

4.2. Aspects of the A Zhong Ge which are approved by participants

4.2.1. Positive image for attracting fans

The majority of the participants approve that the image of China in A Zhong Ge is good for engaging people in the cyber nationalistic movement. When talking about A Zhong Ge the fans iZhongs (re) produce a particular vision of the nation of China. In other words, the image of A Zhong Ge could be used to portray the image of the nation among iZhongs. The recognized portrait of A Zhong Ge is considered by the participants in this study to be attractive.

"... Obviously, this is an image of an Asian idol who is of white skin, handsome, of great stature, and he is in good shape. All in all, this is a handsome young boy, liked by fan girls... " (Xu).

In addition to Xu, Lay points out that the image of A Zhong Ge is in line with popular culture elements. Lay said, "... This image is very handsome, which caters to the tastes of girls who love fandom culture...".

Unsurprisingly, all the participants frequently used common words such as "sharp", "handsome", and "charming" in describing their understandings and feelings about the profile of A Zhong Ge in Image 3. Also, some participants, like Xu and Guo describe the figure as feminine beauty directly or indirectly through using words like "feminine" and "flower boy". It might be because Chinese fans are keen on flower boys who are of feminine beauty under the influence of the Korean wave. (Chen,2017).

All the participants agree that the good-looking image of A Zhong Ge is portrayed as appealing to the younger generation who are active consumers of idol culture. It is because, the good-looking profile is used to cater to the tastes of the fandom population, attracting them as A Zhong Ge's supporters.

Along with the handsome face, the army figure in Image 3 also comes to participants' notice. There are three representative descriptions of military symbols in the A Zhong Ge image below:

"... It reminds me of China's 70th anniversary military parade. I think of our army's ramrod posture and good-looking faces in our military parade from this A Zhong Ge image. It gave me a strong feeling of national pride. This is our country, and this is who safeguards us... I used to think A Zhong Ge refers to those lovely Chinese People's Liberation Army who guard the border. Since many of my family joined the PLA, I know they have no regard for personal safety... " (Hui).

"...You can see that he is strong. He holds the national flag and wears an army uniform, which shows his powerful national image. I feel this image is designed to show China's power... The soldier status is designed to get girls' admiration since he is handsome and powerful..." (Xu)

"... The charming military figure (could) make many people empathize with him and join the fandom community. It is because soldiers are indeed a very respected group in our country. And indeed, they have contributed a lot to our country. Then, I felt his act of kissing the national flag could touch a lot of people. The flag and the military can resonate with some emotions..." (Yan)

According to those answers, the vocabularies "powerful", "forceful" and "strong" are selected to describe the army image of A Zhong Ge. Notably, the army is a symbolic icon in China which contains the meanings of power and rules. In particular, Hui shared that the military figure reminds her of the connection between soldiers and territorial safeguards. It could be deduced that many social media users may show positive emotions towards China's army.

Wan, Yan, and Huang also mentioned the "army cherishes" and "high status of the army" in China as a common phenomenon. It seems that all respondents and even most people in China recognize the Chinese army as a positive icon in China. In this regard, the image of A Zhong Ge could offer two layers of positive connotations for iZhongs or potential fans. For the first layer, in relation to the context of the mess of the Hong Kong independence protest in 2019, it could demonstrate China's military power to caution external aggressors and internal separatists. In this process, a sense of national pride could be emerged from this army persona. It could be seen in Hui's answer that her sense of national honour resonated by connecting A Zhong Ge's figure with the army in her memory.

On the other hand, compared with the image of a flower boy, the army image is of wide familiarity in China. The soldiers are spontaneously considered as the guardians of the nation, just as Lay said "... the servicemen group do gain many respects and they do devote themselves to our country...". Besides, there has been a huge group of military fans in Chinese history of nationalism who are keen on things about the Chinese army (Wang et.al, 2017). In considering these, the army image of A Zhong Ge may reach many more people than the flower boy. In terms of Skey's (2011) political dimension, the military is one of the most important parts which maintains and sustains China's social movements. Hence, this image could contribute to ordinary people's imagination of their attachment to the country.

Over and above, reinforcing national identity, the participants also agree that the rise of A Zhong Ge could offer a channel for ordinary people to perform nationalism and embody their patriotic sentiment on social media platforms. It could be seen in Huang's answer:

“In the past, I thought love-country-ism is an elusive thing. When we are in school, everyone makes an oath and shouts slogans to love the country. But many people do not know what it means and how should they do to obey the oath. Once we personified the country as an idol, now, you can take part in patriotic activities as simply and fanatically as support a star.” (Huang)

As consequences, our participants consider the design of A Zhong Ge image as a great part of nationalistic promotion. In that sense, using the symbols of A Zhong Ge to attract new iZhongs / fans- girls can be understood as both a form of entertainment consumption and an expression of nationalism. In other words, A Zhong Ge image has become both a symbol used in the fandom community to construct nationalist discourses and an expression of national identity in everyday life.

