Zhang, **The Internet and New Social Formation in China: Fandom Publics in the Making**, Abingdon, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016, 143 pp., $155 (hardcover), $49.95 (paperback), $54.95 (Kindle).

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China has been the largest population on the Internet since 2008, and its number of Internet users reached 772 million (55.8% of the country's total population) in 2017 (China Internet Network Information Center, 2018). Accordingly, research on the Chinese Internet has flourished in the last decade, with an increasing body of literature exploring its impact on China's culture, society, economy, and politics, as well as the everyday life of ordinary Chinese people. ***The Internet and New Social Formation in China: Fandom Publics in the Making*** by Weiyu Zhang is a welcome addition to this burgeoning research field, proposing a thorough examination of the rudimentary social category of its fans and its implications for new social formations. With a focus on the everyday practice of fandom groups in China, Zhang attempts to go beyond the typical approaches of the online public sphere and virtual communities. Instead, she rejuvenates the classic notion of "public" by examining how fans in China come together to form politically functioning publics through the mediation of the Internet.
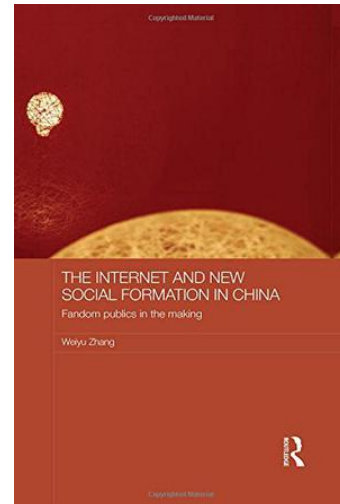
Based on the fundamental discussion of how publics are formed around the logic of networking in the new era of the networked society, Zhang shows her ambition to move beyond the popular "democratic versus authoritarian" frameworks and the traditional "state versus society" dichotomy and find an alternative approach. To achieve this ambition, along with a background chapter (chapter 2) that presents an empirical big picture of the development of the Internet and online popular culture in China, Zhang sets aside two theoretical chapters (chapters 1 and 9) to introduce and explain her key concept of the "fandom public" in view of various theories related to the public, the social network, the network society, and the actor network. She then fills chapters 3-8 with fascinating empirical cases related to online communities of movie and drama fans, online translation communities, and social networking sites (SNS) in China.

The theoretical chapters of this book introduce Zhang's central argument that fans as a social entity could be considered as a public—what Zhang terms "fandom public"— implicating new ways of forming publics based on the new network logic of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). More specifically, in chapter 1, Zhang compares the different definitions of "public" in the European, American, and Chinese contexts, showing that it is defined in the West by its distinction from "mass" and "crowd" while in China it indicates a moral oppositional relationship between *gong* and *si*, or "public" and "private." Based on this comparison, Zhang attempts to develop "a relational concept of publics" (p. 10) that is enabled by the new "network logic of new ICTs" (p. 9) to understand the formation

of "fandom publics." In chapter 9, Zhang further contrasts her central concept of "fandom publics" with a diverse range of concepts like "mediated publics," "networked publics," "issue publics," and "affective publics" in a broader theoretical context. In particular, Zhang clarifies the network logic behind "fandom publics" by building conversations with the three network theories—Social Network Theory, The Network Society, and the Actor Network Theory—as well as the four critical frameworks of democratization, post-Marxism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism.

In order to fully explain the concept of "fandom publics" and its network logic, Zhang synthesizes various case studies from chapters 3-8). First, however, Zhang reviews the development of and existing literatures on popular culture and digital technologies in China (chapter 2), thereby proposing a perspective of technological centralism from which to study China's popular culture, especially when facilitated by the ICTs. From this perspective, Zhang attempts not only to discard the typical binary methods of censorship/activism in earlier studies on online popular culture in China, but also to take a network or relational approach that is always evolving to "trace the trajectory of initiating, stabilizing, and dissolving a network, which is part and parcel of social formations in network society" (p. 27).

Based on this background, Zhang uses five cases in six chapters to further illustrate her theoretical argument. Chapters 3 and 4 use the case of Rear Window to Movies, one of the most influential online communities, to examine the evolution of movie fans in China based on her decade-long continuous participant observation and dozens of in-depth interviews. By means of this case, Zhang introduces the Chinese movie-industry power dynamics in which online movie fandom takes its shape; examines the discourse through which movie fans struggle for visibility and discursive power to counter the state, commercial, and academic power; and explains how movie fans in the Rear Window to Movies community transform themselves into "subaltern publics" (p. 32) and ultimately "regular publics" (p. 50) through active networking among themselves both online and offline, especially through the mediation of Web 2.0, including blogs, microblogs, and other SNSs.

