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Scholarship about the Chinese internet usually emphasizes the contentious politics of netizens or the controls and censorship of the government. But Weiyu Zhang moves beyond the popular “democratic” versus “authoritarian” framework by examining entertainment fan groups and their everyday online practices, highlighting the social-cultural-political impact of China’s digital publics. Zhang offers critical insights to understand the performance, identity, and power of fandom groups and the diverse nature and effects of the interplays between these fandom publics and diverse commercial and political interests.

Zhang’s analysis contributes to multiple areas of research, including audience research, internet studies, and celebrity and fan studies. She collected firsthand data from online fan communities, and she skillfully integrates in-depth interviews and textual analysis with quantitative methods (surveys and social network analysis). Her 15-year longitudinal online ethnography is impressively rare in new media research.

Chapter 1 reviews conceptualizations of “the public” by comparing its different definitions in European, American, and Chinese contexts. Zhang theorizes fandom as publics enabled by the “network logic” of new information and communications technologies (ICTs), and she proposes a social relational network perspective to understand the formation of fandom publics.

Chapter 2 examines fandom as an online popular culture. Zhang employs a “technological centralism” approach to the roles of networked information and communications technologies in creating new social actions, relations, and formations.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the evolution of online movie fans who participate in “Rear Window to Movies,” an influential online discussion board. Zhang’s decade-long participant observation reveals how movie fans in virtual space have transformed themselves from ordinary fans to “subaltern publics” and ultimately “regular publics.” She shows how the networking logic allows fans to interact with the state and the market, accumulate social capital, and become visible to the larger society through their commentaries.

Chapter 5 explores fans’ creativity by looking at zimuzu—fan-driven online voluntary translation communities. Zhang argues that zimuzu fan activism has to work within political and commercial constraints to survive but also has the potential to foster a participatory civil culture.

Chapter 6 looks at Chinese fans’ interpretation of the American political drama House of Cards. Zhang analyzes fans’ posts about the TV drama, showing how they compare and contrast American politics as depicted in the drama with every-day Chinese politics. She finds that fans reflect upon Chinese political reality, fig-
ure out how to survive in such a reality, and form an identity of being Chinese in a networked world while critically reading the drama.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine major Chinese social networking sites such as Douban, Renren, and Weibo and show how fan communities use these sites to generate collective actions around books, movies, music, and celebrities, and form networked publics.

The concluding chapter revisits the preceding case studies to redefine the concept of “fandom publics.” Zhang concludes that the formation of fandom publics relies on “the enhanced self-selection and self-organization of communication networks by individual fans,” “the mediation of new ICTs, or the networking capacity afforded by newer media,” and “visibility achieved through the associational relationships among individuals and their constant performances” (128–29). She argues that the political implication of fandom publics does not lie in democratization but in other interesting domains that are found in the traditions of post-Marxism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism.

The patriotism of fan communities is an emerging phenomenon. For instance, Di Ba, an online forum with 20 million registered users on Baidu post bar that was originally set up by fans of former Chinese soccer star Li Yi, has become a main platform for Chinese netizens to produce patriotic internet groups. In January 2016, after Zhang’s book had gone to the publisher, Di Ba initiated a virtual campaign to flood Taiwanese President-elect Tsai Ing-wen’s Facebook page with anti-Taiwan independence internet memes. In short, some of the online fandom can be mobilized to support the government’s public discourse, fueled with nationalistic sentiments.

On the philanthropic front, fans of Li Yuchun, China’s most influential reality show star, established the Li Yuchun Fan Charity Fund in 2006 with support from and under the management of the government-aligned Chinese Red Cross Foundation. Through this, the Red Cross successfully leveraged the influence of Li Yuchun’s fan community to promote donations to youth-focused charities.

In collaboration with CNPolitics.org, Zhang used a crowd-sourcing approach to translate her book into Chinese and published it online for free coterminous with its publication by Routledge in English. The spirit of innovation, collaboration, and volunteering embodied in the crowd-sourced translation is consistent with the fan activism discussed in the book.

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