4.2.2 Symbolic resources for resonating social media users

In A Zhong Ge case, various symbolic resources have been using to engage ordinary people on Weibo to take part in this nationalistic movement. There is a fundamental symbolic resource which grab all participants' attention in A Zhong Ge related discourses, the national flag. For national flag, few respondents show strong attachment to this symbol in the context of A Zhong Ge. However, some of them do state, to some extent, that national flag reminds them their national identity in daily life:

“...When I see national flag and national emblem in on some particular occasions, I will have different feelings. For example, I am proud of those symbols when I watch some international matches...” (Wan)

Apart from the national pride feelings mentioned by Wan, the participant Kang also shows his sense of belonging brought by the flag, “I feel sense of identity when I saw the national flag. It reminds me of my own country...” (Kang).

According to their answers, most participants assume the national flag as a key symbol for iZhongs to construct the nationalistic context and remind social media users their identities. However, only minority of our interviewees feel or reinforce their national identity from the reproduce of national flag in A Zhong Ge discourses.

Noticeably, when talking about participants' feelings about elements in A Zhong Ge propaganda videos, each of them directly says his/ her admires and sense of identity to Chinese culture. Their statements show that almost all the participants feel attach to Chinese

cultural products like poem, cultural relics, museums and etc. which appears in A Zhong Ge promotional materials. Participants directly show their proud of culture, food, and natural scenery of China. As an example, Xu said “proud” and “good” to praise these symbolic resources:

“...I found the Chinese cuisine, natural heritage and something like have been shown in those posts. I feel it is really good. Because I think comparison with other things, our culture, cuisine and natural geography are things which I am proud of ... ” (Xu)

At the same time, participants like Wan and Shin also share their experiences about introducing Chinese culture and sharing their knowledge about China to their foreign friends in their daily life spontaneously.

“I will point out and explain to foreign friends when there are some misunderstandings about China. Like..if they say Taiwan is a country which do not belongs to China, I will correct it from the perspective of history ”(Wan)

Wan’s case show his attachment to cultural identity. It means that some participants do defend the nation when there are misunderstandings about Chinese culture and history with their knowledge as the tool. And they also mentioned the problems about Taiwan which indicates the participants’ concerns about territorial sovereignty. But only minority of the participants share similar experiences.

Besides, many participants think the language no matters dialect or standardized mandarin helps them define their belongings. In their opinions, speaking Chinese makes them feel comfortable and the language is a signal of who they are.

According to participants, individuals in the community of iZhong / Fans-circle girl are thought to be spontaneous actors with strong sentiment to China. On the one hand, they transmit their love-country-ism in reproducing symbolic resources in national propaganda materials. It confirmed previous findings that Chinese nationalism on internet is trying to brand the nation for domestic people by unpolitical means of culture, scenery, food and etc (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Wang et al, 2017). On the other hand, those symbolic resources in A Zhong Ge materials are used to resonate social media users’ national pride and affectional tie with China. These could correspond to Skey’s (2011) cultural dimension that cultural products in constructing A Zhong Ge nationalistic context are things used in people’s daily life taken-for-granted. It offers an easy way for iZhongs to perform national identity and engage more ordinary people in the nationalistic context.

4.3. Aspects of the A Zhong Ge which are disapproved by participants

4.3.1 Using A Zhong Ge image to represent China

For every young social media user in this research, and even every Chinese, the personification of China is not a fresh news. China has been likened to the mother of all Chinese in the school curriculum. It could be seen that many participants compared the image of A Zhong Ge with Mother China. The majority of participants often use phrases like "my mother town", "motherland", "our mother" to call China when they are asked to describe the nation. And the anime character of China Wang Yao in APH has also been sold as a cultural product for subculture consumers. But only a minority group of anime lovers accept it: "... I really liked Wang Yao. It made me fall in blind patriotism "(Shin). On the contrary, every participant directly shows their unwillingness to call China A Zhong Ge.

Despite social media users agree that A Zhong Ge has been positively designed to be an attractive figure for engaging more ordinary people. However, they also point out that the A Zhong Ge image is of a dual character: one character is of power and attraction, while the other one is weak and bullied.

Notably, when talking about the powerful military figure in the context of A Zhong Ge, the participants share different opinions about the image. Although they use words like "heroic" and "powerful" to describe the military figure in Image 3. However, once some of them know that it is a personified profile of A Zhong Ge, many of them show negative attitudes towards it. This is certainly true in Kang's case:

"... I get a surge of emotion each time I see the army. I feel that the country is strong enough to protect the people, and the Chinese nation has stood up... Actually, I can not accept this profile because it is too enchanting... Do these groups of people like China because he is handsome? Only young girls like it. It did not appeal to me... " (Kang)

According to Kang, he praised the military image in China, but he disapproved of using it to represent the image of China. And he used a question with a scornfully accent to criticize those iZhongs who focused on the appearances of A Zhong Ge. In other words, it indicates that some social media users doubt the love of China among iZhongs. Since then, many participants feel uncomfortable with utilizing A Zhong Ge's good-looking military image as a daily and mass national ritual on social media.