Chapter 5 demonstrates fans' creativity by using the case of the online voluntary translation community (*zimuzu*). Zhang introduces the history and background of the zimuzu, explains how the Internet makes such voluntary collaboration possible, and investigates contributors' motives for such volunteerism. Zhang argues that with a new identity for fans as produsers, this kind of volunteer fandom contribution is more like a form of the participatory civic culture seen in the West, but with the potential to transform into civic engagement, fan activism, and political participation in the Chinese context, despite the challenges of censorship, copyright, and commercialization.

Zhang shifts her focus to actual content with a look at the special case of *House of Cards* in chapter 6. Before analyzing the case itself, Zhang proposes a detailed analysis of the political economy of transcultural TV and its online fandom sphere in China. Based on this background, and through a textual analysis of posts on Baidu Tieba, an online forum where fans can share information and opinions about the TV dramas, Zhang uses the American political TV drama *House of Cards* as a concrete case to illustrate how Chinese fans interpret American TV drama. Zhang finds that Chinese fans have two contradictory themes of "authentic/unauthentic" and "foreign/indigenous" (p. 11) when they watch and compare the American politics in the drama with the Chinese politics in their everyday life. Due to the contradiction and

comparison, Chinese fans do not seem to embrace democratic values directly and easily; rather, they first make explicit what a Chinese political reality is, then form an identity of being Chinese in a network society in order to survive in such a reality.

In chapters 7 and 8, Zhang further explores network logic as the social-formation principle of the fandom publics as well as the network society. She examines the major SNSs in China, such as Douban, Renren, and Weibo, and useds the network analysis and an online survey to explain the collective action and its social-network foundation in China. Specifically, in chapter 7, Zhang compares the network structures of the interest-driven SNS Douban and the relationship-oriented SNS Renren, arguing that fandom publics can be formed not only through social ties but also through shared fan objects such as music, books, and movies. In Chapter 8, Zhang focuses on another fan object (the celebrity) and another SNS (Weibo) to explore the celebrity-fans relationship as a new type of forming publics. She finds that celebrities on Weibo are not only fan objects but also the network nodes that connect the fans, motivating them and raising their awareness of social issues that emerge from different domains. Therefore, Zhang argues that these two chapters explicate the network logic that covers the Internet of People, the Internet of Things, and the Internet of both.

Besides its theoretical discussion and empirical case studies, another of this work's strengths lies in Zhang's mixed research methods. She skillfully integrates qualitative research methods (participant observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis) and quantitative research methods (online surveys and network analysis). In particular, Zhang's 15-year longitudinal, ethnographic participant observation of the formation of fandom publics in China is extremely impressive, important not only for "deep Internet studies" (Yang, 2015, p. 4) in an ever-changing China but also for deep fandom studies and media studies in a global context. In a remarkable demonstration of Zhang's claims about "fandom publics," some of her fans used a crowdsourced approach to voluntarily translate this book into Chinese and publish it online so that everyone interested in this work is free to share, copy, and redistribute it.

In conclusion, *The Internet and New Social Formation in China* is a valuable contribution to the study of the Chinese Internet, fandom, and publics. It is encouraging to see that Zhang attempts to "defy the myth of Chinese exceptionalism through empirically supported theorization" (p. xi). This attempt, on the one hand, challenges the stereotype of "China as exception" that overestimates China's particularity "with Chinese characteristics," and on the other hand, challenges the paradigm of "China as method" that uses China as a case study to verify and modify Western theories. Instead, Zhang's work illustrates that thorough empirical works situated in a Chinese context can and must construct concepts and theories of truly global implication.

However, Zhang may be too optimistic regarding the phenomenon of "fandom publics" in China; she has been overly involved in the ethnographic work, which may have fostered too high an expectation of her research subjects. The landscape of China's Internet is changing so fast that some of the "subaltern publics" Zhang studied in this book did not evolve into "regular publics" but instead slowly faded and even disappeared. In this sense, it is preferable to regard this book as a new starting point rather than a finishing line in this research field. For example, some updated studies on new forms of "publics" situated in new SNSs and mobile applications like WeChat, Youku, Didi, and Mobike would be highly welcome.

However, it is beyond the scope of any book to be exhaustive, and this book is still highly important for its comprehensive discussion of diverse cases in the Chinese context. It therefore deserves a place on the recommended reading list of anyone interested in Internet cultural studies, fan studies, and China studies. This book should also be useful for senior undergraduate and postgraduate media courses and will be of special interest for researchers and scholars of China's evolving cultural and political landscape.

References

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