Moreover, many participants also think it is forcible to use the military image for A Zhong Ge. Those young social media users also state that the military image has connotations of China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They use words like "Our military strength", "military power" and "guarding our border" to describe their perception of why A Zhong Ge was personified as an army. For some participants, like Lay said, "If you show this image to European or American countries, and their media, They will misunderstand it as warlike... ". They think using the military image to represent the image

of China is unsuitable, which could lead to misunderstandings as warlike about the national image. It reveals that the military image is not accepted by many social media users since it could lead to negative connotations for other countries.

Meanwhile, every participant could not accept that iZhongs also portrayed China as someone being bullied, which inspired feelings of protection among the fans.

"... I feel it is really ridiculous. Regarding one nation as a child or an idol who needs to be protected by citizens makes me feel the image of the nation is unserious, babyish and of less dignity... ". (Tia)

As Tia described, iZhongs seem to make the nation like an innocent child who is forceless. She used the word "ridiculous", which could also be found in Guo's description to describe their feelings about A Zhong Ge in Image 2. The words "babyish" and "of less dignity" show the entertaining accent that iZhongs used in the nationalistic context annoy social media users.

To this point, participants feel the national image has been dwarfed by the personification of A Zhong Ge. It means that those young social media users do not agree with iZhongs building a national image as the weak. They described how they feel the nation has become a small and weak child who is bullied and leans back behind iZhongs to look for protection. Some participants thought that this weak image was far away from the national image in their minds: "... In my opinion, once there are dangers, the country should serve the people instead of people standing in front of the country..." (Yu). And many other participants said that they used to call China as Mother and someone who could protect Chinese children.

Besides, the participants also point out that in the process of constructing a figure who needs to be protected, the word "others" is frequently used as the enemies of A Zhong Ge. Based on participants' answers such as Yu's: "... They (iZhongs) are used to setting others against themselves through taking other countries down. For example, the USA... ". iZhongs usually build a wall between China / A Zhong Ge and other countries. It means that iZhongs are thought to try to separate China and the domestic people as "We/Us" and other nations as "Them/Others".

"... it spread a strong sentiment throughout the nation, which means that many countries in the world are coveting us..." (Shin). Similar to Shin, the majority of participants understand that iZhongs show strong hate for other nations. Another case could be seen in Chang's description: "... It is too ridiculous... if A Zhong Ge only has us, then they considered all other countries as China's enemies..." (Chang). In their opinion, iZhongs have been trying to build China's image as a poor child bullied by "Others". It indicates that

iZhongs are thought to make use of national suffering to resonate nationalistic sentiment with Chinese social media users. It is likely to remind people of the humiliated history of being invaded in building their national identity (Gries, 2011).

Just as Guo said "... Even though we may have some sad historical experiences... the way they used to perform them makes me feel that you are selling your sufferings...". It shows that the majority of those young social media users could not agree iZhongs with making use of China's miserable history to grab attention.

In this case, in terms of the spatial dimension of nationalism (Skey, 2011), it is because the concept of A Zhong Ge was derived from protecting China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. So, participants think China was bullied by "Others" who supported Hong Kong independence. Generally, the powerless image of A Zhong Ge could contribute to resonating among the people to inspire "We/Us" to protect the nation from "Them/ Others".

As a result, every participant refuses to accept the use of the A Zhong Ge image to represent the nation. According to participants, "... When we talk about Mother China/ motherland, our roles are mother and children. But now for idols and fans, I feel it estranges our distance from the nation... " (Lay), they feel more comfortable having a parent-child relationship with the nation instead of an idol-fan relationship. Therefore, compared with A Zhong Ge, participants perceive Mother China as a gentler and more inclusive image. In other words, social media users might behave affectionately towards the "Mother" image of China.

4.3.2 Abusing popular culture elements

Symbolic resources from subculture

For symbols which comes from subculture most participants except several active consumers could hardly follow the points in talking about the topic. For example, the China's personified figure Wang Yao (王耀) from the well-known anime APH is a shared nationalistic icon. Only several participants including Shin, Huang and Xu who are active consumers of anime recognize Wang Yao as China from the promotional materials of A Zhong Ge.

Besides, those three active anime consumers point out the rabbit ears in Image 2 referring to Chinese nationalistic animation *Year Hare Affair* which personified China as a hare with a gun. Interestingly, these active consumers recognize the Year Hare Affair is also a concentration camp of Little Pinks.

Shin said "... When I was young, I really liked Wang Yao. It made me fell in a blind patriotism in a particular length of time...". According to her, "blind patriotism" might refer

to a thoughtless nationalism align with Little Pinks. So, it means those active consumers realize the nationalistic intention in A Zhong Ge propaganda immediately. As consequences, some participants are likely to recall some negative experiences about nationalism in previous movements by Little Pinks.

Another case is Huang's experiences:

"...My intuitive feeling is embarrassment...Little Pinks widely use the Wang Yao as China's image in nationalism long time ago...They expect Wang Yao to rule the world one day... I feel embarrassed each time I saw it...". (Huang)

Apparently, the participant recognize that elements have been regarded as symbolic resources by Little Pink. It means that both these two groups have actively consumed similar cultural products and structuring national identity it in their daily life in practising nationalism. As Huang mentioned that Little Pinks intent to conquer or rule the world with a disgust accent. Hence, it reveals the familiarity of subcultural elements which used in previous nationalistic movement could bring bad impression for social media users.

Different from Shin and Huang, Xu as another active consumer of anime she shows positive attitude in applying symbols from previous nationalistic activism. Xu expresses "I think it is really good to applying those elements...It makes me think of the animation character Wang Yao who I really liked. So, it makes me easy to accept the promotional video...". In other words, for some people who do not have bad memories about the previous digital nationalism movements of Little Pinks. Therefore, they might be easier to feel attach to those familiar elements from subculture.

As for people who do not belong to animation lovers and have no idea about the connotations or index of nationalistic symbols, they only describe their feeling about using animated techniques in promoting A Zhong Ge. Similar to Xu, Wan thinks that the animated means of expression of A Zhong Ge makes her feel "Kind" and "Impressive". It indicates that she considers the utilization of anime as an unpolitical. But most participants like Tia and Lay who hold opposite opinions think it is "Babyish" and "Unserious" to talk about the nation and its territorial problem in the amused accent.

As a result, only a few participants find the subcultural elements using by iZhongs in nationalistic discourses are positive for social media users to accept the promotional material. Majority of the participants show negative attitude to the reproduce of subcultural elements in the nationalistic discourse especially which had been used by Little Pinks. Those could connect their negative experiences about Little Pinks with iZhongs.

Symbolic resources from fandom culture

Fandom culture is a crucial background in constructing A Zhong Ge discourses, but fandom culture and the word "Fans circle" or "Fan girls" have negative connotations for many people who are outside of this community (Duffett,2013). It is proved by the participants that they use negative words such as "Fanatical", "Irrational", "Emotional", "Emotion-oriented", "Extreme" to criticize the fandom culture and fan circles in China.

The interviews also reveal that Chinese social media users regard iZhongs as young and childish. It is because the participants find ways of protecting the national image of A Zhong Ge is fanatic and irrational. The "fanatic" refers to iZhong's devotion to sustaining the discourse system of A Zhong Ge. Every participant feels that many compliments made by iZhongs could not be understood and digested by other Chinese. It shows that iZhongs used many sentences without clear meanings to show the predominant status of China. For example, both Shin and Kang mentioned that they were confused on the sentence "China has the biggest higher education in the academic field". There is a lack of explanation about whether the sentence refers to the number of schools, scale, number of students, or Chinese higher education quality. In addition, other than obscure sentences, there are many meaningless praises used in structuring China's national image. For example, "... I do feel it is brainless to say 'China has the largest population in the world without any rivals' to show the sense of superiority of China..." (Chang).

In general, the participants find that iZhongs are used to make tendentious compliments to the nation. Wan comments on iZhongs' discourse paradigm, "I think some people are brainless. They think China is the best country and the rest of the countries are terrible...iZhongs are those brainless people... ". According to the participants, iZhongs boasted China exaggeratively through banal repeating of fixed lexicons, phrases and symbols to express their emotions. As for outsiders of iZhongs, the participants think this kind of banal reproduction helps to reinforce the image of the nation among iZhongs.

As for the "irrational", fundamentally, there are two aspects which make those young social media users feel iZhongs irrational in using the symbolic resources of fandom culture: (1) aggressing public opinion; (2) mindless imitation.

In terms of aggressing public opinion, iZhongs/ Fans-circle girls build a firewall between iZhongs and others who oppose the idol A Zhong Ge. It urges the fan community to block and even attack speeches or comments by others. According to participants, those social media users who refuse to admit they are iZhongs or who criticize China for some reason, no matter how much they love China, are thought to be others. Just like Hui said"... Even if you see any drawbacks in the nation and propose some advice to it, they (iZhongs) will claim that you are hurting their A Zhong Ge..."

The majority of the participants, including Chang, Hui and Lay, directly show that they feel uncomfortable with applying the linguistic and semiotic paradigm of "fans circle" in the nationalism context. It is because they could not propose any advice to the nation or any policy freely in an irrational fandom cultural context.

"... It is in the nature of fans to defend their idols' works, but sometimes they offend normal netizens' space to express their opinions... In this context, they would not allow other people to criticize A Zhong Ge..." (Guo).

The case of Guo's experiences indicates that iZhongs/ Fans-circle girls simply use their thinking and behaviour to preserve their national image. They refuse to accept any criticism in China, no matter why others say so. Those iZhongs see it as their responsibility to fight back to any negative speeches. Since then, iZhongs classify groups as We/ Us" who are fans of A Zhong Ge and "They/ Them/ Others" who do not like A Zhong Ge. One of the biggest missions is to put an end to unpleasant words about their idol. As a result, it leads to a lack of rational discussion space in which iZhongs try to mute dissenting opinions.

"'Rule by the voice of one man alone' is common in fan circles. It means that once others say something wrong with certain people / things, fans will retort upon them immediately... When you apply this paradigm to A Zhong Ge, many more people will accept the logic to deny any criticism. More concretely, it will become a taken-for-granted world for fans to protect idols, although their protectiveness may infringe on public speech space for others." (Hui)

Based on Hui, she regards the behaviours of fans-circle girls in protecting China from criticism as an aggression of public sphere and individuals' agency. Therefore, it suggests that young social media users may mute themselves to criticize A Zhong Ge related discourses and iZhongs' since they would not to be cyber violented.

Interestingly, many participants also connect the iZhongs' performance on Weibo with the Little Pinks, who are also boycotting others for cyber nationalism. For example, Little Pinks often attack celebrities who support Taiwan independence, and they take part in blog wars with fans of those celebrities (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Wang et.al, 2017). As for iZhongs, they do not use cyber violence to any particular people, but they condemn those who say some bad words about their idol, A Zhong Ge.

Nevertheless, participants also stated that iZhongs devote themselves to their own nation by reproducing fandom symbolic resources more rather than blaming "Others". As Wan commented about iZhongs "... I think they are more likely to propagandize a certain patriotist sentiment and culture...", iZhongs seem to be gentler and more harmless. And in

the process of promoting and reinforcing A Zhong Ge as an icon of the nation, our participants considered iZhongs' behaviour as mindless imitation.

Regarding mindless imitation, it refers to the banal reproductions of certain positive discourses to (re) build the image of their idol, A Zhong Ge. Apart from muting bad posts or comments on A Zhong Ge, another essential mission of iZhongs is to promote positive propaganda about China. As mentioned above, iZhongs keep repeating symbols like the national flag, heart emoji, army figures, and slogans like "A Zhong Ge has 1.4 billion active fans", "China's GDP ranks second in the world" and something of this kind.

Even though iZhongs/ Fans-circle girls are thought to be naturally organized and take part in defending their common idol, A Zhong Ge, this kind of agency has been described as an educated "autonomous agency". The participant Yan said, "... I think they (iZhongs) decided to post those speeches and symbolic materials spontaneously. But these kinds of spontaneous decisions and performances are educated and brainwashed...". As the promotion of patriotic education, the national education curriculum has been rooted in fundamental education, which is free to the public. Through propagating the glories and bullied humiliation in Chinese history, aligning the nation's honour or disgrace with individuals has become a taken-for-granted thing. It indicates that some social media users doubt the human agency of iZhongs and consider their behaviour as mindless.

As an active Weibo user with rich experience of reading A Zhong Ge related posts, Xu's descriptions could prove the three basic models of nationalistic practices:

"..There are A Zhong Ge propagandizing speeches such as 'There is no regret being a Chinese in my whole life'. There are a large number of 'China is top in XXX' which are the same as the slogans in the previous video... They used emoji of the Chinese national flag to cobble together a heart and said 'I love you China'. You can find those kinds of repetitive comments under almost all Weibo posts about China's achievements....

Another well-known one is a rabbit with the flag of Hong Kong to say 'It is our China'. I will not give it to you". (Xu)

To describe their understandings about those large number of repeating symbols, pictures and texts, Shin said: "...Obviously, those posts are language patterns fandom which list the advantages of idols...I do not know should I call this behaviour as national pride or nationalism...". Represented by Shin, majority of the participants pointed out that it is iZhongs' routines to post, repost and comment certain topics related to China with those paradigms on Weibo. They understood the banal reproducing of those imitated and recitative symbolic resources as so-called data traffic for building and keeping high-profile image for their idols (Xie, 2019, p.9-12). Consequently, iZhongs' those symbols and language

paradigm tend to form a systematic tool book which new members of the fan community could be easily guided and imitated.

However, reported by some participants who are not active consumers of fandom culture, they could hardly follow those particularly symbolic resources borrowed from fandom culture. It could be proved by Xu, Yu and Kang who asked the meaning of "Flower Road" (see the meaning in 4.1) in those Weibo posts and videos. It means the abusing of symbolic resources from fandom culture could make a part of social media users out of the context. In other words, that linguistic and semiotic paradigms requires that audiences on certain media channels be familiar with the online fandom community. Otherwise, people outside this subcultural group could hardly perceive the intentions of nationalistic discourses.

Nevertheless, one participant, Xu, expressed that fandom culture does contribute to the increase in attention to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity among the younger generation. As she said, "... "....Actually, I quite appreciate it. Because it means that patriotism is rooted in the younger generation to some extent... " (Xu). According to her, the use of fandom culture in promoting nationalism may motivate young people to accept the ideology. However, none of our participants show positive attitudes towards the fandom culture used in A Zhong Ge.

4.3.3 The role of mainstream media in promoting A Zhong Ge

Interestingly, although A Zhong Ge is shaped by grassroots on social media, mass media plays an important role in engaging people in the movements. The Chinese mainstream media represented by the People's Daily, CCTV and Hunan TV have contributed to constructing A Zhong Ge related nationalistic discourse system in China. Most participants noticed that iZhongs and the image of A Zhong Ge are reported, supported, and appreciated by the mainstream media. As some respondents mentioned, the evidence can be clearly seen in CCTV's Weibo posts: "A Zhong Ge has 1.4 billion active fans", "Go fans-circle girls" and "Fans-circle girls, you did well".

"...I saw People's Daily was calling on Fans-circle girls to help A Zhong Ge...They use very adorable tones, such as 'Go Fans-circle girls'. I was astonished that the government was stirring up those Fans-circle girls and pushing the nationalistic atmosphere..." (Tia).

According to Tia, she was aware that official media tried to use an unserious and entertaining tone to motivate them, and so did other participants. Correspondently, every participant shows their dissatisfaction with the motivational speeches to iZhongs which spoken by the two key mainstream media channels. Shin said, "I feel it is inappropriate for

official media to post things like that. Since you are transmitting the voice of the party and the government...".

They use the vocabulary "bad", "incorrect" and "inappropriate" to comment on the motivational speeches posted by these official mainstream media channels. It implies that the participants considered the speeches official media posts in public as incorrect. By applying fandom discourses with an entertaining accent in the nationalistic context, certain official media approve what iZhongs/ Fans-circle girls have done, and they even entitle all Chinese as "1.4 billion active fans" publicly.

At the same time, the phrase "1.4 billion active fans" which was posted by the official media was also criticized by participants. Even though all participants said they "Love" China directly and they do call China "our country /nation" or "my motherland", none of them agreed to entitle themselves as an iZhong or a fan of A Zhong Ge.

Instead, when talking about the "1.4 billion active fans", some participants reluctantly said that they can admit they are members of iZhong. Otherwise, they are afraid that they will be blamed for betraying the nation. For example, Hui said, "... " ...I must be an iZhong if the country acquiesces to this personification. Because he (China) is my motherland, I definitely love him...". It can also be seen in Kang's case:

".... It depends on how you define iZhong. If it refers to fandom culture, I am surely not a fan. But if you are using the word to measure whether I love the country, whether I feel a sense of honour for China, I think that I am a member of it... " (Kang)

But for most people, they straightly express that they would never be a member of the iZhong community. For example, Yan shows her discomfort with this fan title given by People's daily and CCTV automatically:

"...I feel it is too bad... It is not correct. Because active fans refer to people who do what fans should do actively, but I did not and many others either. Obviously, it is contrary to the fact. 1.4 billion is too exaggerated... I feel like I was offended and represented..." (Yan)

They use words like "exaggerated" and "offence" to criticize the "1.4 billion active fans". It indicates that the majority of the participants would not like to be represented by the official media to own a fandom identity which they do not like. And many of the participants believe the "1.4 billion active fans" has a political meaning more than entertaining posts. One example is what Chang said, "... The underline meaning of this sentence means that once you are a Chinese, you have to love China, love A Zhong Ge. But not every Chinese loves the nation... ".

Accordingly, those social media users find that the official media try to use an entertaining accent borrowed from popular culture to ask all Chinese people to participate in the A Zhong Ge nationalism for Chinese sovereignty over Hong Kong. Those public speeches became a signal which could affect a large number of nationalists to take responses to the encouragement from the official media. It is because the People's Daily and CCTV both belong to the largest media of the CCP and the government. The support from those two media could be considered as recognition of the ruling party and the nation by social media users. In other words, in A Zhong Ge cyber nationalism, the official media is thought to control public opinion. Based on Billig (1995), the mass media routinely highlight the sovereignty and independence of the nation. Therefore, it could make ordinary people feel that they should follow the wave of supporting the idol A Zhong Ge for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In particular, the phrase "1.4 billion active fans" sounds like an informal policy where everyone is counted as a fan automatically, although some people do not agree with it.

4.3.4 Patriotism with critical thinking

Significantly, the participants keep distinguishing themselves with iZhongs / Fans-circle girls strictly. In talking about A Zhong Ge related discourses, they often express critical attitudes to iZhongs or Fans-circle girls. In all their discourses, they keep calling iZhongs as "those fans-circle girls" or "they/ them".

In comparison with iZhongs, the participants show a wide range of differences. First of all, different from iZhongs' sense of superiority for their Chinese national identity the participants deny to compare China with other countries. For example, Yan said "I do not think that Chinese identity will make me feel sad or proud...I feel nothing difference to be a Chinese, an American or an Indian...". They show a value the nature of each nation is the same. It seems that our participants are more neutral in value their national identity. On the contrary, they show a strong pride in their cultural identity.

Besides, many of participants directedly show their dissatisfaction with the irrational discussion space on the internet in the A Zhong Ge context. Due to iZhong's comment controlling, participants show their affairs about being accused as unpatriotic. Just like Hui said, "...If I, as an active fan of A Zhong Ge, put forward a different point of view on China, does it mean I am no longer a fan but a hater...". Since then, most of our participants choose to mute themselves on social media in A Zhong Ge related topics even though they have different ideas. When talk about whether they post or comment any A Zhong Ge related discourses on social media, Shin said "...I only posted one Weibo to say 'I am a citizen

rather than your fans' but no one replies me except several 'like'...". It reveals that participants may use some metaphors to show their grievance on social media instead of criticizing radical nationalists directly.

For this, Yu also mentioned that she feels unsafe to post her own ideas or thoughts on social media for many reasons, rather she would talk about her opinions with close friends offline. Yu said: "...I would love to post some critical speeches about A Zhong Ge. But I am afraid of cyber-bully. And I fear that they hurt my family. So, I just give up ..." As a result, the participants regard iZhongs as radical nationalists who invade and occupy other netizens' critical-discussion space.

Furthermore, even though all participants show their sense of belongings and national pride to the nation, they would not choose to follow iZhongs to easily post those national discourses paradigms on Weibo mindlessly. However, they prefer to be reflective patriotists who show their love to the nation through propose constructive suggestions and opinions which could be found in every participants' answers.

In general, those participants construct an image of rational patriot who are of great dissimilarities with the radical nationalists iZhong in the context of A Zhong Ge. But the rational patriots may choose to escape express critical views on social media to avoid potential risks. Instead, they prefer to talk those sensitive topics with their close friends who can bring them sense of safety.

5. Conclusion and discussion

5.1 Conclusion

This study set out to dig into the novel wave of everyday nationalism by A Zhong Ge to reveal how the younger generation experiences nationalism and discovers themselves through digital nationalistic activism for the personified nation. There are five fundamental findings in this study. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that young social media users in the sample offered contradictory evaluations of A Zhong Ge. On the one hand, they do agree that the military image of A Zhong Ge is attractive. And it could engage more ordinary people in this nationalistic movement. In constructing the attractive image of A Zhong Ge, certain symbolic resources in promotional materials could positively resonate with patriotic sentiment. It is remarkable that even though the military figure has a good reputation among social media users, they do not agree to use it as the national image due to its controversial nature.

On the other hand, they feel uncomfortable about iZhongs building a weak and bullied image of the nation to inspire national sentiment. What they expect from the relationship between nation and citizens is mother and child. It means that the nation should be strong enough to protect them instead of being protected by citizens.

The second major finding is that the younger generation of social media users confirmed Wang's et.al (2017) research that iZhongs are similar to Little Pinks in that they post symbolic elements from popular culture. However, they perceive that iZhongs are more likely to brand the nation for domestic people by unpolitical means such as culture, scenery, food, etc., instead of attacking particular celebrities. At the same time, it confirmed that social media users who are outside of this community show their negative attitudes towards fan culture and fan girls (Duffett,2013).

The third major finding is that the familiarity of popular cultures may affect social media users' perception of nationalistic discourses used by iZhongs on social media. In this study, it indicates that social media users who are more familiar with popular culture are more likely to have negative connotations about those symbolic elements used in constructing nationalistic discourses. It also means they might be more negative towards the fandom community, iZhongs. Moreover, iZhongs / Fans-circle girls portrayal and defend the national image on social media through imitating discourse paradigms borrowed from fandom culture. As a consequence, ordinary people who are not active consumers of fandom culture could hardly engage in the A Zhong Ge related nationalistic discourses.

The fourth main finding is that younger generation social media users are aware that the role of official mainstream media is affecting public opinion. It could be a supplement to

Billig's (1995) theory that the reproductions of mass media contribute to building a sovereign and discrete nation among the public. According to those young social media users, they still feel that mainstream media emphasises territorial sovereignty and independent nationalism to the public in the context of social media.

The last important finding identifies that younger generation social media users outside of the iZhong community are more likely to mute themselves in the context of A Zhong Ge nationalism. It implies that there might be less space left for critical speeches on nationalistic topics with a fandom background. It is because they are afraid of cyber abuse from iZhongs. Since then, social media users outside of the fandom community would not like to take the risks of criticizing iZhongs and the utilization of fandom in personifying the nation, nor express their suggestions or dissatisfaction with the nation. To some extent, it seems that these banal reproduces of A Zhong Ge related discourses partially deprive civics of their right to speak.

In general, in order to answer the research question, it should define how those young social media users talk, choose, perform and consume in the context of A Zhong Ge. Based on Skey's five measuring dimensions, the results can be generated as: (1) For the spatial dimension, social media users experience the territory through the nationalistic slogan about territorial sovereignty and the military image of A Zhong Ge; (2) For the temporal dimension, those social media users regard iZhongs' daily reproduces of A Zhong Ge promotional materials for data traffic on Weibo as rituals in the case of A Zhong Ge; (3) For the cultural dimension, social media users show their sense of identity and belonging to Chinese culture, history, ancient civilizations, and Chinese language. But some of them may feel way more national pride than others in experiencing cultural symbols in the A Zhong Ge movements; (4) For the political dimension, there is no evidence revealing direct relation. But those young social media users consider iZhongs/ Fans-circle girls as an online organization for nationalism which is supported by the official media; (5) For the self/other dimension, those social media users do not have a sense of superiority over other nations, and they refuse to compare themselves with "Others". Instead, they feel their nationality does not make them different from people in other nations. Thus, we could simply summarize that the younger generation of social media users with overseas study experience label themselves as rational patriots who often practice and perform their national identity through consuming cultural symbols. They show critical attitudes towards the nationalistic discourses of iZhongs and they dismiss iZhongs' behaviour as abusing popular culture elements in a nationalistic context.

5.2 Limitation and implication

The first limitation of this study is the disequilibrium gender of samples, with 10 females and only 2 males. In analysing respondents' discourses, different genders do show some differences in performing their nationality. For example, male participants pay much more attention to describing how they will choose to protect the nation, to show their devotion and love to the nation. On the contrary, females focus on distinguishing themselves from iZhongs/ Fans-circle girls by criticizing iZhongs' radical behaviour on social media. However, this difference could not be simply caught in a few words. In order to dig into this question, the method of survey could be used in future research.

Also, the study intends to reveal authentic thoughts from the muted population on social media. Luckily, all our participants seem to be silent on political ideology topics due to the fear of risks. However, no distinct evidence shows whether muted people have been treated on social media. Moreover, the study is limited by the lack of information on respondents who took part in the discussion about A Zhong Ge. It means that there is a short of representativeness of the sample. Thus, in further research, the voices of Weibo users who posted opinions about A Zhong Ge should be included and detected.

In this study, reflexivity was crucial throughout all phases of the research process. My international student status could affect the process of data collection and data analysis in studying the younger generation of social media users' perceptions of Chinese nationalism. In the process of data collection, it could help to induce the participants to dig into the topic with research intentions. And every time they go far away, I can always guide them back to the point. However, in the process of data analysis, even though the background could contribute to generating and clustering data, sometimes it might make me interpret participants' answers with some personal dedication. It might make the answers go deeply and broadly, but it could lead to some misunderstandings.

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Appendix A

Topic guide

[Basic Information]

- Which country have you studied in? And how long have you been there?
- What social media do you use in your daily life?
- What kinds of media channel do you usually get information about China?
- Which channel makes you know the word “A Zhong Ge”?

[Familiarity about discourses of “A Zhong Ge”]

- Do you know the origin of “A Zhong Ge”
- How do you understand the sentences in following weibo

[Translated as: A Zhong, A Zhong, go bravely! The children of China will follow you forever! Let’s tell the world, # Our idol named A Zhong!” ...]?



- Reviewing the video about A Zhong Ge

What elements used in those A Zhong Ge related discourses on social media impress you?

[Fans-circle girl/ iZhong, popular culture and nationalism]

- Do you know anything about iZhong or “Fans circle girl”?
- Are you a member of them? How do you feel about this special community?
- How do you understand following pictures?



[Translate as: Nobody could bully him (China)]



- Do you think there are some differences between iZhong and other kind of nationalists like “little pink”?
- How do you feel that using popular culture elements in “A Zhong Ge”?

[Everyday experiences about A Zhong Ge]

- Have you posted or expressed your comments anything about A Zhong Ge or kind of things on social media? (What/why/why not?)

- How you feel about Chinese social media users expressing “A Zhong Ge” related discourses on the internet?

- How do you feel the way Chinese people express their opinions on the Nation (China)?
- How do you understand the agency or freedom of speech in the A Zhong Ge related discourses?

[Understandings about A Zhong Ge with other nationalism events]

- What do you think the differences between “A Zhong Ge” and other forms of nationalism in China, for example, the boycott of Japanese products in 2008 or Korean restriction (which was used to backlash Sade)?
- Based on your experiences, how do YOU feel the relationship between this new form of nationalists (iZhongs) and the nation (China)?

[Understandings about national identity construction in A Zhong Ge.]

- How you express your Chinese identity in your daily life? (why/why not? The role of National symbols?)
- How do you feel about the grassroots nationalism which means nationalism lead by normal citizens?
- How do you understand the sentence “A Zhong Ge has 1.40 billion active fans” posted/reposted on Weibo by many official account (阿中哥哥有 14 亿活粉)
- How do you understanding “A Zhong Ge” related discourses might affect the way people build national identity? For example, iZhongs’ slogan “We all have an idol named A Zhong GE”.